

The Opcon Military Command Issue Amidst a Changing Security Environment on the Korean Peninsula

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Presented at the KORUS Forum at the Embassy of Korea, March 24, 2010

The planned date for completion of the Opcon military command transfer plan is April 2012, just two years away. At that time, the U.S.-R.O.K. Combined Forces Command, commanded by the U.S. commander in Korea, will be terminated. Two separate military commands will be created. South Korean military forces, now under the command in wartime of the U.S. commander of CFC, will then be under the wartime command of the R.O.K. military high command.

The Opcon plan has been controversial for three reasons. One is the contention of critics that the South Korean military will not be able to operate fully an independent command apparatus, which incorporates major elements of the CFC organization, with its highly sophisticated war planning system, communications systems for the speedy issuance of military directives and exchanges of information between the U.S. and R.O.K. militaries, and the apparatus for the transfer and exchange of intelligence information. Second, critics charge that the timing of the plan does not take into account North Korea's progress in advancing its nuclear and missile programs and, therefore, deterrence against potential North Korean aggression will be weakened. Some critics argue that there should be no change in the U.S. command and force structure in South Korea until there is complete denuclearization of North Korea (despite the dismal prospect for denuclearization). A third element of criticism is that a divided command signals a lessening of the U.S. defense commitment to South Korea and a near term U.S. military withdrawal from South Korea.

The final judgment regarding the readiness of the R.O.K. military to operate an independent command organization must be left to the experts in the U.S. military and South Korean military. It does seem to me, however, that since the CFC was formed in the late 1970s, U.S. and South Korean military personnel have worked side-by-side—physically side-by-side—in all of the operations of the command. It is difficult to believe that the South Korean command has not achieved a high level of preparedness over this 30-year period. If an expert judgment is made prior to April 2012 that the South Korean command is not fully capable of operating independently a command as sophisticated as the CFC command structure, then a postponement and re-scheduling of the Opcon transfer plan would be justified. However, it seems to me that in this eventually, the U.S. and R.O.K. commands would need to put forward an alternative schedule for implementation of Opcon. Otherwise, there likely would be many in South Korea who would suspect that the South Korean and U.S. governments had ulterior motives for scuttling the 2012 implementation. It seems to me that it is not be credible to argue, as

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some critics seem to do, that the South Korean military could not assume sole operation of the command organization under any circumstances. Moreover, South Korea's own military deficiencies are more a separate issue than related to South Korea's ability to operate an independent military command. These deficiencies have existed under the CFC. They should be corrected; but whether or not they are corrected is more dependent on the South Korean Government's defense planning and spending priorities than whether the CFC continues to exist or is divided into separate commands in 2012.

The second contention of the critics is part of a long-standing problem in both South Korea and the United States: exaggerating the North Korean military threat to South Korea. The critics' emphasize Pyongyang's nuclear weapons, missiles, and artillery on the demilitarized zone (DMZ), so-called asymmetric forces. However, I do not think that a case can be made that these asymmetric capabilities compensate North Korea for the substantial deterioration of its conventional military forces since the early 1990s—which went largely unacknowledged until the middle 2000s. North Korea's conventional forces always have been Pyongyang's main instrument for achieving its supreme political-strategic objective on the Korean peninsula—toppling the South Korean Government and achieving political dominance over the South Korea. Pyongyang could seek militarily to realize this supreme political-strategic objective only through a second massive invasion of South Korea that at least would capture Seoul and inflict debilitating damage on South Korean and U.S. military forces. In the 1980s, the Pentagon conducted numerous “war games” focused on whether R.O.K. and U.S. forces could repel a North Korean invasion and keep the North Korean army out of Seoul (I participated in several of these). Today, North Korean conventional forces have no capability or sustainability to attack across the DMZ with any hope of seizing and/or holding territory, including Seoul. Their weaponry is obsolete mostly vintage 1960s. Fuel supplies are marginal and do not allow for sustained military training; the North Korean air force is largely grounded because of lack of fuel. Food supplies for North Korean rank and file forces are marginal even in peacetime. Food requirements for an army at war grow considerably above peacetime requirements. For North Korea, this would mean immediate, debilitating food shortages for the civilian population that always lives on the margin of malnutrition and starvation. The bulk of North Korean rank and file soldiers are physically weak and undoubtedly mentally deficient as the products of years of malnutrition. Neither China nor Russia would support a North Korean attack on South Korea with a re-supply of weaponry. The U.S. Air Force and Navy's counter-attack on North Korea would be massive and militarily debilitating within a few days. North Korea's ability to sustain an invasion of South Korea no doubt would deteriorate within a very few days, probably less than a week.

Kim Jong-il is well aware of the weaknesses. His asymmetric forces can neither seize territory, including Seoul, nor inflict debilitating damage on U.S. and South Korean forces. The Pentagon today recognizes the diminution of the North Korean military threat to South Korea in its decisions to move the U.S. Second Division off the DMZ and allow approximately 40,000 family members of U.S. servicemen to live in South Korea. As we speak, the first group of family members is moving into housing in Seoul's northern suburbs, close to the DMZ. Moreover, the United States and South Korea have

several potential steps that could increase deterrence in the eyes of the North Koreans. It seems to me that one would be for the U.S. and South Korean air forces to exercise F-16s regularly off South Korea's west coast, signaling North Korea that if it ignites a major military clash on the northern limit line, its forces would face a massive retaliation from the air. A second would be a decision by the United States to station a squadron of heavy bombers on Guam, as was done until the early 1990s. During the 1980s, North Korea issued the strongest denunciations of U.S. B-52 bomber exercises near the Korean peninsula. I then concluded that the B-52s on Guam constituted the strongest element of U.S. deterrence of North Korea. President Obama and President Lee agreed in 2009 to begin U.S.-R.O.K. discussions of enhanced deterrence. Those discussions need to begin and examine the potential steps, including my ideas, that would increase deterrence.

The criticism that the Opcon plan would weaken the U.S. defense commitment to South Korea mistakenly equates the defense commitment with the permanent presence of U.S. ground combat forces in South Korea. At least some of the critics seem to believe that an indefinite postponement of the 2012 schedule would freeze U.S. ground combat forces inside South Korea permanently. This attitude may be understandable in terms of the history of the U.S. military presence in South Korea, but the connection is fallacious. This attitude, coupled with argument of no changes in Opcon or U.S. forces until complete denuclearization of North Korea, would rob the Pentagon of any flexibility in considering the utilization of U.S. ground forces in South Korea in present and future active theaters of combat outside of Korea. Given the dismal outlook for denuclearization, it likely would freeze the U.S. military presence in South Korea for many years.

To the contrary, the Pentagon and the U.S. Army foresee such a changing role for U.S. ground forces in South Korea. President Obama and U.S. commanders spoke in 2009 of the possibility of the remaining U.S. ground combat units in South Korea being deployed to Afghanistan or other active theaters of combat under a doctrine of strategic flexibility. General Bell, the U.S. Commander in Korea until 2009, stated several times that the future U.S. defense role in Korea would be primarily an air and sea role and that the primary U.S. response to any North Korean attack on South Korea would be the deployment of a huge "air armada" against North Korea. In no way does this changing U.S. military role signal a lessening of the U.S. defense commitment to South Korea. In fact, U.S. air combat strength in South Korea and around the Korean peninsula has been built up steadily since 2003; the critics ignore this fact as well as the continuing formidable U.S. Navy's air and missile assets in Northeast Asia.

North Korea's progressive military weaknesses give the United States added flexibility to make changes in the U.S. force structure in South Korea. Future changes in U.S. ground forces likely will come regardless of whether or not the Opcon plan is implemented. It would be erroneous to assume that a cancellation or postponement of Opcon implementation would ensure that U.S. ground combat forces will remain permanently in South Korea. Any final decision on the Opcon transfer prior to April 2012 should be kept separate from U.S. decisions on application of the strategic flexibility doctrine regarding U.S. ground combat forces in South Korea.

Distinct roles for R.O.K. and U.S. forces—the R.O.K. on the ground and the U.S. in the air—create a workable rationale for separate U.S. and R.O.K. commands. A primary task in preparing for April 2012 will be to move the U.S. Air Force Command in South Korea into the highest level of the U.S. command structure and to maximize the coordination in planning between the U.S. Air Force and the R.O.K. military command.

In short, if the South Korean military proves capable of operating a sophisticated command apparatus, then it seems to me that there is no good military reason for not proceeding with Opcon implementation on schedule. However, past history of the U.S. military presence in South Korea should make us all aware that unexpected events could influence the decision-making in Seoul and Washington. Unpredictable events, including non-military events, may prove more influential in the outcome of the Opcon plan that we can envisage now. South Korean electoral politics, the election outlook in 2012 and immediately afterwards, is one of these. Another is relations between U.S. military personnel and the South Korean people.

North Korean actions are another. It seems to me that North Korea currently has two fundamental strategic military objectives. One is to test successfully a long-range missile that can reach U.S. territory. A second is to develop a nuclear warhead that can be mounted on missiles. North Korea's priority regarding warhead development probably focuses on the Nodong missile. There are substantial reports and information pointing to North Korean-Iranian collaboration in trying to develop nuclear warheads for the Shahab-Nodong missile that they have developed jointly.

North Korea's motivations toward these strategic-military goals appear primarily related to strengthening deterrence against the United States and especially to bolster Pyongyang's diplomatic strategy toward the United States, China, and South Korea. If North Korea succeeds in accomplishing either or both of these goals by 2012, the military factors I have discussed related to the threat to South Korea would not change markedly. However, the psychological impact would be substantial and likely would cause Washington and Seoul to postpone indefinitely Opcon implementation.

If the Opcon plan is postponed beyond 2012, the reasons need to be stated clearly to the South Korean people. Too many Americans and South Koreans want to forget about 2002 or no longer deem the events of that year important. That is a mistake. South Korean public attitudes toward the U.S. military will be influenced significantly by the outcome of the Opcon plan. That outcome should be of a nature to turn South Korean attitudes in the most positive direction.