



# The Year 2012

## South Korea's Resumption of Wartime Operational Control

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*The contents of this paper reflect the author's original views and are not necessarily endorsed by the U.S. Army or the Department of Defense.*

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PHOTO: U.S. soldiers walk through smoke during a military exercise with South Korea in Dongducheon, north of Seoul, March 2011. (AFP photo/Jung Yeon-Je)

**F**ROM THE SILVER screen to the pulpit, many are prophesying apocalyptic events in the year 2012 as Earth supposedly enters its final phase of existence. As if this were not bad enough, it is also the year that the Republic of Korea was originally scheduled to reassume wartime operational control (OPCON) of its military forces from the United States. This transfer should have occurred as planned, and must occur in 2015 without another delay. It will unfetter U.S. forces now stationed in Korea for global strategic use.

Sixty years ago, newly liberated from Japanese domination and embroiled in a desperate war of survival, the Republic of Korea (ROK) made a strategic decision to subordinate its military forces under the operational control of the United Nations.<sup>1</sup> When hostilities ceased with an armistice agreement, the UN was empowered to maintain the armistice until a peace settlement could be concluded.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the UN commander retained full OPCON over ROK forces until the 1978 establishment of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC), when full OPCON transferred to the CFC commander.<sup>3</sup> In 1994, the ROK reassumed *peacetime* OPCON of its forces while the CFC commander retained *wartime* OPCON of ROK forces.<sup>4</sup>

Placing ROK military forces under the control of a U.S. commander has provided a milieu of stability and fostered the development of the ROK military; however, the OPCON subordination of one nation's military under another is not a permanent construct. In 2003, at the behest of the Korean government, CFC undertook a command relations study to determine if it was appropriate for the Republic of Korea to reassume wartime OPCON of its forces. The study evolved into the Strategic Transition Plan, which is now being implemented in a combined fashion. In September 2006, the ROK and U.S. heads of state agreed that Korea should assume the lead for

its own defense. At the 41st ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting held in October 2009, the ROK Minister of Defense and U.S. Secretary of Defense reaffirmed their 2007 decision for this transition to occur on 17 April 2012.<sup>5</sup>

However, on 20 January 2010, ROK Minister of National Defense Kim Tae-Young seemed to step back from this agreement when he publicly declared that 2012 would be “the worst time” for a transfer of wartime OPCON because of North Korea’s burgeoning nuclear weapons posture.<sup>6</sup>

For its part, the U.S. government reaffirmed its commitment to “provide specific and significant bridging capabilities until the ROK obtains full self-defense capabilities,” continue to “contribute enduring capabilities to the combined defense for the life of the alliance,” and “provide extended deterrence for the ROK, using the full range of military capabilities, to include the U.S. nuclear umbrella, conventional strike, and missile defense capabilities.”<sup>7</sup>

However, some fear that pressing concerns elsewhere could undo America’s enduring presence on the Korean peninsula or precipitate public and political cynicism about the continued relevance of the alliance. The concerns arise from fears that single-theater focused forces are not viable and that the ROK-U.S. alliance is in its twilight of efficacy. Observers worry that the long war on terrorism will demand so much U.S. combat power that the United States will precipitously withdraw its forces in Korea if they are not accessible for rotational use. They also worry that when conditions change and governments are left scrambling to justify the future relevance of the alliance, both countries will face cries from citizens and public officials for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea, sacrificing strategic necessity on the altar of public furor.

We must unshackle U.S. forces in Korea for global strategic use while solidifying America’s

enduring military presence on the Korean peninsula. The United States must—

- Unencumber its forces in Korea from a peninsula-centric mission.
- Exercise strategic flexibility of forces.
- Recast the ROK-U.S. alliance as a comprehensive, strategic alliance for the 21st century.

## To the Peninsula and Beyond

When the Soviet Union collapsed, U.S. overseas forces were arrayed as they had been since the Korean War. As America reaped its peace dividend, it downsized its forces, reshaped its global posture, and rethought its willingness to engage in massive ground fights, including on the Korean peninsula.<sup>8</sup> United States forces deployed along the Korean demilitarized zone as a tripwire against a North Korean invasion are now preparing to move to positions south of Seoul—in essence compelling Korea to assume a heavier defense burden.

However, to consolidate its forces further south on the peninsula, the United States must relieve these forces from their peninsula-centric mission. This process began with a 2003 agreement to transfer 10 military missions from U.S. to ROK forces and has expanded as Korea prepares to accept wartime OPCON of its own forces. To ensure a seamless transition, ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command has conducted an annual computer-simulated warfighting exercise since August 2008 to train and certify this future command and control structure of independent, parallel national commands with the United States supporting the ROK lead.<sup>9</sup>

However, for U.S. forces to truly retain an enduring presence on the peninsula, they must be fully unencumbered for global employment. We should not merely consolidate U.S. forces on robust installations in Korea and continue a single-theater focused mission with a new command structure.

Some argue that South Korea does not have the experience to assume complex combat missions,

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AP Photo/South Korean Army via Yonhap

**South Korean Army soldiers disembark from a Black Hawk helicopter during an exercise to prepare for possible aggression by North Korea, south of Seoul, 20 January 2011.**

and that it cannot compensate for lost U.S. combat capabilities. Others say that the absence of U.S. forces from the peninsula would embolden North Korea to attack South Korea. These and other concerns can be effectively mitigated. Regarding training inadequacies, the United States has a process to certify ROK performance before transferring military missions. For capabilities shortfalls, the United States would either provide bridging capabilities or transfer missions at a slower rate until the ROK acquires more advanced capabilities. We can mitigate North Korean threats by moving comparable U.S. capabilities into the region when deploying on-peninsula U.S. assets off-peninsula.

### **Strategic Flexibility of Forces**

In January 2006, after years of bilateral negotiations, then-ROK Minister of Foreign Affairs Ban Ki-Moon and then-U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice signed a Joint Statement of Strategic Consultation for Allied Partnership, which recognized America's right to globally employ its forces stationed in Korea while recognizing Korea's right not to be drawn into a regional conflict against

its will.<sup>10</sup> This "strategic flexibility" has yet to be exercised in any meaningful fashion. Some point to the deployment of the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team to Iraq in 2004 as one exercise of strategic flexibility, but this brigade was actually re-stationing in the United States with an en route deployment to Iraq. To qualify as an exercise of strategic flexibility, units must deploy from the Korean peninsula and then return to the peninsula at the conclusion of their deployment.

American forces stationed in Germany have followed this deployment model. Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm broke the paradigm that U.S. forces were in Germany solely for the defense of Germany. This paradigm shift must also occur in Korea. The recent agreement among the U.S. military services to normalize tour lengths from the traditional one- and two-year deployments to three-year assignments is reshaping this paradigm.<sup>11</sup> In 2009, U.S. Forces Korea increased command-sponsored assignments by 60 percent, approving 5,000 service members to serve three-year assignments with their family members. This, however, accounts for little more than 15 percent of the total assigned force.

While DOD's goal is to phase out all unaccompanied tours in Korea, much work is still ahead before we transition from single-theater focused *forward-deployed* forces to globally deployable *forward-stationed* forces.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the United States should address Korea's geopolitical concerns about this transformation.

Like many weaker partners in alliances, Korea wrestles with fears of *abandonment* on one hand and fears of *entrapment* on the other. The Korean government signed the 2006 Strategic Flexibility Agreement to forestall further reductions of U.S. forces or U.S. abandonment of Korea. It wants a credible and enduring U.S. military presence to remain on the peninsula, but understands that changing security conditions requires U.S. forces to be globally deployable.

Korea is also apprehensive that the United States might choose to employ its Korea-based forces in a Taiwan Strait crisis, and is afraid of armed reprisal from its neighbor, China. It also fears economic reprisal from China, its largest trading partner.

An effective strategic communications plan can placate Korea's concerns. The U.S. government should tell the ROK that it will not use its peninsula-based forces in a Taiwan Straits confrontation. It is difficult to conceive of a scenario where Korea would ever sanction such an act. The end of the ROK-U.S. alliance would be certain anyway if the U.S. government unilaterally deployed its on-peninsula forces in direct contravention to ROK policy. All but the direst scenarios would rule out such an employment of forces.

Regardless, to assuage our ally's concerns and in the interest of consensual strategic flexibility, I strongly urge the U.S. government to be more frank about its intended global employment of peninsula-based forces. This is a time-sensitive issue that can readily become a public outrage in Korea.

While political pragmatism may have been the first step in acquiescence to strategic flexibility,

sustainable flexibility requires a transparent and incremental "flexing" approach in which the United States routinely deploys its Korea-based forces in off-peninsula training exercises. It should do so with Korean forces encouraged to participate during bilateral and multilateral exercises to lessen domestic and regional anxieties and advance a comprehensive, strategic alliance.

## Recasting the ROK-U.S. Alliance

At the 34th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting in December 2002, then-U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and ROK National Defense Minister Lee Jun announced the "Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance" policy initiative (renamed "Security Policy Initiative" in 2004), chartering a consultative body "to adapt the alliance to reflect changing regional and global security circumstances."<sup>13</sup> The two governments have taken several alliance-strengthening measures, the most visible being the ongoing consolidation of U.S. forces south of Seoul. Efforts to shrink the widely dispersed, 100 installation-strong U.S. footprint in Korea are helping sustain America's enduring military presence there, but equally important are less visible efforts to recast the alliance into something broader than the defense of Korea. At the 38th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting in October 2006, the Security Policy Initiative working group said it had completed a two-year joint study on the vision of the ROK-U.S. alliance, and that the alliance would contribute to peace and security on the peninsula, within the region, and globally.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, the alliance is still seen as a peninsula-centric military arrangement. The failure to recast it as a comprehensive, strategic alliance means that the rationale for it will invariably dissipate once the North Korean threat abates. This would be unfortunate, because a recast alliance would be mutually beneficial. Of course, nations build relations on the pillars of trust, common values, and common interests. While these pillars have matured, the United States brazenly approaches the bilateral relationship asking what Korea can do for it, and Korea guardedly wonders what America will ask for next. These viewpoints must be reconciled for this relationship to broaden and persist in an era where a North Korean threat no longer exists.

***An effective strategic communications plan can placate Korea's concerns.***



Most Americans know very little about Korea: they do not know the major Korean brands (such as Hyundai, Samsung, and LG); too few are sure which Korea is America's ally (North or South); and many believe that Korea is an underdeveloped third-world country. The reverse is true in Korea, where everyone has studied many facets of America since primary school. This must change. Universities can sponsor language and culture exchanges, ad campaigns can associate consumer products as being from "South" Korea, and Korean sports and entertainment troupes can visit America's major cities.

Historically, Korea has been a debtor nation that depended on American largesse for its economic survival; those days are gone. Korea has emerged near the top ten largest global economies, the United States is Korea's fifth largest importer, and Korea is America's seventh largest importer.<sup>15</sup> Bilateral trade opportunities are much larger than are currently being realized, which is why the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement was signed in 2007, although it still needs to be approved.<sup>16</sup> While this trade agreement benefits both countries economically, if the United States is to increase its Korean trade advantages over the European Union, Congress

must act quickly. Approving the trade agreement will exponentially advance efforts to broaden the ROK-U.S. military relationship into a comprehensive, strategic alliance. This economic meshing, coupled with Korea's emerging role as a quintessential member of the G-20, can significantly enhance Korea's influence in Asia and throughout the world.

A comprehensive, strategic alliance will also help in addressing climate control through collaboration in low-carbon, green-growth clean technologies, such as nuclear power, smart grids, and green vehicles. A partnership in global peace operations can help address crises of humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and peacekeeping, as well help combat the evils of human trafficking, counterfeiting, illegal drugs, piracy, and terrorism.

## The End of the Cold War

The end of the Cold War led to an evolution of America's military alliances and global defense posture everywhere except in Korea, where anachronistic arrangements remain in place. Early last year, there were strong indications that the Korean government would officially request to delay the resumption of wartime OPCON of its own forces in



AFP photo/Kim Jae-Hwan

Female members of South Korea's Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) conduct a bayonet drill at a training camp in Seongnam, south of Seoul, 19 January 2011.

2012. The United States should have rejected such a request and urged Korea to follow through with the agreement. However, after much negotiation, at last year's G-20 economic summit President Barack Obama and South Korean President Lee Myung-bak agreed to delay OPCON transfer from April 2012 to December 2015. One concern is that waiting for Korea to better posture for the transition might lead to renewed debates about abrogating the agreement and retaining the current ROK-U.S. CFC arrangement. The ROK-U.S. alliance and America's military presence in Korea will become irrelevant unless we free U.S. forces in Korea for global strategic employment while strengthening our enduring military presence on the Korean peninsula.

The alliance today is perhaps as healthy as it has been in its 56-year existence, which will prove beneficial as we chart the course ahead. However, we need look no further back than the last decade for the palpable acrimony pointing to the underlying fissures in this relationship and the need to recast this alliance now. Ten years ago, the ROK government and populace collectively embraced inter-Korean relations, leaving many to blame the United States for a divided peninsula, and a vocal and violent minority demonstrated for the immediate withdrawal

of all U.S. forces from Korea. That environment complicated several sensitive issues.

Extreme nationalists stoked anti-American sentiments with startling results: A 2002 Winter Olympics controversy virulently incited the Korean nation after Korea's speed skater Kim Dong-sung was disqualified on a technicality and a U.S. athlete won the gold medal; the 2002 U.S. tactical vehicle accident which killed two Korean school girls led to massive and prolonged demonstrations, fire bombings, and retaliatory attacks upon U.S. servicemen; and in 2008 a protest against the importing of American beef led more than 500,000 Koreans to stage street demonstrations that nearly immobilized the government.

The above incidents are not raised as reasons to consider dissolving the alliance; that would be myopic, leaving America without an important ally or military presence in East Asia. Efforts to evolve the ROK-U.S. alliance are not synonymous with an attempt to abrogate the alliance's core function: America's agreement to help the ROK defend itself against aggression. Rather, the incidents reinforce the risk of failing to recast the relationship as a 21st-century alliance built on trust, yoked in common values and interests, no longer defined by a North Korean threat, and welcoming an enduring U.S. military presence unfettered for global force employment. **MR**

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## NOTES

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