

Restructuring the U.S. Military Presence in Korea: Implications for Korean Security and the U.S.–ROK Alliance

by Terence Roehrig

During the past few years, the United States has begun three important initiatives that alter its defense commitment to South Korea (Republic of Korea [ROK]). First, Washington started to decrease its ground force presence in the ROK from approximately 38,000 to meet its goal of 25,000 by 2008. These reductions in troop levels will be accompanied by over \$11 billion in force upgrades to compensate for the decrease. Second, remaining U.S. forces will be pulled off the front lines and redeployed to two hub areas south of the Han River. Finally, Washington and Seoul agreed to adjust the command arrangements for U.S. and ROK forces in Korea. Under current arrangements, South Korea retains operational control of its military during peacetime, but in wartime South Korea cedes that control to a U.S. commander. The new structure will have ROK troops, and U.S. troops remain under their own commands at all times.

These initiatives have raised some serious questions about the U.S.–South Korean alliance. How will these changes affect defense readiness and security on the peninsula? Do these measures signal a weakening of the alliance, or are they simply another step in a maturing relationship? Will North Korea's nuclear weapons test alter these plans? While

unsettling for some in South Korea, these measures are part of a progression in a maturing alliance that is moving toward more of a partnership. If the transition is properly managed, the changes will have little or no impact on South Korean security.

History of U.S. Forces in Korea

The U.S.–ROK alliance has played a crucial role in maintaining peace and stability in Korea for more than a half century. The overall level of U.S. troop strength has varied over the years, and the command structure has been slowly changing to provide Seoul with a greater role in its defense.

Force Strength and Location

At the height of the Korean War, U.S. troop strength reached eight combat divisions, but by 1955 President Eisenhower reduced the U.S. presence to two divisions, the Second and Seventh Infantry Divisions, despite the protests of President Syngman Rhee, who still wished to invade the North and unify the peninsula under his rule. Numbers of troops stayed relatively fixed at two divisions from 1954 to 1971; thus, U.S. forces in Korea averaged approximately 63,000.

KEI initiated a new Academic Paper Series in December 2006, with Professor Roehrig's paper being the second in the series. KEI intends to commission 9 to 10 papers per year with diverse perspectives on original subjects of current interest to Korea watchers. KEI will edit and distribute each paper as a KEI Academic Paper to over 2,000 government officials, think tank experts, and scholars around the United States and the world. Distribution of each paper will be followed by a public discussion with the author at KEI. An annual collection of KEI Academic Papers will then be collated and published in a single volume by KEI. The next KEI Academic Paper will be published in February 2007. Authored by **Leif-Eric Easley** of Harvard University, it will address **Securing Tokyo's Positive Role in North-South Reconciliation**. A program with Mr. Easley at KEI is tentatively scheduled for February 20, 2007.

The two U.S. infantry divisions deployed in Korea were located along the chief invasion routes leading from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to Seoul. The Second Division was the most forward deployed along an 18-mile sector of the west-central portion of the DMZ. The Seventh Infantry Division was deployed south of the Second Division as a reserve force but was still situated along these invasion routes.

In 1969, with the United States deep in the throes of the Vietnam War, the Nixon administration reexamined U.S. policy in Asia and concluded the United States was overextended with too few military resources to match its commitments in the region. Nixon decided—in what was called the Nixon Doctrine—to keep U.S. treaty commitments, but to require allies to provide a greater share of the manpower for their own defense.¹ To implement this measure in Korea, Nixon withdrew the Seventh Division, with its approximately 20,000 troops, and moved the Second Division off the DMZ to positions farther south but still north of Seoul. Nixon at first intended to withdraw all but one combat brigade from the Second Division by 1974 but did not follow through on this measure.² For South Korea, these were ominous signals that the United States might be slowly dismantling its commitment.

During the 1976 presidential campaign, candidate Jimmy Carter proposed to withdraw all U.S. forces from Korea, maintaining that the troop presence made U.S. involvement in another Asian ground war more likely.³ After his election, President Carter began implementing his plan despite strenuous opposition in both Seoul and Washington.⁴ After a vigorous struggle, Carter scaled back his withdrawal plans to 6,000 but in the end withdrew only 3,400, of which 800 were combat soldiers and the remaining 2,600 were support personnel. U.S. forces in Korea thus stood at approximately 39,500 after the Carter reductions.

When Ronald Reagan came to the White House in 1981, he increased the U.S. presence to 43,000 and accompanied the increase with significant equipment upgrades. President Reagan believed that the U.S. commitment to South Korea had eroded during the Carter years, and that it was necessary to demonstrate that the U.S.-ROK alliance remained robust.

At the end of the Cold War, the George H. W. Bush administration began again to draw down U.S. forces, in a three-phase process.⁵ After phase one removed 5,000 combat troops from the Second Division along with 2,000 support personnel, the remaining two phases were suspended because of growing concern over North Korea's nuclear weapons program.⁶ President Clinton continued the moratorium

on withdrawals so that troop levels remained at approximately 37,500 for the next decade.

Throughout this time, U.S. forces were scattered among close to 60 bases throughout South Korea. The presence of foreign troops on a country's soil is likely to be a source of friction, and that has been the case in Korea as well. A particularly sensitive issue is the U.S. base at Yongsan in central Seoul. The base represents a long history of foreign occupation that precedes the U.S. presence. Chinese troops from the Qing Dynasty were stationed there during the 1882 military revolt, and Japan followed with a small garrison there that grew when it formally annexed Korea in 1910.⁷ At the end of World War II, U.S. forces entered Seoul and took over the same headquarters used by the Japanese. It is expected that by 2008 the facility will be turned over to Korean authorities, who intend to build a national park on the site. However, a recent report suggests this may be delayed until 2013.⁸

Command Structure

When North Korea invaded the South in 1950, the UN Security Council created the first formal command structure, the United Nations Command (UNC), to coordinate the efforts of 16 countries that came to the South's aid. The Security Council designated a U.S. officer as the UNC commander, and in July 1950 President Syngman Rhee turned over operational control of South Korean military forces to the UNC. After the war, control of South Korean forces shifted to actual U.S.—not UNC—control.

In 1978, the United States and South Korea altered the relationship to allow Seoul greater participation in the command structure although Washington remained the dominant player. The new arrangement was initiated in anticipation of Carter's withdrawal of U.S. ground forces. The new structure, called the Combined Forces Command (CFC), consisted of 14 sections, with a head position of "chief" and a second-in-command position of "deputy" for each section. U.S. personnel hold the positions of chief for eight of these sections, including most importantly the commander in chief. South Korean officers hold the top positions for the remaining six sections.

In each section, if a South Korean officer holds the chief position, an American is in the deputy slot, and vice versa. The eight sections led by a U.S. officer are commander in chief, chief of staff, planning, operations, logistics, judge advocate, public affairs, and secretary combined staff. The six ROK sections are personnel, intelligence, communications, engineer, operational analysis group, and headquarters commandant. The CFC provides an integrated com-

mand structure to facilitate joint planning, training, and exercises. In wartime, the CFC is set to assume operational control over U.S. and ROK forces along with any additional U.S. forces deployed from outside South Korea to provide a coordinated defense through the various component commands such as ground, air, and naval commands.⁹

Although it is a U.S. general who is the commander of CFC, the CFC commander reports to the presidents of both South Korea and the United States. According to the current CFC commander and U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) commander, General Burwell B. Bell, in actuality “the United States does not command ROK forces during wartime—it is a shared responsibility. [Under current CFC arrangements], I direct combat operations . . . in full coordination and with the mutual consent and guidance of both nations.”¹⁰ Thus, the decision to go to war has always rested with the Korean and U.S. governments, not the CFC commander.

The combined command structure has played an important role in U.S.-ROK efforts to deter North Korea. U.S. dominance of the command structure reinforced U.S. credibility and ensured that, in a crisis, it would be more difficult for the United States to abandon its commitment to the South. U.S. prestige would suffer if, after dominating the planning, the United States would withdraw prior to a conflict. Despite the U.S. role in bolstering deterrence, ROK domestic politics and concerns for sovereignty made it likely that these command arrangements would need to be altered at some point in the future.¹¹

Changes to the U.S.-ROK Military Relationship

In recent years the United States and South Korea have worked together to bring changes in the numbers of U.S. troops stationed in the ROK, the locations of the U.S. bases, and in the operational control of ROK troops.

Force Reductions and Relocations

For a number of years, the U.S. Department of Defense has been working on “transformation” to change the military into a force that is more swift, agile, expeditionary, and suited to the challenges of the twenty-first century.¹² In congressional testimony, former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld argued that, despite different adversaries, the U.S. military is “arranged essentially to fight large armies, navies, and air forces, and in support of an approach—static deterrence—that does not apply to enemies who have no territories to defend and no treaties to honor.”¹³

In South Korea, Rumsfeld noted, “our troops were virtually frozen in place from where they were when the Ko-

rean War ended in 1953.”¹⁴ U.S. troops in South Korea were there in order to deter and defeat North Korea. These would remain important objectives, but the United States could no longer afford to retain forces solely for these purposes.¹⁵ As a result, U.S. troops in Korea would need to be reduced and reconfigured to allow more rapid deployment to a wider array of contingencies. U.S. officials also intended the reconfiguration to include more “equitable” burden sharing, a phrase used by Secretary Rumsfeld to indicate a 50-50 split of the costs of stationing U.S. troops in Korea. Currently, South Korea covers approximately 38 percent of these expenses.

In 2003, the United States announced a two-pronged effort to achieve the goals of transforming U.S. forces in Korea.

Withdrawal of 12,500 troops. The Pentagon had initially wanted to finish withdrawing the planned number of troops from Korea by 2005 but, after negotiations with Seoul, agreed to defer completion of the withdrawal until 2008. As a result, U.S. planners began to draw down forces in three phases. Phase one occurred in 2004 with the withdrawal of 5,000; 3,700 of the 5,000 were from the Second Brigade of the Second Infantry Division sent to Iraq. The Second Brigade will not return to Korea after its deployment; it will return instead to Fort Carson, Colorado. Phase two will entail the removal of another 5,000 military personnel, mainly combat support units, by the end of 2006. By 2008, phase three will complete the withdrawals: 2,500 will be removed, mainly from support units, bringing the total U.S. forces in Korea to approximately 25,000.

Additional expenditure of \$11 billion. To compensate for the withdrawals, the Defense Department announced that it would be spending an additional \$11 billion to modernize remaining U.S. forces, including the delivery of PAC-3 Patriot missile systems and upgrades to the Apache helicopters. According to a former USFK commander, General Leon LaPorte, the previous measure was the “number of troops on the ground. However, what is truly important is the complementary deterrent and combat capabilities that each nation contributes to the security of the peninsula.”¹⁶

In addition, at approximately the same time, the Pentagon proposed moving U.S. forces remaining in Korea from their forward deployments to positions south of Seoul. In February 2003, Secretary Rumsfeld told the Senate Armed Services Committee, “I’d like to see a number of our forces move away from the Seoul area and from the area near the . . . DMZ and be more oriented toward an air hub and a sea hub, with the ability to reinforce so there’s still a strong deterrent, and possibly, with our improved capabilities of moving people, some of those forces come back home.”¹⁷

In June 2004, U.S. and ROK officials agreed to move U.S. forces to two hub locations south of Seoul, one at the Osan Air Base, 38 miles south of Seoul, and the other at Camp Humphreys, 55 miles south of Seoul. According to Admiral William J. Fallon, commander, U.S. Pacific Command, “the realignment and consolidation of U.S. Forces Korea into two hubs optimally locates forces for combined defense missions, better positions U.S. forces for regional stability, greatly reduces the number of major installations, returns most installations in Seoul to the ROK, and decreases the overall number of U.S. personnel in Korea.”¹⁸

By 2008, as part of the consolidation, the U.S. military will return to South Korean authorities 59 military installations totaling over 36,000 acres with an estimated value of over \$1 billion, including the headquarters of USFK at Yongsan, which occupies valuable land in central Seoul.¹⁹ In the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that provides guidelines for the U.S. presence in South Korea, both countries agreed that, whenever land is returned, the United States will not be compensated for any capital improvements such as buildings and facilities.

Some Koreans are concerned with the environmental condition of the properties and are calling for a cleanup of these sites before their return. The SOFA obligates the United States to “restore facilities and areas to the condition they were at the time they became available to the U.S. armed forces, or to compensate the government of the ROK in lieu of such restoration.”²⁰ The 2001 revision of the SOFA also mandates to “promptly undertake to remedy contamination caused by United States Armed Forces in Korea that poses a known, imminent and substantial endangerment to human health.”²¹ U.S. authorities argue that they have been watchful for “imminent and substantial” dangers, and any implementation of new environmental standards is unfair. According to USFK, “the Korean government would receive the land and the billions of dollars in capital improvements made by the United States over the years free, while also achieving environmental improvements far exceeding standards that were established in good faith agreements by our Status of Forces Agreement.”²²

As a compromise, the United States agreed to go beyond the SOFA and take out some of the underground fuel tanks, remove heavy metal contaminants from firing ranges, and install pump systems to remove fuel contaminants from ground water at five closed bases.²³ U.S. officials believe this is a “good faith effort” to address these matters, but it is unlikely to satisfy all concerned parties in South Korea.

As of September 2006, 19 facilities have been returned to ROK authorities. South Korea has agreed to provide \$4.5 to \$5 billion for relocating the Yongsan base,²⁴ and South

Korea purchased an additional 2,852 acres to expand Camp Humphreys and Osan Air Base to accommodate the need for larger U.S. facilities there.²⁵ Initial plans projected the move to be completed by 2008, but delays have pushed this date back to 2009.²⁶ The ROK Ministry of Defense acknowledged recently that this date may be further delayed to 2013 because of struggles with residents and protesters in the Pyeongtaek area (near Camp Humphreys) that have led to construction delays.

Return of Wartime Operational Control

After the Korean War, the operational control (OPCON) of South Korean forces during both peace and wartime remained in the hands of the U.S. military command. This arrangement persisted even after the Nixon administration’s withdrawal of the Seventh Division. In 1990, President Roh Tae-woo initiated discussions to alter this arrangement at the same time that Washington was beginning its phased troop withdrawal. In 1994, the United States returned peacetime OPCON to South Korea, but it was specified that ROK troops would remain under U.S. OPCON during wartime. As a result, much of the day-to-day management of ROK forces was assumed by the ranking ROK commander; in the event of war, however, OPCON was to be under the control of the U.S. CFC commander.

In 2002, U.S. and ROK officials began a dialogue on the transfer of wartime OPCON to ROK authorities; in 2003, the incoming ROK president, Roh Moo-hyun, pushed this measure enthusiastically. Defense planners worked on the issue for more than two years and, in 2005, agreed to present a set of recommendations at the 38th Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in October 2006. The Pentagon had already indicated its willingness to return wartime OPCON to South Korea, so the chief recommendation was the timetable for doing so. Seoul proposed a 2012 date for the change, while Washington maintained it could be done by 2009. At the 38th SCM, the two ROK defense ministers announced a compromise that essentially pushed the decision off to a later date; the communiqué from the meeting stated that the OPCON transfer would occur sometime after 15 October 2009, but no later than 15 March 2012.²⁷ This decision came soon after North Korea’s nuclear weapons test, and, although some speculated the changes might be placed on hold, the test appeared to have little impact on this issue. Plans are continuing for the changeover.

The exact details of the new command structure are uncertain at this time. Most likely, the CFC will be deactivated and replaced with a military cooperation center (MCC) for “the establishment of independent and complementary National Warfighting Commands.”²⁸ The new structure will likely be a parallel command structure similar to the

arrangement between the United States and Japan that maintains high-level contacts through the security consultative meetings and military committee meetings of the chairs of the respective joint chiefs of staff. While both will have independent command, there will be cooperation through the MCC that will manage joint operations during a crisis.²⁹

Significant levels of integration, command, and training already take place and will continue with the CFC gone. In the future, however, South Korea will be in the lead. The USFK and ROK military already operate a joint intelligence center on this basis that will continue after the OPCON transfer. Combined training operations and exercises such as Foal Eagle and Ulchi Focus Lens will continue to ensure the new arrangements maintain the necessary capabilities for South Korean security. Defense planners from the United States and South Korea are working on a detailed transition plan that will likely be ready by mid-2007.

Sovereignty and Readiness: The Impact on South Korean Security

The primary force behind South Korea's insistence on the return of wartime OPCON is President Roh Moo-hyun. In an interview with Yonhap News Agency, President Roh maintained:

*Korea is the sole country that does not have complete operational control (OPCON) of its own troops. The country is the 11th-largest economic powerhouse and has the sixth-largest military forces but it does not have wartime OPCON. OPCON is the basis of self-reliant national defense. The point is that self-reliant national defense is the essence of sovereignty for any nation. Unless there is a serious problem, a nation must have OPCON as a necessary condition even if it may have to pay a certain price for it.*³⁰

For President Roh and others, wartime OPCON is a matter of national pride, and he is convinced South Korea is more than able to defend itself. In response to critics, President Roh maintains "our military forces have . . . grown up strong enough to be able to control its operation."³¹ Moreover, South Korea is determined to "take back operational control by 2012 because our armed forces have a goal of evolving into one of the best in the world in terms of capability," and, according to Roh, South Korea could do it, "even if we get it back now."³²

For the United States, the withdrawal and relocation of U.S. troops have been important parts of its effort to transform the military, and U.S. military leaders are convinced that

restructuring along with the transfer of wartime OPCON will not jeopardize Korean security. According to the USFK commander, Gen. Burwell B. Bell, the three ROK armies that defend the peninsula "are powerful fighting forces. They're very, very capable."³³ Concerning the command transfer, General Bell noted that the ability to deter and defeat North Korea, if necessary, is the most important consideration "and nothing will be done, in transferring any command relationships, that jeopardizes that fundamental."³⁴ One of the criticisms of the proposal to turn over OPCON to South Korea has been that South Korea is unable to perform all the necessary missions to defeat a North Korean invasion. An important requirement here, according to General Bell, is the continued U.S. provision of bridging capabilities. These are capabilities that the ROK military does not yet possess but are necessary for its defense, for example, missile defense systems such as the Patriot system, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance capabilities, and certain battle command systems that allow theater commanders to manage these capabilities in combat.³⁵ General Bell noted that the two countries will "put the systems in place to make sure there is no risk . . . to the Republic of Korea that some capability will not be present that is needed when operational command is transferred."³⁶ In the end, the United States will continue to provide important air and naval assets in a supporting role while ROK troops assume the lead on the ground.³⁷

The relocation of U.S. forces has also been an important part of efforts to reduce the U.S. footprint in South Korea. Many U.S. bases, particularly the headquarters located in Yongsan, occupy prime real estate, and these moves will help make the U.S. presence on the peninsula more tolerable for the ROK public. Many younger Koreans have a perception of the U.S.-ROK alliance different from their elders.³⁸ In testimony before the House International Relations Committee, Deputy Under-secretary of Defense Richard P. Lawless stated:

*A younger generation of Koreans seeks a different relationship with the United States, a relationship that is perceived to be more equal. This is not to say that this generation is anti-American or calling for an end to the alliance, but it is not bound by memories of the war and of American sacrifices and is therefore much more assertive of its desires and its concerns than perhaps previous generations have been.*³⁹

Although the United States will be returning thousands of acres, some additional land was needed in the Pyeongtaek area near Camp Humphreys, and making use of that land has been very unpopular with local residents and activists.⁴⁰

Criticism in South Korea of these changes has come from both the left and the right but for different reasons. For those on the left, Washington's pursuit of "strategic flexibility" is dangerous for South Korea: U.S. forces stationed on the peninsula might be used more readily for other conflicts in Asia, particularly a confrontation with China over Taiwan that would drag Seoul into the fight. In November 2005, U.S. and ROK authorities began talks to reach an understanding on this concern, and on 19 January 2006 they released a statement whereby the South recognized "the rationale for the transformation of the U.S. global military strategy, and respects the necessity for strategic flexibility." The statement continued that the United States also "respects the ROK position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people."⁴¹ In addition, President Roh declared that Seoul has the right to veto any use of U.S. forces in South Korea for operations outside the peninsula.⁴²

For conservatives, reconfiguring U.S. forces and transferring wartime OPCON is preliminary to the complete dismantling of the alliance, which will then be followed by the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Korea. They believe the U.S. move is punishment for the growing anti-Americanism present in Korean society and within the Roh administration. These critics also argue that the South Korean military simply is not and will not be ready by 2012 to assume wartime OPCON. Accordingly, continuing the combined command structure will be crucial to maintaining the U.S.-ROK alliance and South Korean security. Finally, many fear the increased tax burden that will be necessary to upgrade ROK forces in the years ahead.

In an effort to derail what they see as Roh's foolish insistence on this issue, conservative forces have mounted several efforts. In August 2006, a group of 16 former South Korean defense ministers issued a statement condemning the turnover, noting "we are thunderstruck that the president, who is responsible for safeguarding national defense and the nation's survival, takes national security so lightly."⁴³ They went on to state that the government should first seek public and parliamentary approval for a measure that will be very expensive to implement and should wait until the North Korean nuclear weapons and ballistic missile issues are settled.⁴⁴

Former defense minister Kim Dong-jin noted that "the critical factor in carrying out successful operations in wartime is the establishment of one single consistent command structure. The road map talks about something unimaginable. How can the two nations 'cooperate' in wartime operations when they have two separate commands?" Lee Sang-hoon, another former defense chief, chimed in, arguing "the most important principle in waging a war is to have a unified

command structure, and I doubt whether a mere 'cooperation' center will do."⁴⁵

These critics were joined by others during a protest rally of 173 groups along with 500 retired generals and admirals.⁴⁶ Leaders of the rally, which eventually swelled to 5,000 people, issued a statement criticizing the Roh administration for unilaterally pursuing a reckless policy that threatened national security and demanding an apology from President Roh along with a halt to dismantling the CFC.⁴⁷

In an effort to influence the decision, opponents and members of the conservative Grand National Party sent a delegation to Washington to lobby U.S. officials, journalists, and academics against any transfer of wartime OPCON. According to Hwang Jin-ha, the leader of the delegation, "the wartime operational control of the Combined Forces Command is symbolic of the alliance. It's like living in one house under one roof, thinking together about threats and fighting together."⁴⁸

Some South Koreans are concerned that the force adjustments are a prelude to the withdrawal of all U.S. forces and the dismantling of the alliance. According to a Congressional Research Service Issues Brief for Congress, after the troop reductions and expected OPCON transfer, it is likely that there will be some level of further withdrawals in the future. The report notes that the Pentagon is reluctant to have a large contingent of U.S. troops under a divided command, and, with South Korea's veto over the use of U.S. troops that are stationed in South Korea, especially air units, against China, the United States has an incentive to remove its troops from the Korean peninsula before a conflict with Beijing is likely.⁴⁹

General Bell indicated, however, that "in whatever form our command structure moves to in the future, and as long as we are welcome here, the ability of the ROK-U.S. Alliance to deter and, if necessary, win decisively in war will be our clear objective."⁵⁰ The communiqué from the SCM held in October 2006 stated that both sides agreed again that "the ROK-U.S. Alliance remains vital to the future interests of the two nations and that a solid combined defense posture should be maintained in order to secure peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia."⁵¹

Conclusion

The arguments on both sides of these changes fall generally within one of two categories: military-security or political.

Military-Security Dimension

The key military-security question is whether these changes will have a serious negative impact on South Korean security. South Korea has a strong economy that has built a modern, well-equipped military, albeit with some shortcomings such as airpower. Seoul's annual defense spending is more than \$20 billion, ranking it eighth in the world.⁵² South Korea may not have all of the capabilities yet for a fully independent defense, but has the resources to acquire these in time.⁵³ The United States has already begun the transfer of several crucial missions—counterfire task force headquarters and special operations—to South Korea, an important indicator of ROK capabilities.⁵⁴ The United States has been emphatic in its commitment to provide the necessary capabilities while remaining committed to the alliance and ROK security in the future.

Moreover, South Korea faces a deteriorating North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea [DPRK]), which has no great-power allies to provide military support. North Korea knows the military balance is not in its favor and that an invasion would be suicide, although it could wreak catastrophic damage on the South. Indeed, a great deal of evidence indicates that North Korea's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons are driven more by a desire to deter the United States than to take aggressive action.⁵⁵ Throughout the past 50 years, the U.S. defense commitment to South Korea has been altered periodically, but the U.S. commitment to deterrence has remained strong. There is no reason to believe that North Korea will have any greater confidence to test the U.S. commitment than it has in the past.

While the change to wartime OPCON will necessitate a new command structure, this is a task that can be accomplished successfully. The U.S.-Japan defense relationship can be a model for this new arrangement, and, despite changes, extensive cooperation and coordination will continue between U.S. and ROK commands. The United States will still bring its air and naval capabilities to the fight along with its ability to augment current force levels should circumstances warrant. Some are concerned that changes in the wartime OPCON will mean that earlier plans to dispatch U.S. troops in a crisis will be less certain than in the past.

It is likely that OPLAN 5027, the U.S. planning document that outlines the U.S. response, may be altered, but the exact nature of the U.S. response has always been dependent on the circumstances of the crisis. If South Korea is attacked and the United States deems its support crucial, that assistance will be forthcoming regardless of the specifics of the command structure. As General Bell noted:

I don't equate the power of the alliance to the Combined Forces Command, command arrangements. I equate the power of the alliance to the willingness of the two nations to stand shoulder to shoulder in face of adversity and in the face of threat and agree together mutually to defend one another.⁵⁶

Political Dimension

The more difficult dimension here is the political message these changes might send to either the ROK or the DPRK. For many in South Korea, sovereignty and a self-reliant defense are important. South Korea has grown in power and status; it is no surprise that it would and should have a more independent defense posture. These changes may, in fact, reduce some of the friction in the alliance and be important measures to sustain the long-term health and acceptance of the U.S. presence in Korea.⁵⁷ For the United States, the changes are part of an overall effort to transform its military capability along with a desire to obtain more equitable burden sharing from its allies.

The changes in the force structure need not be indicators of a crumbling alliance. The alliance rests on core assessments of the political, security, and economic interests at stake in the region, not the specific command arrangements. Given the upcoming uncertainties in East Asia—China's future, a potential Sino-Japanese competition for regional dominance, and North Korea's fate—the U.S.-ROK alliance will continue despite the current strain in relations. In the years ahead, there will be adjustments to operational details, but U.S. and ROK leaders are likely to determine that their alliance promotes the interests of both countries.

Do these changes send a dangerous signal to North Korea? One could argue that these measures weaken the alliance and might embolden North Korea to invade the South. Pyongyang might assume that it could now defeat South Korea and that there would be less likelihood of U.S. intervention. At the very least, one might argue that the U.S. troop reduction and pullback from the DMZ should have been linked to concessions from North Korea.

These changes ultimately will not send a dangerous signal to the DPRK or have a negative impact on the overall security environment in Korea. The U.S.-ROK alliance will remain in place for some time, and Washington and Seoul will regularly stress the importance of the relationship for the future. A statement issued by Condoleezza Rice and Ban Ki-moon after ministerial meetings in January 2006 maintained:

[T]he U.S.-ROK alliance was forged in battle and tested through the long years of the Cold War. Today, our alliance remains a bulwark of stability in Northeast Asia and our security cooperation has provided a framework for the development and growth of our economic ties and the nurturing and protection of common values rooted in shared respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law.⁵⁸

Despite the current difficulties in the alliance, these are important words that indicate the continued significance of the relationship. The statement goes on to suggest that the alliance could possibly lead to “an eventual regional multi-national mechanism for security cooperation.”⁵⁹ Thus, the alliance is also a foundation for future security cooperation in the region.

Even if the United States drew down its forces further, North Korea could never be certain Washington would refrain from coming to South Korea’s assistance. For North Korea, a mistake here could mean the end of the current regime. In the earlier years of the alliance when U.S. military power was more crucial to the defense of South Korea, the question of U.S. credibility always existed. Would Washington really defend Seoul? The combined command structure, among other things, helped ensure this would be the case in the past.⁶⁰ The strength of South Korea and the continued durability of the alliance indicate that the commitment no longer needs to be reinforced on so many levels; however, U.S. and ROK forces will maintain a significant amount of joint planning and cooperation that provide ample evidence of the U.S. commitment to ROK security.

Implementing these changes to the U.S. presence poses many challenges that will need to be resolved. Intensive planning has begun toward working out the details and developing a new command structure. Despite the likely dissolution of the CFC, the new command structure will maintain a significant and sufficient level of cooperation. The time frame of three to six years for the transition is adequate for making the necessary alterations. Moreover, the United States remains committed to ROK security and does not believe these changes will endanger the South. Under the new arrangements, deterrence will remain robust and, in many respects, will be more credible because South Korea will assume a greater share of the defense burden and will be less reliant on its alliance partner, the United States, for its defense.

The adjustments to the U.S. defense commitment are important for addressing ROK concerns as well as for transforming the U.S. military. The heated debate in South Korea is part of its political process, and this will need to play

out. The outcome of Korea’s 2007 presidential election and 2008 parliamentary elections may prompt some adjustment to the OPCON initiative. In fact, it is likely that U.S. officials pushed for the 2009 date to ensure the transfer would be firmly in place before a new ROK administration took office, and the changes to U.S. force numbers and relocations were too far along for substantial alterations. This process is part of an understandable drive by South Korea for sovereignty and self-determination that will likely continue and move the relationship increasingly toward more of a partnership.

Although the U.S. withdrawals and relocations might have been used as leverage to obtain concessions from North Korea, it is not certain this would have been successful. Indeed, according to one line of argument, the relocation of U.S. forces to positions south of Seoul would free Washington to conduct a military strike on the North with less fear of retaliation on its forces close to the DMZ. Statements from North Korea indicate the North may believe this possibility as well.⁶¹ Given the current climate of U.S.-DPRK relations, it is unlikely Pyongyang would perceive U.S. policy to be softening and interpret these changes as such. Thus, the overall impact of U.S. force changes on deterrence is negligible.

These changes have been important to the United States and South Korea for another reason: they can help lead to the long-term health of an important relationship, one that needs to be strong as East Asia approaches a future with many uncertainties. The U.S.-ROK alliance will continue to be an important foundation as both countries see their way through the unpredictable years ahead.

Terence Roehrig is Associate Professor, National Security Studies, U.S. Naval War College. The views expressed in this report are the author’s alone and do not represent the official position of the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government. Professor Roehrig would like to thank Uk Heo, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, for his assistance and comments on an earlier draft. He would also like to thank Colonel Richard A. Lacquement Jr., U.S. Forces Korea, and Colonel Stanley Wolosz, U.S. Army, for their assistance.

Endnotes

1. Richard Nixon, "American Policy in the Pacific: Informal Remarks of President Nixon with Newsmen at Guam, July 25, 1969," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1969* (Washington, D.C.: GPO), 545–49.
2. "Statement of General Bernard W. Rogers, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army," in *Review of the Policy Decision to Withdraw United States Ground Forces from Korea: Hearings before the Investigations Subcommittee and Committee on Armed Services, 95th Congress, 1st and 2nd Sessions* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1978), 89.
3. Donald Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 86–87.
4. William H. Gleysteen Jr., *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1999), 22–23.
5. *A Strategic Framework for the Asian Pacific Rim: Looking Toward the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, April 1990), 7.
6. "Citing North Korean Atom Threat, U.S. to Delay Troop Cuts in South," *New York Times*, 21 November 1991.
7. For years, Korea had been under the suzerainty of China in a relationship Koreans called *sa dae ju ui* that resembled a Confucian big brother–little brother relationship. China provided protection while Korea supplied tribute and loyalty. In the late 1800s, China's regional dominance was challenged by Russia and Japan, with Korea often caught in the middle. As a result, the presence of foreign troops in Korea during the latter decades of the nineteenth century was commonplace. The Japanese garrison at Yongsan began as a result of the 1876 Kanhwa Treaty.
8. "U.S. Yongsan Base Relocation Likely to Be Delayed until 2013," *Yonhap Online*, 13 December 2006, www.english.yna.co.kr (accessed 14 December 2006).
9. The U.S. commanders of CFC, who also serve as commanders of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) and the UNC, have all been four-star generals, as have all the ROK deputy commanders.
10. General B. B. Bell, "Korean National Assembly—Security Forum," 13 July 2006, p. 2, www.usfk.mil/org/FKPA/sptr/contents/7_13_06_Korean%20National%20Assembly%20-%20Security%20Forum%20Speech.pdf (accessed 16 September 2006).
11. Terence Roehrig, *From Deterrence to Engagement: The U.S. Defense Commitment to South Korea* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2006), 185–86.
12. The plan for transformation of the U.S. military was first outlined in the *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, 30 September 2001, and later in the 2004 Global Posture Review.
13. "Global Posture: Testimony as Prepared for Delivery by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld to the Senate Armed Services Committee," 23 September 2004, www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2004/sp20040923-secdef0783.html (accessed 10 October 2006).
14. *Ibid.*
15. The U.S. Army's reorganization was also an effort to become more modular as it moved to the primary organizational unit of a brigade. This would allow the Army to tailor its forces more readily to different circumstances than was possible when it was organized around larger divisions.
16. Jim Garamone, "In Korea, Think Capabilities, Not Numbers, General Says," *American Forces Information Service*, 24 September 2004, www.defenselink.mil/news/Sep2004/n09242004_2004092411.html (accessed 30 October 2006).
17. Sonni Efron and Mark Magnier, "Rumsfeld May Reduce Forces in S. Korea," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 February 2003.
18. "Statement of Admiral William J. Fallon, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on U.S. Pacific Command Posture," 7 March 2006, p. 24, www.pacom.mil/speeches/sst2006/DAR-FY07-Fallon%2003-07-06.pdf (accessed 19 December 2006).
19. United States Forces Korea (USFK), "US Land Returns Continue," 14 July 2006, www.usfk.mil/usfk/index.html?/org/fkpa/press/contents.html (accessed 23 August 2006).
20. "Agreement between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea Amending the Agreement under Article IV of the Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea, Regarding Facilities and Areas and the Status of United States Armed Forces in the Republic of Korea of July 9, 1966, as Amended," January 2001, www.shaps.hawaii.edu/security/us/sofa2001.html#item6 (accessed 17 September 2006).
21. "Memorandum of Special Understandings on Environmental Protection," January 2001, www.shaps.hawaii.edu/security/us/sofa2001.html#item6 (accessed 17 September 2006).
22. USFK, "US Land Returns Continue."
23. *Ibid.*
24. Larry A. Niksch, "Korea: U.S.-Korean Relations—Issues for Congress" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 21 July 2006), 16.
25. "Statement of General B. B. Bell, Commander, United Nations Command; Commander, Republic of Korea–United States Combined Forces Command; and Commander, United States Forces Korea before the House Armed Services Committee, March 9, 2006," p. 26, <http://armedservices.house.gov/3-9-06GenBell.pdf> (accessed 14 November 2006).
26. The United States also received permission to set up a new firing range on Jik island, 70 kilometers from Kunsan Air Base, that will replace an area closed in 2005 after a long effort by ROK activists. According to Donald Kirk, the United States was frustrated with the apparent foot-dragging of ROK authorities and said the United States would have to remove U.S. planes from Korea if it did not have a suitable place to train. The ROK government likely relented because it did not want further criticism from South Korean conservatives. See Donald Kirk, "Korea: Redesigning a Historic Alliance," *Asia Times Online*, 30 September 2006, www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/HI30Dg01.html (accessed 1 November 2006).
27. "38th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communiqué," 20 October 2006, www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2006/d20061020uskorea.pdf (accessed 23 October 2006).
28. General B. B. Bell, "U.S. Forces Korea Press Conference," 30 October 2006, p. 2, www.usfk.mil/org/FKPA/sptr/contents/10_30_06_USFK%20Press%20Conference.pdf (accessed 10 December 2006).

29. Jung Sung-ki, "S. Korea, US Envision Separate Commands," *Korea Times*, 8 August 2006.
30. Roh Moo-hyun, president of South Korea, as quoted in "Regaining Wartime Operational Control," *Vantage Point*, September 2006, 23.
31. Ahn Mi Young, "Yankees Don't Go Home, Yet," *Asia Times Online*, 15 August 2006, www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/HH15Dg01.html (accessed 23 September 2006).
32. "Roh Says Korea Could Handle Wartime Control 'Now,'" *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 9 August 2006, <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200608/200608090030.html> (accessed 10 September 2006).
33. General B. B. Bell, "News Transcript: U.S. Forces Korea Media Roundtable," 29 September 2006, p. 8, www.usfk.mil/org/FKPA/sptr/contents/9_29_06_USFK%20Media%20Roundtable.pdf (accessed 8 October 2006).
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. In the joint communiqué from the 38th Security Consultative Meeting, Secretary Rumsfeld stated, "the U.S. will continue to provide significant bridging capabilities until the ROK obtains a fully independent defense capability." Rumsfeld also noted that "the U.S. will continue to contribute U.S. unique capabilities to the combined defense for the life of the Alliance." "38th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communiqué," 20 October 2006.
38. According to Hamm Taik-young, "while public opinion calls for a more equal partnership in the alliance, it is also true that many South Koreans have maintained a deeply entrenched sense of insecurity. For them, the ROK-U.S. alliance and the USFK remain the backbone of national security in spite of the dramatic growth in economic and military capabilities of the South vis-à-vis the North." Hamm Taik-young, "The Self-Reliant National Defense of South Korea and the Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance," *Nautilus Institute—Policy Forum Online no. 06-49A*, 20 June 2006, www.nautilus.org/for_a/security/0629Hamm.html (accessed 10 July 2006).
39. Richard P. Lawless, "The US-ROK Relationship—Prepared Statement before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, September 27, 2006," <http://www.internationalrelations.house.gov/109/law092706.pdf> (accessed 19 December 2006).
40. Kim Kwang-tae, "S. Korea Starts Razing Village for Base," Associated Press, 13 September 2006.
41. U.S. Department of State, "United States and the Republic of Korea Launch Strategic Consultation for Allied Partnership," 19 January 2006, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/59447.htm (accessed 19 December 2006).
42. Niksch, "Korea: U.S.-Korean Relations—Issues for Congress," 15.
43. "Roh Turns Deaf Ear to 16 Former Defense Chiefs," *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 10 August 2006, <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200608/200608100032.html> (accessed 19 December 2006).
44. "Roh Under Fire Over Wartime Command Withdrawal," *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 10 August 2006, <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200608/200608100014.html> (accessed 8 September 2006).
45. "National Assembly Told of End to Combined Forces Command," *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 17 August 2006, <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200608/200608170031.html> (accessed 8 September 2006).
46. Conservative groups including the Korea Retired Generals and Admirals Association, the Korea Veterans Association, the New Right Union, the Christian Council of Korea, the Christian NGO, and the Free Citizens' Alliance of Korea announced an effort to obtain 5 million signatures on a petition in an effort to block the transfer of wartime OPCON. "Wanted: 5 Million Signatures against Troop Control," *Chosun Ilbo*, 12 September 2006, <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200609/200609120023.html> (accessed 28 September 2006).
47. "Military Experts Rally against Forces Control Plans," *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 11 August 2006, <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200608/200608110017.html> (accessed 19 December 2006).
48. Norimitsu Onishi, "U.S. Discusses Giving Seoul Command of Combined Forces," *New York Times*, 5 October 2006.
49. Niksch, "Korea: U.S.-Korean Relations—Issues for Congress," 16–17.
50. Bell, "Korean National Assembly—Security Forum," 2.
51. "38th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communiqué," 20 October 2006.
52. According to Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, South Korea has one of the top ten, possibly even top five, militaries in the world. Michael O'Hanlon, "South Korea: A Disunited Allied Force?" *Washington Times*, 28 August 2006, www.washtimes.com/commentary/20060827-100246-4814r.htm (accessed 8 September 2006).
53. South Korea is improving its military capabilities by upgrading its K1A1 tanks, K-9 propelled howitzers, and multiple launch rocket systems and adding the first 4 of 40 F-15K fighters and a new naval base for its Third Fleet. See "Statement of General B. B. Bell," 9 March 2006, 23–24.
54. Ibid., 24.
55. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Terence Roehrig, "Restraining the Hegemon: North Korea, the U.S., and Asymmetric Deterrence," in *The United States and the Korean Peninsula in the 21st Century*, ed. Tae-Hwan Kwak and Seung-Ho Joo, 163–84 (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006).
56. General B. B. Bell, "Remarks to Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry," 29 November 2006, p. 3, www.usfk.mil/org/FKPA/sptr/contents/11_29_06_Korea%20Chamber%20of%20Commerce%20and%20Industry.pdf (accessed 10 December 2006).
57. General Bell argued "the command and control construct we use to do that is subject to change. Over the years it has been changed four or five times since the end of the Korean War. This is a normal pattern for friends who are great allies to adjust their command and control relationships based on changes in capabilities so I think it's a good news story, something we should celebrate and take pride in and not necessarily be so concerned about." Bell, "News Transcript: U.S. Forces Korea Media Roundtable," p. 4.
58. "United States and the Republic of Korea Launch Strategic Consultation for Allied Partnership," 19 January 2006, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/59447.htm (accessed 19 October 2006).
59. Ibid.

60. See Roehrig, *From Deterrence to Engagement*, 184–86.

61. In a statement in the Korean Central News Agency after the United States announced its plans, including spending an additional \$11 billion on force upgrades, North Korean officials noted, “this clearly proves that the ‘arms reduction measure’ does not mean any switchover in the U.S. Korea policy but is aimed at retaining a ‘qualitative edge’ to stifle the DPRK by force. . . . If the U.S. truly hopes for peace and détente on the Korean peninsula, it should completely withdraw its troops from south Korea, far from deceiving the world public opinion with talk about so-called ‘arms reduction.’” “Foreign Ministry Spokesman on U.S. ‘Arms Reduction,’” Korean Central News Agency, 24 June 2004, www.kcna.co.jp (accessed 12 July 2004).



KEI Editorial Board

Editor-in-Chief: James M. Lister

Contract Editor: Mary Marik

Assistant Editors: Florence Lowe-Lee and Scott Rembrandt

The Korea Economic Institute is registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act as an agent of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, a public corporation established by the Government of the Republic of Korea. This material is filed with the Department of Justice, where the required registration statement is available for public inspection. Registration does not indicate U.S. Government approval of the contents of this document.

KEI is not engaged in the practice of law, does not render legal services, and is not a lobbying organization.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author. While this publication is part of the overall program of the Korea Economic Institute, as endorsed by its Board of Directors and Advisory Council, its contents do not necessarily reflect the views of individual members of the Board or the Advisory Council.

Copyright © 2007 by the Korea Economic Institute of America.

Printed in the United States of America.

All Rights Reserved.

Korea Economic Institute of America

1201 F Street, NW, Suite 910

Washington, DC 20004

Telephone: (202) 464-1982

Facsimile: (202) 464-1987

Webpage: www.keia.org