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38 NORTH SPECIAL REPORT

No More Delays

Why It's Time to Move Forward With Wartime OPCON
Transition

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No More Delays: Why It's Time to Move Forward With Wartime OPCON Transition

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Executive Summary

The history and evolution of the military command architecture between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) offer remarkable insight into core relationship dynamics within the US-ROK alliance that exist even today. At the start of the alliance, US policymakers conceived the command architecture as a means to institutionalize a starkly patron-client relationship with its smaller South Korean ally, including the nearly unilateral US operational control (OPCON) over the ROK military. However, it was not intended to remain this way. Both US and ROK officials saw the command architecture as following a specific evolutionary trajectory. What began as a unilateral, US-led arrangement evolved into a bilateral combined architecture that eventually moved toward the ROK taking the lead in its own defense.

Following the end of the Cold War, the last stage in this aforementioned evolution began. US policy at the time called for the United States to move from a leading role to a supporting one in the alliance. However, since then, the evolution has been beset by multiple complications, including: the politically motivated separation of OPCON into peacetime or armistice OPCON and wartime OPCON; conceptual shifts from a combined command toward a parallel command and then back again to a combined command arrangement; multiple delays in the process driven by electoral politics, North Korea's nuclear and missile advancements, and concerns about a rising China; and growing misunderstanding and policy drift surrounding the issue of wartime OPCON transition. The alliance must redouble its effort to move forward and transition wartime OPCON to a ROK-led combined command architecture.

Contrary to previous thinking on this issue, this transition would position the alliance to better address the evolving North Korean threat and shifting strategic environment characterized by worsening US-China relations. Undertaking wartime OPCON transition will require Washington to deepen alliance consultation around the details of the US extended deterrence commitment and tighten cooperation around what Seoul brings to the deterrence equation. Furthermore, Seoul would be compelled to grapple much more concretely with its broader regional responsibilities, including improving its relations with [Tokyo](#) and strengthening cooperation with various United Nations Command (UNC) [Sending States](#). Leading the alliance's command architecture on the peninsula means that Seoul would have to embrace regional and multinational planning and operations in a much more serious manner.

Alternatively, if this transition is no longer a feasible scenario, the US and ROK need to

negotiate and communicate another way forward to both the South Korean and American publics. Wartime OPCON transition is an officially agreed upon alliance policy that has been affirmed by successive ROK and US presidents and their highest civilian defense officials. The alliance should finally either move forward with the policy or be clear and decisive about changing course.

Introduction

The history and evolution of the US-ROK military command architecture offer remarkable insight into core relationship dynamics within the US-ROK alliance. Over the years, the alliance's command architecture has been codified in formal agreements at the highest levels of the US and ROK governments, including in the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT).¹ Official agreements aside, informal and subjective understandings of the command architecture have been just as important in driving its evolution.

When the alliance was established in 1953, US policymakers conceived the command architecture as a means to institutionalize a starkly patron-client relationship with its smaller South Korean ally. As such, the command architecture, including the nearly unilateral US OPCON over the ROK military, was devised to bolster the alliance's deterrence and defense capabilities, but it was also expressly designed to institute asymmetric alliance restraint in order to exert maximum control over South Korea's actions. However, it was not intended to remain this way.

As South Korea developed economically and advanced militarily, the command architecture evolved by mutual agreement in 1978 into the [Combined Forces Command](#) (CFC), which was a bilateral, combined arrangement. Following the end of the Cold War, US policy called for a shift from the States having [a leading role to a supporting one](#) in the alliance. Although this process was truncated by the [first North Korean nuclear crisis](#), the ROK did take over armistice or peacetime OPCON of its military in 1994, and the US retained wartime OPCON within a combined command architecture.

This issue once again came to the forefront in the mid-2000s, and in 2006, the allies officially agreed to transition wartime OPCON to the ROK and establish a parallel command architecture consisting of two separate, independent national commands: a lead ROK command and supporting US command. However, a resurgence of conservative political leadership in South Korea that was deeply opposed to OPCON transition, along with growing US concern about relinquishing control in the face of a worsening North Korean nuclear threat and China steadily rising in power, resulted in a shift back to a combined arrangement and further delay of OPCON transition from a set date to a conditions-based approach.

Since then, the result has been an unsynchronized policy environment beset by policy drift and misunderstanding about the nature and purpose of wartime OPCON transition. This paper examines the history and evolution of the alliance's military command architecture and the rotating periods when alliance managers pushed for and retreated from moving forward with wartime OPCON transition to shed light on past challenges and help policymakers chart a better path forward.

Historical Foundations

OPCON in Occupation, War, and Alliance Formation

The US holding OPCON of Korean security forces predates the Korean War, as well as the

establishment of South Korea as a sovereign state and the US-ROK alliance. During the US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK, 1945-1948) period, the US held OPCON over the Korean national police, constabulary, and coast guard, which US occupation forces helped form. On August 24, 1948, nine days after the formal establishment of the ROK and the end of USAMGIK, ROK President Rhee Syngman and the commander of the US Army Forces in Korea (USAFIK) signed an [executive agreement](#) “whereby the ROK government would gradually assume command of their security forces.”

Based on this agreement, the US retained OPCON and continued to train and equip the South Korean constabulary and coast guard—shortly renamed the ROK Army and Navy—until it withdrew its last occupation forces from the country. The US wanted a smooth transfer of authority to avoid any instability that might trigger a conflict. At that time, there was already regular fighting across the 38th parallel between North Korean and South Korean forces. US officials were concerned President Rhee might make good on his promise to “march north,” thus sparking a conflict the US would be compelled to join. Given these conditions, the US wanted to maintain as much control as possible. This also explains why it refused to supply Rhee with heavy weaponry prior to the Korean War.²

The last US forces departed South Korea in late June 1949, leaving behind a 500-man [military advisors’ group](#), and transferred OPCON to the ROK. The period from June 1949 until the start of the Korean War on June 25, 1950 remains the only time in its history when the ROK held sole and exclusive OPCON over its own military and navigated its national security without a US combat force presence on the Korean Peninsula. With the [outbreak](#) of the war, “US forces returned and prevented South Korea’s destruction by North Korean blitzkrieg.” In the early stages of the war, OPCON of the ROK military was transferred to the US-led UNC, at Rhee’s direction, for the duration of the conflict. Soon after the signing of the Korean War Armistice Agreement and per US insistence, the ROK once again agreed to place the ROK military under the OPCON of the US-led UNC. This arrangement was codified in the Agreed Minute to the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty in November 1954.³

The Eisenhower administration insisted on the US-led UNC retaining OPCON over the ROK military to preserve US leadership and capabilities for the purposes of deterrence and, if need be, warfighting. The administration also did so in order to exert maximum control over its South Korean ally’s freedom of action. The US wanted to maintain predominant influence over any escalatory scenario, whether caused by North or South Korea.⁴ This is otherwise known as dual deterrence. President Rhee’s [disruptive actions](#) during the war and efforts to impede armistice negotiations in the summer of 1953 drove US thinking. In order to deliberately institutionalize an asymmetric alliance, the US retained mostly unilateral OPCON within a hierarchical US-led UNC. The understanding, however, was that this arrangement would evolve as conditions allowed. Nevertheless, it remained mostly static for the next two decades.

During the 1950s, there was some internal discussion among US policymakers and military officers about handing back OPCON as part of the gradual redeployment of US forces after the armistice was signed. However, certain ROK officers and politicians bristled at the arrangement, calling, respectively, for taking back OPCON or characterizing the arrangement as unconstitutional. The ROK government even requested that a ROK general be made the deputy commander within the UNC. The US denied this request because South Korea was not

a United Nations (UN) member state and US officials doubted the ROK military's operational and planning skills. Moreover, the overwhelming concern was ROK postwar reconstruction and maintaining stability.⁵ In short, US policymakers' original reason for instituting a hierarchical command arrangement remained steady for much of the 1950s and 1960s, with some events reinforcing it. In 1961, when Park Chung-hee removed ROK forces from under UNC OPCON without US approval in order to overthrow a short-lived democratic government and take power through a military coup, US officials were incensed. Following the coup, a primary concern for US officials both in South Korea and back in Washington was to reestablish OPCON.⁶

From Patron-Client Hierarchy to Something More Equal

Conditions began to change in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. South Korea's economy started to take off, and the ROK military gained crucial experience in the war in Vietnam, where ROK officers held de facto OPCON over their forces, and amidst the significant uptick in military clashes along the DMZ during the so-called "[Second Korean War](#)" (1966-1969).⁷ Under the [Nixon Doctrine](#), the US sought to pass a greater burden to allies like South Korea. It was against this backdrop that the alliance tightened security cooperation and bolstered direct ROK participation in the command and planning structure. This [included](#) the establishment of the US-ROK Operational Planning Staff and annual Security Consultative Meetings (SCM) and ROK assumption of counter-infiltration missions. It also resulted in the creation of a US-ROK integrated field army headquarters in 1971 following the Nixon administration's withdrawal of one of the two remaining US infantry divisions from South Korea.⁸

At the same time, the UNC was coming into [growing disfavor](#) at the UN General Assembly. Growing calls for its dissolution meant US policymakers had to [devise an alternative](#) to the armistice or another institution to maintain it under a different command that would take over the defense of South Korea. An alternative to the armistice remained elusive as inter-Korean relations had [torpedoed](#) soon after the [hopeful events of 1972](#), but in 1975, US officials began to study a future combined headquarters to serve as a successor to the UNC. This resulted in the creation of a Combined Battle Staff test concept and the combination of, formerly separate, US and ROK military exercises to test it. Out of this effort, US and ROK officials created the Military Committee Meeting (MCM) in 1977. Then, in 1978, amidst President Jimmy Carter's plan to withdraw all US ground combat forces, they created the Combined Force Command (CFC).⁹ The establishment of the CFC meant the defense of South Korea was entirely transferred to the bilateral alliance from the unilateral US-led UNC. The latter remained in place, with its primary responsibility being maintaining the armistice.

The creation of the CFC represented a sea change in the alliance's command architecture. It created a much more cooperative, integrated, and bilateral command arrangement, wherein the allies jointly guided OPCON. The commander in chief of the CFC (CINCCFC) remained a four-star US general, but he answered to both US and ROK National Command Military Authorities (NCMA) through the annual Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) and Military Committee Meeting. Furthermore, his deputy commander was a four-star ROK general, and the CFC structure consisted of an almost equal number of US and ROK officers. [Moreover](#), "CFC OPCON was more restricted than under the UNC, consisting only of ROK and US units on the official List of Combat Units," which the Military Committee (MC) could change at any time. This [meant](#) that "ROK officers could engage in limited yet independent, peacetime operations

outside of CFC OPCON.”¹⁰ The ROK JCS also advanced to having a much more direct role in the management of theater-level operational plans and operations. This evolution in the late 1970s “transformed the concept of the relationship from patron-client and [sic] into something more equal.”¹¹ However, to be clear, it was not entirely equal.

Even though US restraint of the ROK was loosened, and planning and decision-making were made more bilateral within the CFC, the CINCCFC remained a four-star US general based on the same thinking that had underpinned the US-led UNC. Throughout the 1970s and surrounding the creation of the CFC, US officials and lawmakers expressed concern that future changes beyond the CFC would loosen US control in relation to the deterrence of North Korea and South Korea. Establishment of the CFC enhanced ROK operational capabilities and improved alliance interoperability, but it was conceived as a cooperative means for dealing with Carter’s withdrawal of US ground forces. In other words, it was a transitional arrangement.¹² US officials foresaw that a third-generation command arrangement beyond the CFC would need to be created and that it would need to be one that would give the ROK greater control and autonomy while retaining “the built-in restraint of the current arrangements.”¹³ Officials were also concerned about the potential for incongruity between the still US-led UNC’s armistice-keeping responsibilities and that a third-generation arrangement would allow for greater ROK autonomy, particularly once US forces had been further withdrawn.¹⁴

In the short term, these concerns abated. Carter was forced to delay and then put his withdrawal policy in [abeyance](#), and then President Ronald Reagan [canceled it entirely](#). US concerns about the UNC’s diminished capability to maintain the armistice were obviated by the fact that the same four-star US general simultaneously commanded both the UNC and CFC. This meant he had the authority to ensure friendly force compliance with the armistice. He also had the power to control contingency planning and day-to-day security measures, particularly since most US and ROK forces within the country were under the CINCCFC’s OPCON. The CFC, which had originally been a transitional arrangement, was further institutionalized and refined throughout the 1980s as the ROK continued to build its planning and operational experience within it.¹⁵

Importantly, though, as had happened before in the alliance’s history, the newly evolved command architecture quickly became embroiled in South Korea’s domestic politics. Following the assassination of ROK President Park Chung-hee and [the rolling military coup](#) of 1979-1980, the operation and integrity of the CFC were undermined as a result of South Korean leaders removing ROK forces from the CFC’s OPCON to brutally quash political protests in the city of Gwangju. Although intense debates persist about the exact degree of US involvement, given the longstanding US force presence and position atop the CFC, the US could not avoid being associated with the tragic and bloody events surrounding Gwangju. The [Gwangju massacre](#) became the lodestar of South Korea’s democracy movement, and activists framed CFC OPCON as symbolic of Korea’s truncated sovereignty and suppression of its democratic aspirations.¹⁶

The Post-Cold War Shift From a Leading to a Supporting Role

Accommodating ROK Nationalism, Maintaining US Wartime Control

Assertive nationalism, along with public expression of [anti-American](#) sentiment, came to the

forefront during South Korea's democratic transition in the late 1980s. Amidst [public scrutiny](#) of Gwangju and the CFC, demands for the ROK to take back OPCON increased. ROK leaders, propelled by such nationalism and a desire to further advance the ROK military's command and operational capabilities, [initiated reforms](#) in order to better prepare the ROK JCS to take on a more robust role in the command architecture.¹⁷

These trends also occurred alongside and were driven by a noted shift in US policy as the Cold War came to an end. Under the Bush administration's 1990 East Asian Strategic Initiative (EASI), the US began to draw down forces within South Korea and "modify command structures to transition from a leading to a supporting role for US forces."¹⁸ Building on discussions between US and ROK military officials initiated in 1987, the allies came to an agreement in 1992 to transfer armistice OPCON to South Korea (specifically the ROK JCS) while retaining wartime OPCON under the CFC. The transfer took place in 1994. A complex mix of variables drove the creation of separate categories—peacetime or armistice OPCON and wartime OPCON.

As previously noted, Seoul was intent on taking on greater responsibility in its own defense, and Washington was happy to let them. By taking over peacetime OPCON of its own forces, the ROK JCS took over the day-to-day security of South Korea. However, the transfer of peacetime OPCON was equally driven by political and military considerations. It was devised to assuage US and ROK voices calling for more precipitous change. The transfer, which occurred in the midst of wider ROK defense reforms, helped Seoul improve its operational and command and control capabilities. What the US was not willing to do was relinquish key elements of wartime preparation or wartime OPCON itself. Moreover, ROK defense officials were not eager to take it on either.

Peacetime OPCON transition provided a sort of artful, middle-of-the-road solution. It nodded toward ROK sovereignty and offered some noteworthy changes in the alliance's division of labor while maintaining a US-led combined security system. ROK military leaders made clear that they did not envision wartime OPCON transition until "the threat of North Korea has disappeared," as ROK Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Pil Sup Lee wrote to then-CFC Commander General Robert W. Riscassi.¹⁹ Still, the transfer of peacetime OPCON had important consequences.

The CFC and UNC control paradigm fundamentally changed as a result of the transfer. The same four-star US general commanded the CFC and UNC as during the 1978-1994 period. However, moving forward, they would lack full authority within the CFC to control friendly forces and ensure compliance with armistice directives.²⁰ In order to mitigate this change and retain a degree of US control, the allies coined a new term—Combined Delegated Authority (CODA)—under which the US retained leadership over key elements of wartime and crisis planning. As an undated, internal CFC staff document exploring the 1994 transfer and genesis of CODA notes, the creation of CODA reflected the politically driven nature of the change: The ROK JCS was granted the term OPCON for political purposes, and the CFC was given the term CODA for accomplishing missions. If the US and ROK remained cohesive and shared objectives, these mitigating measures would function fine.²¹ Yet, over time, divergences in the allies' respective interpretation of those measures emerged, which created potential rifts between them, particularly during times of crisis.

The 1992 EASI report stated that if the threat from North Korea were to sufficiently diminish,

the CFC could be dissolved, marking “[the final step in the transition to a ROK leading role.](#)” However, it did not specify what type of command arrangement would follow. Meanwhile, in the same year as the EASI report came out, the Bush administration put further US force reductions on hold due to the North Korean nuclear crisis—a decision reaffirmed by the Bill Clinton administration’s [1995 Nye Initiative](#). For the time being, altering the alliance’s command architecture took a backseat to addressing a worsening North Korean threat, yet EASI’s leading-to-supporting formula was retained in the Clinton administration’s [regional strategy](#) throughout the 1990s. Coupled with the politically driven separation of peacetime and wartime OPCON, the leading-to-supporting policy trajectory opened the door for future changes that would test the institutional moorings of the alliance, which did not take long to transpire.

Politicization of OPCON Amidst Alliance Transformation

In 2003, the progressive administration of Roh Moo-hyun came into office and pushed for wartime OPCON transition from the US to the ROK. President Roh and his aides framed the issue in terms of South Korean sovereignty and self-reliant defense. Roh strongly criticized the ROK JCS and Ministry of National Defense (MND) for their passivity in failing to take the lead in defending their own country. His criticism extended to conservative South Korean leaders for what he saw as obsequious dependence on the US.²² Roh’s advisors repeatedly cited the earlier 1994 transfer of peacetime OPCON as a partial or incomplete step that they would complete by taking on wartime OPCON.²³ The fact that North Korea remained not just an ongoing but increasing threat did not deter them. In fact, it drove them. Roh and his advisors argued taking on wartime OPCON would bolster Seoul’s position vis-à-vis Pyongyang.

Furthermore, Roh and his team were concerned about the Bush administration’s unilateralism and potential preemptive military action against North Korea. It was thought that taking on wartime OPCON would allow South Korea to prevent itself from being entrapped in a war between the US and North Korea.²⁴

For President Roh, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made for an eager and willing partner. Amidst the creation of the US [Global Posture Review](#), Rumsfeld and US Department of Defense (DOD) policy officials sought to further reduce and realign US forces in Korea in order to consolidate and make them more flexible on and off the Korean Peninsula. Rumsfeld was determined to move away from having a single US command devoted solely to the defense of one US ally. He was exasperated by the organizational and operational complexities of having several US-led theater-level commands of the CFC, UNC, and United States Forces Korea (USFK) in Korea. Further evolving the alliance’s command architecture was a way to simplify US presence, move past persistent Cold War-era legacies amongst US and ROK officials, and strengthen the alliance.²⁵

Alliance managers began discussions in 2005. It became quickly apparent that ROK MND and ROK military officials, while pushing President Roh’s policy for wartime OPCON transition, did not share his enthusiasm. These ROK officials were equally taken aback by Rumsfeld and the DOD’s receptivity to wartime OPCON transition.²⁶ ROK MND insisted that the allies “[appropriately accelerate](#)” discussions on command relations and wartime OPCON. The US insisted on “accelerate” and MND officials on “appropriately.”²⁷ This resulted in a Command Relations Study (CRS) and an agreement in late 2006 to “[expeditiously complete the transition of OPCON to the ROK after October 15, 2009, but not later than March 15, 2012.](#)” Rumsfeld

and Roh preferred the former date, but high-level ROK MND officials pled their case for the latter in order to have more time for acquisitions, preparation, and possible reconsideration. In early 2007, in a concession to the ROK MND's firm opposition, the allies agreed to transfer wartime OPCON from the US to the ROK in April 2012 under the [Strategic Transition Plan \(STP\)](#).

From a Combined to a Parallel Command Construct

The STP included not only wartime OPCON transition but also disestablishment of the CFC. It created in its place two independent, parallel national commands: a leading command operating under the ROK JCS and a supporting US command, called Korea Command (KORCOM), evolved from USFK. Yet, despite the concept change from an integrated, combined defense under the CFC to a parallel defense concept, the STP still included notable combined elements. These included combined air, amphibious and combat weapons of mass destruction operations, with these combined operations remaining under the OPCON of US officers. Moreover, the Military Committee (MC) structure was to be retained in order to provide unified higher-level operational and strategic guidance and direction to the national commands. Furthermore, a new military coordination center would provide synchronization at the tactical and operational levels.²⁸

As mentioned earlier, US officials in the late 1970s had discussed a third-generation command arrangement beyond the CFC that would help the ROK take the lead and assume greater control while retaining built-in restraints. It appeared that the STP was such an arrangement. The parallel defense concept also obviated the concern of placing US forces under ROK OPCON, which could prove difficult to sell to skeptical US lawmakers ignorant of the nuances of how operational control functions. Richard Lawless, who led alliance negotiations regarding the CRS on the US side as the Under Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, [told Congress in 2006](#) that US forces would remain under the command and operational control of an American commander and that “no other option has been discussed.” Nevertheless, even if the parallel construct was the logical next step in the evolution of the alliance, it was a step too far in the eyes of many observers in the US and ROK. For some, it threatened broader institutional untethering in the alliance.

The STP was roundly [criticized](#) by US observers who questioned splitting up an established and effective combined architecture, saying it did not so much transfer OPCON as divide it. They said that this would potentially open space for the allies to work at cross purposes during a crisis or conflict; the so-called “unity-of-command” critique.²⁹ The parallel concept, despite its retention of combined elements, created the risk of a disaster occurring like the one that took place early in the Korean War when the US Eighth Army and X Corps, both commanded by US generals, were separated. This resulted in one of the worst routs in US military history.

The STP added an additional layer of concern as it divided command between ROK and US generals, which meant that they could more easily default along national lines. These concerns were made clear when a four-star US commander asked what Seoul's strategic war aims, military objectives, and desired war-end state would be in exercising independent operational command and developing future alliance war plans. Additionally, the commander questioned how the ROK would manage the armistice and exercise crisis management in any future confrontation with North Korea, given the fact that a US four-star would remain commander of the UNC once the

STP was completed. The same concerns about institutional incongruities were voiced during Carter's earlier withdrawal policy. STP brought them into the open once again but provided no ready solutions.

In the ROK, [conservative lawmakers](#), politically active [retired military officer associations](#), and much of the defense analyst community fervently opposed the parallel concept and OPCON transition in general, seeing it as a harbinger of alliance dissolution and US withdrawal. These concerns were reinforced by the fact that some US analysts noted that the parallel concept could eventually undermine the rationale for maintaining US forces in Korea. The realignment of US forces to regional hubs south of Seoul, which included the relocation of USFK Headquarters and other key US units to US Army Garrison Humphreys (USAG-H), exacerbated such fears as US and ROK commanders would no longer be co-located, thus increasing the sense of separation.³⁰

These critiques and questions were pertinent under any circumstance, particularly if the US was going to maintain forces in South Korea along with its mutual defense treaty obligation to come to the ROK's defense. These concerns became even more salient given the disagreements between the Roh and Bush administrations surrounding the alliance's operational plans (OPLANS) and planning for a possible regime collapse in North Korea. South Korea vacillated between a desire to disregard or revise existing bilaterally agreed-upon OPLANS because they were perceived as unilateral US documents that threatened escalation or war and asserting ROK sovereignty over any operations in North Korean territory, including locating and securing North Korean nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.³¹ Nonetheless, STP set the OPCON transition date to 2012, which meant new administrations in Washington and Seoul would inherit the process under new circumstances and with their own priorities in mind.

Conservative Resurgence, Delay, and Policy Drift

Conservative ROK President Lee Myung-bak, who entered office in 2008, opposed the STP plan, [saying](#) he would push for its reconsideration if elected. Amidst North Korea's second nuclear test in 2009, an uptick in missile tests, and significant provocations, President Lee and President Obama [agreed](#) to delay transition from 2012 to December 2015 under a new [Strategic Alliance 2015 Plan](#) (SA-2015 Plan)—effectively replacing the STP. The SA-2015 Plan, which gave the ROK more time to acquire necessary capabilities, retained the parallel command concept and put more detailed focus on the certification process necessary to refine the future command structure and maximize its military efficiency.³² Nevertheless, this was merely the start of several delays and concept shifts.

President Park Geun-hye and her administration, which entered office in 2013, also [opposed](#) both the parallel concept and predetermined timeline for OPCON transition. In [June 2013](#), with US approval, the allies quietly dropped the parallel construct in favor of retaining a combined command arrangement, but without specifying its exact structure or operation. At the [45th SCM](#) in October 2013, discussions on a conditions-based approach rather than a fixed timeline commenced. During an April 2014 visit to Seoul, President Obama said the 2015 date [could be reconsidered](#). As a result, at the [46th SCM](#) in October 2014, the allies officially agreed to a conditions-based OPCON transition and to organize a US-ROK combined division. The allies replaced the SA-2015 Plan with the conditions-based OPCON transition plan (COTP).

The conservative groundswell within the ROK against wartime OPCON transition prevailed for

a time. The alliance would maintain a combined command, which ROK conservatives saw as critical to maintaining a US force presence on the peninsula and confronting a more threatening North Korea.³³ Given North Korea's steady nuclear and missile advancements, China's assertive behavior in the region and the potentially escalatory consequences that might follow from the ROK taking the lead, the Obama administration preferred not to alter the alliance's longstanding security architecture as it pivoted attention and additional resources to the Asia-Pacific.³⁴

COTP ensured the ROK would assume wartime OPCON when critical ROK and alliance military capabilities were secured and “[the security environment on the Korean Peninsula and in the region is conducive to a stable OPCON transition.](#)” The conditions, particularly the latter one, were sufficiently broad and subjective as to ensure indefinite delay. [Reportedly](#), this meant sometime in the mid-2020s. According to others, however, indefinite really meant “forever.”³⁵ Either way, the can was being intentionally kicked down the road, and several complications ensued.

First, as already mentioned, despite shifting away from the parallel defense concept and back to a combined command, there was a lack of clarity about its future structure and operation following wartime OPCON transition. Transition implied a change, but the concept was not fleshed out. Some indicated the initial thinking was it would take on a lead nation concept, similar to the US-led UNC's previous role before the CFC was created in 1978. This meant the US would plug forces into an otherwise unilateral ROK command. However, such an arrangement would have appeared to undermine overall alliance “[combinedness](#)” and would be tough to justify to an American audience. As a result, the lead nation concept did not gain traction.³⁶

Second, the 2014 decision chose alliance stability and reassurance at the cost of policy drift. Even though the parallel construct was dropped and OPCON transition was delayed once again, the effort that had been put toward the parallel construct resulted in the ROK JCS and USFK being empowered incrementally at the expense of the CFC. These modifications were not reversed even when the parallel construct was dropped. The consequence, according to a close observer, was an “ad hoc and unsynchronized” environment.³⁷ The ROK continued to develop or acquire high-end capabilities, and alliance managers spoke of transformation. However, by March 2017, when President Park was impeached and removed from office, neither her administration nor the allies had made much headway in the transition process.

Third, as the CFC had ceded certain powers and authorities to the ROK JCS as part of STP, more ROK officials began to challenge CODA in open forums as serving as a directive authority over ROK forces.³⁸ This arose as a result of US pressure against successive ROK governments to tamp down their retaliation to various North Korean provocations in 2010 and 2015. The ROK—at least under conservative leadership—preferred a more aggressive retaliatory stance than the US.³⁹ As a result, the US-led UNC came under increased criticism as hampering the ROK's right to [self-defense](#). Furthermore, both conservatives and progressives within the ROK view the UNC's revitalization campaign suspiciously, albeit for different reasons, as hampering ROK sovereignty.⁴⁰

Halting Progress Leads to Friction and Further Delay

When Presidents Moon Jae-in and Donald Trump entered office in 2017, conditions initially appeared promising for renewed progress on wartime OPCON transition. Moon, a close

associate of and advisor to President Roh Moo-hyun, [framed the issue](#) in similar terms and chastised the ROK military for not being able to stand on its own against North Korea. Given Trump's [well-recorded criticism](#) of allies "[free-riding](#)" on American security guarantees, Moon's message resonated. In [June 2017](#), Moon and Trump [agreed](#) "to enable the expeditious conditions-based transfer of OPCON." In the midst of historical diplomatic efforts with Pyongyang and reduced tensions on the peninsula, the allies agreed at the [50th SCM](#) in October 2018 to [Alliance Guiding Principles](#) following wartime OPCON transition. In essence, the CFC would remain in place, with a ROK general or admiral as the commander and a US general or admiral as the deputy commander.

Therefore, with the future combined concept established, the allies set out to jointly and continuously evaluate the necessary conditions for transition "[while taking into full consideration changes in the security situation](#)." Despite military exercises being canceled or scaled down due to ongoing diplomatic efforts with Pyongyang, the [Initial Operational Capability](#) (IOC) test was successfully run in 2019, and a Full Operational Capability (FOC) test was scheduled for the following year. However, some US officials doubted the adequacy of the testing conditions and felt the ROK was going to give its stamp of approval to the IOC test no matter what, considering its political imperative to achieve OPCON transition. Things only went downhill from there.

In 2020, exercises were [again](#) canceled or scaled down due to COVID-19 and lingering hopes for diplomacy. During the scaled-down exercises, the US emphasized joint readiness against North Korea, considering the damaging effect of years of canceled exercises and Pyongyang's increasing short-range missile tests. The FOC test was only partially completed and was thus rendered inadequate and would need to be run again. [ROK officials](#) criticized the conditions for OPCON transition, saying they were too strict and needed revision. [Others](#) accused the US of dragging its feet by not wanting to relinquish control of allied forces considering the worsening threat from Pyongyang and great power confrontations with Beijing. Differences between ROK and US officials came to a head at the 52nd SCM in October. The Moon administration pushed to have the FOC test scheduled for 2021. The Trump administration [disagreed](#), saying neither side was ready and that bolstering joint defense readiness took priority over OPCON transition.⁴¹

Fortunately, overall alliance relations stabilized once President Joe Biden took office in 2021. Nonetheless, initial reports indicated officials in the Biden administration foresaw a [2025](#), if not a 2028, wartime OPCON transition date. At the [53rd SCM](#), both US and ROK officials acknowledged progress had been made but that the "conditions stated in the bilaterally approved COTP must be met before the wartime OPCON is transitioned" to the Future Combined Forces Command (F-CFC). The FOC test was scheduled for 2022, and a comprehensive joint study of certain rewrites to the COTP and a bilateral assessment of critical ROK and alliance capabilities were also slated to [happen by the 54th SCM](#) in 2023. On the one hand, this made it clear the Moon administration, despite [last-ditch efforts](#) to complete the OPCON transition process before the end of Moon's term, would not get its wish. Yet, on the other hand, discussions at the 53rd SCM did indicate fidelity in moving the process along.

Implications

The history and evolution of the US-ROK military command architecture reveal the inherent

push and pull at the heart of the US-ROK alliance. Over time, the US has encouraged the ROK to take on a more robust role in its own defense and within the alliance's command architecture. However, US officials have also been equally hesitant to relinquish too much control too quickly. Simply put, Washington has had trouble navigating the outer edges of its own authority within the alliance command structure as it simultaneously and discordantly pushes and pulls back Seoul in the process.

For their part, ROK leaders have engaged in a similar dance. Driven partly by US pressure to take on a greater role in the command architecture, South Korean leaders have also eagerly sought to do so based on their own growing capabilities, nationalism, and need to hedge against potential US abandonment. However, despite their desire to achieve a greater degree of self-sufficiency and sometimes bristling against real and perceived US restraints on ROK agency, leaders in South Korea have also been hesitant to move too rapidly or comprehensively in taking on the lead role in the command architecture lest doing so undermines the rationale for maintaining a US presence and commitment.

This push-and-pull dynamic was evident in the original establishment of the alliance's command architecture and during its fitful evolution, and it remains salient today. As things currently stand, politics could potentially intercede once again under the new conservative Yoon Suk-yeol administration. President Yoon has [said](#) he seeks to expedite the transfer of wartime OPCON but that if "a perfunctory transfer of wartime OPCON weakens or erodes the combined defense posture, the safety of the people will be threatened." Such discourse tracks with previous conservative ROK administrations that ostensibly embraced OPCON transition but cast doubt upon it in order ultimately to kick it down the road.

Moreover, the Biden administration's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine and its desire to build cohesion among US allies in the Asia-Pacific due to worsening US-China relations may not only limit the bandwidth that is necessary for moving forward with wartime OPCON transition but may also disincentivize them from doing so for fear of its destabilizing consequences. Under similar circumstances, the US has often resorted to a preference for maintaining the status quo on the Korean Peninsula. However, this is not an effective strategy for managing either alliance relations or expectations.

Instead, it is long overdue to move forward and transition wartime OPCON to a ROK-led combined command architecture. Doing so would better position the alliance to be able to better address an evolving North Korean threat and shifting strategic environment characterized by worsening US-China relations. Undertaking wartime OPCON transition will require Washington to deepen alliance consultation around the details of the US extended deterrence commitment, which is something the Yoon administration, like those before it, has expressed a strong interest in. It would also require tightening cooperation around what Seoul brings to the deterrence equation.

Furthermore, moving forward with OPCON transition would require Seoul to grapple much more concretely with its broader regional responsibilities, including improving its relations with [Tokyo](#) and strengthening cooperation with various UNC [Sending States](#). Leading the alliance's command architecture on the peninsula means that Seoul would have to embrace regional and multinational planning and operations in a much more serious manner.

Alternatively, if wartime OPCON transition is truly not a feasible scenario given the complex and evolving geostrategic environment, then the US and ROK need to come to terms with this reality, devise a more achievable arrangement, and communicate that plan clearly and decisively to both the South Korean and American publics. Wartime OPCON transition is an officially agreed upon alliance policy that has been affirmed by successive ROK and US presidents and their highest civilian defense officials for the last two decades. Prevarication, policy drift, inattention, and misunderstanding do not befit such a longstanding and deeply institutionalized alliance.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Once the "Agreed Minutes Relating to Continued Cooperation in Economic and Military Matters" was signed on November 17, 1954, it resulted in the MDT going into force. One of the key outcomes of the Agreed Minutes was the retention of ROK armed forces under the operational control (OPCON) of the US-led United Nations Command (UNC); see: Shawn P. Creamer, "Joint and Multinational Theater Headquarters in Korea: History, Organization and Manpower Activities," Institute for Corean-American Studies (ICAS), January 6, 2020, 6, endnote, 32.
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- ³ Creamer, "Joint and Multinational Theater Headquarters in Korea," 6, endnote 31.
- ⁴ Victor Cha, "Powerplay: Origins of the US Alliance System in Asia," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (2009): 158-96, accessed September 14, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40389236>.
- ⁵ Donald Stone MacDonald, *US-Korea Relations from Liberation to Self-Reliance* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 63-103; see also: Creamer, "Joint and Multinational Theater Headquarters in Korea," 1-28.
- ⁶ MacDonald, *US-Korea Relations from Liberation to Self-Reliance*, 70-71.
- ⁷ Kwang Sub Kwak, "The United States-ROK Alliance, 1953—2004: Alliance Institutionalization" (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 2006), 169.
- ⁸ Creamer, "Joint and Multinational Theater Headquarters in Korea," 90, endnote 47.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ See also: Kwak, "The United States-ROK Alliance, 1953—2004," 171-172.
- ¹¹ Creamer, "Joint and Multinational Theater Headquarters in Korea," 9.
- ¹² Clint Work, "A Fly in Amber: Carter's Korea Troop Withdrawal & The Recasting of U.S. US Hegemony and Korean Agency" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, Seattle, 2019), 348-350.
- ¹³ US Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *US Troop Withdrawal from the Republic of Korea: A Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate by Senator Hubert H. Humphrey and John Glenn, 95th Cong., 2d sess., 1978, Senate, 42.*
- ¹⁴ Work, "A Fly in Amber," 348-350.
- ¹⁵ Creamer, "Joint and Multinational Theater Headquarters in Korea," 57.
- ¹⁶ Namhee Lee, *The Making of the Minjung* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 116-122.
- ¹⁷ Creamer, "Joint and Multinational Theater Headquarters in Korea," 32.
- ¹⁸ US Department of Defense, "A Strategic Framework for the Asian Pacific Rim: Looking Toward the 21st Century," April 18, 1990.
- ¹⁹ "ROK CJCS GEN Pil Sup Lee letter to Commander CFC Robert W. Riscassi, Yongsan, ROK, June 29, 1992," letter provided by USFK official, accessed through the United States Forces Korea Command History Office.

- ²⁰ Creamer, “Joint and Multinational Theater Headquarters in Korea,” 58.
- ²¹ “Combined Delegated Authority (CODA): A short history and evaluation by Mr. Rice who was one of the principal action officers and coined the term CODA,” undated CFC staff document, provided by USFK official, accessed through the United States Forces Korea Command History Office.
- ²² Yoichi Funabashi, *The Peninsula Question: A Chronicle of the Second Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 230-261; and Seo Joo-seok, interview by the author, October 10, 2016.
- ²³ Lee Jong-seok, interview by the author, October 19, 2016; and Kim Jong-dae, interview by the author, November 30, 2016.
- ²⁴ Funabashi, *The Peninsula Question*, 230-261.
- ²⁵ Richard Lawless, interview by the author, October 23, 2021; and Michael Finnegan, interview by the author, June 10, 2021.
- ²⁶ Former ROK military officer, interview by the author, November 11, 2021; Richard Lawless, interview by the author, October 23, 2021; and Michael Finnegan, interview by the author, June 10, 2021.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Creamer, “Joint and Multinational Theater Headquarters in Korea,” 47.
- ²⁹ Former US four-star commander in Korea, interviewed by author, January 31, 2022.
- ³⁰ US military official, interviewed by author, March 3, 2022.
- ³¹ Funabashi, *The Peninsula Question*, 247-252.
- ³² Former US four-star commander in Korea, interviewed by author, March 17, 2022.
- ³³ Hwang Jin-ha, interviewed by the author, December 14, 2016; Lee Jung-run, interviewed by the author, December 12, 2016; and Park Jin, interviewed by the author, December 19, 2016.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*; and U.S. military official, interviewed by author, March 3, 2022.
- ³⁵ US military official, interviewed by author, March 3, 2022.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Creamer, “Joint and Multinational Theater Headquarters in Korea,” 34.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 102, endnote 143.
- ³⁹ Former U.S. four-star commander in Korea, interviewed by author, March 17, 2022.
- ⁴⁰ Clint Work, “Psychological & Institutional Limits: Trump & the Future of the US-ROK Strategic Alliance,” in *Divided America, Divided Korea: US-Korean Relations During and After the Trump Years*, edited by Mitchell B. Lerner and David P. Fields (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022 forthcoming).
- ⁴¹ Former ROK military official, interviewed by the author, January 10, 2022.