Controversy over South Korean OPCOM:
The Real Issues

Sovereignty vs. a Self-Reliant Defense Force

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Table of Contents

Transition: Confusion and Opportunity

Points of Contention

Challenges in the Field for the ROK Military under the US-led CFC

Tasks Ahead

Conclusion
Transition: Confusion and Opportunity

In 1950, ROK's military OPCON was handed over to the US military.

In 2006, President Rho ignited the wartime OPCON transition.
  • ROK and the US agreed to the transition on April 14, 2012.

In 2011, First Postponement by President Lee.
  • ROK and the US delayed the transition to December 1, 2015.

In 2014, Second Postponement by President Park.
  • A conditions-based approach.
    "...when critical ROK and Alliance military capabilities are secured and the security environment on the Korean Peninsula and in the region is conducive to a stable OPCON transition." (46th SCM/MCM Joint Communique)

※Nothing has changed; nothing has been enhanced.
Points of Contention

1. Is the wartime OPCON transition a sovereignty issue?
2. Is the conditions-based approach an indefinite postponement?
3. Would the US presence be reduced or would they retreat after the wartime OPCON transition? If so, could the ROK military deter or defeat N. Korea's provocations on its own?
4. Would additional costs arise and would the US arms market in Korea expand from this second postponement?
5. Would the wartime OPCON transition postponement...
   - Stimulate China to further military expansion?
   - Have no influence or affect on deterring or reducing N. Korea's threats?
   - Would dialogue and cooperation be more effective?
Is the wartime OPCON transition a sovereignty issue?

Critics have said:

- ROK should secure national military autonomy and national dignity.
- There is no Korean military sovereignty under the current CFC system, yet during an independent movement against Japanese military imperialism and during the Vietnam War, Korean military forces had its own OPCON.
- If the ROK military does not have its own OPCON, ROK will lose initiative to have peace talks with N. Korea.
- If Japan exercises its collective defense rights, Japan could operate with the US in the case of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula.
My Opinion

- The sovereignty-centered argument is emotionally charged, and during the past 8 years, there has not been any significant enhancement in ROK's self-reliant national defense force.

- It is not an accurate assessment that the ROK military does not have its own military sovereignty under the current CFC system.

- Comparing the current wartime OPCON issue with the Independence Army or ROK's military in the Vietnam War is not a fair comparison.

- In terms of peace talks, N. Korea's argument is nothing but propaganda.

- If Japan engages in Korean Peninsula affairs without ROK's agreement, it is an infringement of Korean sovereignty.
2. Is the conditions-based approach an indefinite postponement?

• Critics have said:

  - It would be difficult to shape and track.

  - It would be subjectively assessed.
My Opinion

- This is a meeting between two countries' policies.
  - ROK: Saving time, avoiding difficult situations
  - US: Promoting "Asia Rebalancing"

- It is a symbol of confidence and maturity of the ROK-US Alliance.

- "Shaping Operations" should be juxtaposed.

- As long as the ROK military does not give any definitive date or conduct shaping operations, it will be assessed as an indefinite delay.
Would US presence be reduced or would they retreat after the wartime OPCON transition? If so, could the ROK military deter or defeat N. Korea's threats on its own?

A. On the US presence drawdown or withdrawal

- Restricting factors
  - Purpose - to deter and defeat N. Korea's threats
  - Power to influence N. Korea's nuclear and missile programs
  - Contributing to regional stability

- Promoting factors
  - The US military's strategic flexibility
  - Budget cuts

→ The Korean policy would continue to engage the US policy.
→ The solution is for ROK to build up its self-reliant national defense force.
3. On ROK military's capabilities against N. Korea

- Outdated traditional capabilities and weak logistic capabilities are regarded as factors in not being a threat to the ROK military.
- ROK's strengthening war fighting capabilities and its economic power (10th largest in the world) are regarded as factors in being able to defeat any N. Korean provocation.

→ Volume and asymmetric forces and surprise attacks by N. Korea are factors causing severe damage on the Korean Peninsula.

→ A second Korean War should be deterred, but if it were to break out, ROK would pursue it aggressively.

→ ROK military should enhance its warfighting capabilities so as to take the lead in the region.
4. Would additional costs arise and would the US arms market in Korea expand from this postponement?

- Critics have said:
  - The reason the US changed its position on the transition is related to the ROK government's purchase of US state-of-the-art weapons.
  - For meeting the conditions, ROK needs to invest tens of billions of dollars.
My Opinion

- Existing purchase is not a sudden decision.
  - Whether postponed or not, the ROK military has been pushed to strengthen its warfighting capabilities.
  - It is merely propaganda.

- ROK needs to consider interoperability for the ROK-US alliance.

- ROK military has a reason to purchase from various sources.
  - To avoid relying on one source of procurement
  - To avoid rising latent anti-Americanism
Would deferral of the wartime OPCON transition stimulate China to further military expansion? Or have no influence nor affect on deterring or reducing N. Korean threats? Would dialogue and cooperation be more effective? Critics have said:

- The current US strategy for Asia, focused on containing China, is one of the reasons that the US agreed to the postponement.

- Talks and cooperation are more effective in deterring N. Korea's provocations when compared to preparedness for war.
My Opinion

- Relating the wartime OPCON issue to regional security is regarded as an expanded focus of the wartime OPCON transition.

- ROK should place its own security first and be more decisive. ROK should act in its own self-interest when it relates to security. That is the same in the case of THAAD.

- Under two progressive administrations, the two Koreas suffered serious conflicts on the border of the Korean West Sea.
  - Two sea battles
  - Sinking of Cheon-ahn
  - Shelling of Yeon-Pyoung
Challenges in the field faced by the ROK military under US-led CFC

Fixation on heteronomy

Limitations in National Defense Planning

Not experienced enough in planning, exercising, and execution of large-size unit operations and joint operations
Tasks Ahead

ROK military modernization
• Intelligence and C4: Critical capability in building a self-reliant defense force
• Korean Missile Defense Systems: An imperative capability
• Joint Operation System: Establishing separate joint operation HQs
• Own doctrine and own concept on how to fight
• Officers development for post-wartime OPCON era
• New architecture

New combined command structure
• ROK-led CFC
• Future UNC issue

Management of conflicts
• The wartime OPCON transition is not a sovereignty issue; Establishing a timeline; Managing latent anti-Americanism.

Budgeting
• Establish a new independent tax: "Wartime OPCON Transition Tax"
Conclusion

The wartime OPCON transition should be the final word on building a self-reliant national defense force for the ROK military.

ROK should view achieving national defense modernization as a top priority. And it should act with urgency.