

Briefing Memo

The Wartime OPCON Transfer Issues and the U.S.-ROK Alliance

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Introduction

The issues on the Wartime Operational Control (hereafter, OPCON¹) transfer² are one of the keywords over the security issues on the Korean Peninsula. It is also the symbol that represents the asymmetric alliance. OPCON is defined that “it is the set command structure to accomplish specific missions or tasks. Also, it is the core authority of operational command which could assign and order missions to specified units.”³ Indeed, the commander with OPCON could plan operations, organize units, and manage information, although that is limited during the joint operation and in the specific area.⁴

Currently, Combined Forces Command (CFC) Commander possesses OPCON. In 1950, at the beginning of the Korean War, the ROK president Syngman Rhee assigned OPCON (called “the command authority” at that time) to Douglas MacArthur, the United Nations Commander.⁵ Even after the Armistice Agreement and the Mutual Defense Treaty between U.S. and the ROK, OPCON remained under the control of UN Command.⁶ Following the establishment of the CFC, OPCON was transferred from UN Commander to CFC Commander in 1978. According to the regulation, CFC Commander is to be the U.S. Army general, who is also the Commander of United States Forces Korea (USFK). Therefore, the U.S. Army general is able to operate OPCON. The Korean Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) has OPCON during peacetime; however, it is regulated to transfer to CFC Commander during wartime. That is one of the reasons why the U.S.-ROK alliance is called an asymmetric alliance. Because of that, the Moon administration is trying to transfer it as soon as possible.

This article analyzes the ROK government's approach to the transfer of OPCON and the ideal

¹ On the OPCON transfer issues, several terms are used, for example, “return”, “convert” or “redeem”. In this article, “transfer” is to be applied except for direct quotes.

² Operational control is categorized into peacetime and wartime. Unless otherwise noted, this article uses the “operational control” or “OPCON” as the “wartime operational control”.

³ Roh Moo-hyun Memorial Library “Understanding the Issue of Transfer of Wartime OPCON (전시 작전통제권 환수 문제의 이해),” August 17, 2006.

⁴ R.O.K Joint Chiefs of Staff, “The Significance of Operational Control Transfer (전작권전환의 의미),” https://new.mnd.go.kr/mbs/home/mbs/jcs2/subview.jsp?id=jcs2_020401010000

⁵ The Korean President Syngman Rhee to the American Embassy, July 4, 1950

Security Council Resolution 84, United Nations, July 7, 1950

⁶ “While the United Nations Command takes responsibilities for the defense of the ROK, its military force is placed under the operational command of the United Nations Command.” Article 2 of the “Economic and Military Aid and the Signature of the U.S.-ROK Agreed Minute of Understanding”, November 17, 1954.

posture of the U.S.-ROK alliance after the transfer.

“Condition-based approach” for the OPCON transfer

In 1987, the ROK government started discussing the transfer. At that time, Roh Tae-woo, the presidential candidate, laid out that issue as a campaign promise. After that, the U.S. and the ROK had been consulting about the timing and conditions for the transfer at the Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) or the summit. As the result of the Secretary of Defense Conference between the U.S. and the ROK, it was decided to transfer the OPCON on April 7, 2012.⁷ However, both sides needed to reconsider the timing because of repeated provocations by the DPRK such as nuclear tests, ballistic missile launches, and the sinking of the Cheonan warship. Then, at the 42nd SCM (2010), both Secretary of Defense approved “Strategic Alliance 2015”⁸ and postponed the transfer of OPCON by December 2015 by prioritizing the stability of security environments on the Korean Peninsula.⁹

In 2014, the 46th SCM was the significant turning point for the OPCON transfer. The U.S. and the ROK shifted the policy that they were going to decide the transfer with the “condition-based approach”.¹⁰ After that, both sides had not mentioned the specific date of the transfer. Instead, the transfer would be implemented depending on the conditions. Subsequently, the “Conditions-Based OPCON Transition Plan” (COTP) was approved at the 47th SCM.¹¹ COTP indicates the conditions and procedures for the transfer as the alternative strategic document of “Strategic Alliance 2015”.¹² The conditions indicated by COTP are as follows. 1) military capabilities to lead the allied defense, 2) comprehensive response capabilities of the allies against nuclear forces and ballistic missile threats by DPRK, 3) stable security environment of the Korean peninsula and surrounding areas for the OPCON transfer.¹³ The first condition means that the ROK military force is to be equipped with military and operational capabilities. The second one implies that U.S.-ROK alliances capability aims to foster inclusive response capabilities, including U.S. nuclear deterrence, against military threats including nuclear forces and ballistic missiles. The last one is whether the peripheral security environments are suitable for the OPCON transfer or not. To meet these conditions, the ROK government and military have been improving national defense capabilities and confirming the verification work with the U.S. side.

The ROK government accelerates the OPCON transfer efforts under Defense Reform 2.0 which aims to improve defense capabilities. Especially, the Moon administration has been promoting Defense

⁷ South Korean Ministry of National Defense, “Joint Communiqué of the 39th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” November 7, 2007.

⁸ It is the strategic document which shows military actions for the OPCON transfer and the plans for development of the US-ROK alliance. (R.O.K Joint Chiefs of Staff, “The Significance of Operational Control Transfer (전작권 전환의 의미)”)

⁹ South Korean Ministry of National Defense, “Joint Communiqué of the 42nd ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” October 8, 2010.

¹⁰ South Korean Ministry of National Defense, “Joint Communiqué of the 46th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” October 23, 2014.

¹¹ South Korean Ministry of National Defense, “Joint Communiqué of the 47th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” November 2, 2015.

¹² R.O.K Joint Chiefs of Staff, “The Significance of Operational Control Transfer (전작권 전환의 의미),” https://new.mnd.go.kr/mbshome/mbs/jcs2/subview.jsp?id=jcs2_020401030000.

¹³ R.O.K Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Condition-based the OPCON Transfer,”

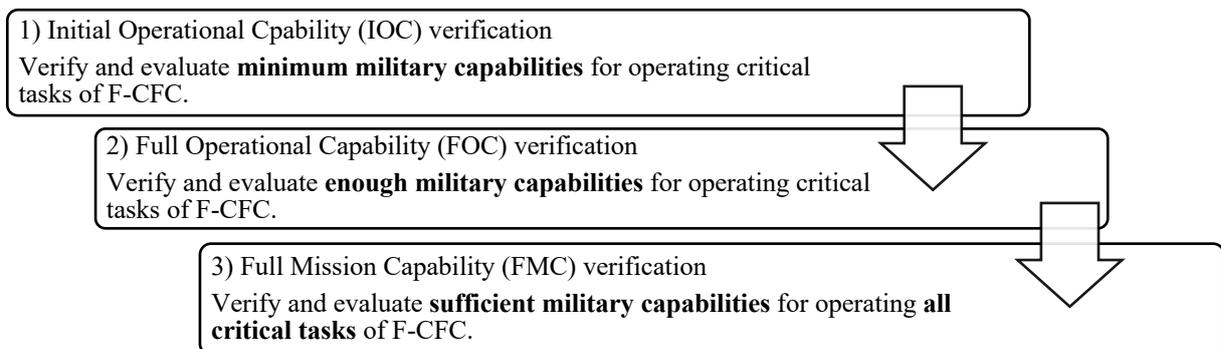
https://new.mnd.go.kr/mbshome/mbs/jcs2/subview.jsp?id=jcs2_020402010000; *National Defense Daily*, November 3, 2015.

Reform 2.0 since his inauguration and focusing on “self-reliant defense.”¹⁴ It is one of the important issues that “to acquire the critical capability for the OPCON transfer as soon as possible, then reform the command structure led by our (ROK) military” at Defense Reform 2.0¹⁵. Particularly, it aims to improve national defense capabilities through the construction of the Korean missile defense, strengthening the system of surveillance and reconnaissance, and the vitalization of defense industries. According to those efforts, the ROK side aims to acquire the capabilities for taking command at CFC.

Those actions affect the increase in defense expenditure. The Moon administration has been increasing the defense expenditure annually by 7% on average since 2017¹⁶. The national defense expenditure in 2021 was 52.84 trillion won, an increase of approximately 13 trillion won over the 2017 figure of 40.33 trillion won. Notably, allocations for “defense capability improvement expenses” of the defense expenditure, grew from 12 trillion won in 2017 to 17 trillion won in 2021.¹⁷ This improvement expense is the budget to allocate for upgrading military capabilities for the OPCON transfer and building response capabilities for nuclear forces and weapons for mass destruction (WMD). Therefore, it shows that the ROK government has been increasing the defense expenditure continuously to meet COTP conditions for the OPCON transfer.

Additionally, the U.S. and the ROK have been confirming the verification process through joint exercises and simulation games as efforts for the “condition-based approach.” Figure 1 summarizes the verification process based on COTP.

Figure 1: Three-stage combined verification and evaluation of the Future Combined Forces Command (F-CFC) mission capability



¹⁴ The Moon administration tends to use “responsible defense”; however, this article standardizes the terminology to “self-reliant defense.”

¹⁵ South Korean Ministry of National Defense, “Defense Reform 2.0: Realizing a Strong Military and Responsible National Defense (국방개혁 2.0 강한군대, 책임국방의구현),” July 27, 2018.

¹⁶ South Korean Ministry of National Defense, “Defense Reform 2.0: How Our National Defense has Changed in Four Years (국방개혁 2.0’ 4 년, 달라진우리국방),” May 24, 2021.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Sources: Created by the author based on
the Joint Chiefs of Staff website and the “2020 Defense White Paper.”

Among the three stages, the U.S. and the ROK verified the IOC process at the Combined Command Post Training (August 2019) and the Military Committee Meeting (MCM) (October 2019)¹⁸. It was the first time that the exercise was implemented with the ROK Army general as CFC commander and the U.S. Army general as the vice commander at the Combined Command Post Training. The training and verification work was carried out by simulating situations where the ROK commander would actually exercise OPCON.¹⁹ At the 51st SCM, the secretary of defense of both countries evaluated the verification results at MCM and agreed on proceeding with the FOC verification process in 2020.²⁰ However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the joint exercise has been postponed and downsized; therefore, it is expected that the second process will be delayed. Furthermore, military provocations by the DPRK might have some impact on the verification work if they occurred. For these reasons, it needs to comprehensively approach the second and third conditions of COTP besides the first one: military capabilities.

The U.S.-ROK alliance after the OPCON transfer and the Autonomy-Security Trade-off Model

As mentioned above, the U.S. and the ROK have been dealing with OPCON transfer issues for several decades. The ultimate national defense goal for the ROK is to complete the “self-reliant defense”; therefore, the OPCON transfer is just one of the waypoints. So, if the transfer is completed, USFK will withdraw? In that case, the alliance will be ended? Is the ROK able to achieve the “self-reliant defense”? This section analyzes the U.S.-ROK alliance posture after the OPCON transfer by applying the autonomy-security trade-off model²¹ to get the answer to the above questions. The U.S.-ROK alliance has been analyzed with the model because of its asymmetric nature²². Indeed, the model is useful to examine the alliance issues post the OPCON transfer.

The autonomy-security trade-off model explains that security and autonomy are trade-offs in an asymmetric alliance. According to the model, a major power is negotiable in an alliance while it provides security benefits to a minor power. It means that autonomy benefits of a minor power become low. Conversely, if provided security benefits by a major power are low, autonomy of a minor power is high. However, an extremely lower level of security or a higher level of autonomy results in the dissolution of the alliance. Based on this premise, this section examines the relationship between “autonomy-security” on the issues of

¹⁸ *National Defense Daily*, August 21, 2019.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ South Korean Ministry of National Defense, “Joint Communique of the 51st ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” November 15, 2019.

²¹ James D. Morrow, “Alliance and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances,” *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no.4 (1991): 904-33

²² Han Yong-Sup and Jeong Sang Hyuk, “Political, Economical, Military Analysis of the Wartime Operational Control Authority Transfer Issue: Theory, Evaluation, Countermeasures (전시작전통제권 전환 재연기의 정치·경제·군사적 조명: 이론, 평가, 대응),” *Journal of International Politics*, vol.1, no.1 (April 2015): 5-36; Kim Gi-Deok, “The Direction of the Development of the ROK’s Alliance Strategy for the US to Overcome Alliance Dilemmas (동맹 딜레마 극복을 위한 한국의 대미 동맹 전략의 발전 방향),” *The Journal of Strategic Studies (전략연구)*, Vol. 56, (November 2010): 181-211; Park Hwee-rhak, “The South Korea–US Alliance under the North Korean Nuclear Threat: A Reluctant Return to the ‘Autonomy–Security Trade-Off’,” *Pacific Focus* 34, no.3 (2019): 447-472.

the OPCON transfer. From the ROK perspective, Figure 2 shows the status quo and the completion of the OPCON transfer and the dissolution of CFC.

Figure 2: The U.S.-ROK alliance in the Autonomy-Security Trade-off Model”

	Security	Autonomy
status quo	High	Low
The completion of the OPCON transfer and dissolution of CFC	Low	High

Created by the author.

At the status quo, the ROK security is maintained at a higher level, on the other hand, the autonomy is relatively low because OPCON belongs to CFC commander during wartime. Then, if the OPCON transfer will be completed and CFC is dismantled, the autonomy becomes higher because the ROK could exercise OPCON without consulting with the U.S. However, if the ROK excluded the option of joint operations with the U.S. forces, the security will be jeopardized. That is the extreme case in which the ROK boosted “self-reliant defense” strongly. Therefore, that means the dissolution of CFC entails higher risks. As far, CFC is to be maintained after the OPCON is transferred to the ROK. At the 50th SCM (2018), the U.S. and ROK secretary of defense agreed to remain USFK after the transfer, maintain the extended deterrence by the U.S. military, and keep a similar system like CFC²³. Not only USFK station but also the system of CFC is going to maintain. That implies the alliance pledges the ROK autonomy while keeping the security level provided by the U.S. Whether or not to take the balance between security and autonomy depends on the ROK’s next administration.

Conclusion

The ROK has been struggling with the issues of OPCON transfer since the Korean War outbreak which was before the U.S.-ROK alliance started. After the Armistice Agreement, OPCON has been belonging to CFC commander and the ROK government has been making efforts to transfer it. Both sides continuously prolonged the timing of the transfer, and finally, they did not show the deadline and applied the ambiguous explanation: “condition-based approach”. However, especially, the Moon administration is progressing actively for the OPCON transfer. During that, it held the North-South summits, and the U.S.-DPRK summits to avoid stimulating the DPRK while downsizing the U.S.-ROK joint exercise and substituting large-scale

²³ South Korean Ministry of National Defense, “Joint Communique of the 50th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” October 31, 2018.

drills with computer simulations.²⁴ Both the U.S. and the ROK are arranging the FOC verification: the second work at COTP. In spite of condemnations from the DPRK and challenging situations of COVID-19, they are keeping postures for the OPCON transfer with minimum joint exercises.²⁵ Those actions are reflecting the strong desire for an achievement of the “self-reliant defense”. As analyzed with the autonomy-security trade-off model, it is one of the important factors for “self-reliant defense” with a higher level of autonomy by the OPCON transfer. However, if the ROK pursues more autonomy, the balance with security is collapsed, and the alliance itself will be jeopardized.

At this moment, it might be impossible to transfer the OPCON during the Moon administration. Therefore, the most eminent task is how to promote the readiness for the FOC verification process by the end of the term. The next administration is expected to continue to progress the OPCON transfer. However, if the DPRK provokes military actions, and public opinions at the ROK are inclined to negative postures for the transfer, the government might have to take security more seriously than autonomy. The pathway to the transfer is still long. Through that process, it is important to focus on how the ROK implements the policy between the asymmetric alliance and the “self-reliant defense”.

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²⁴ Department of Defense, “Readout of Minister of National Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo’s Phone Call With Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan,” March 2, 2019.

Kyodo News. “U.S., S. Korea tone down joint-military exercises,” March 4, 2019 (<https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2019/03/ee0060526350-update1-us-s-korea-tone-down-jointmilitary-exercises.html>)

²⁵ Policy Briefing “U.S.-South Korea Combined Command Post Training Begins ‘Defensive Character’ (한미 연합지휘소훈련 시작...“방어적 성격”), August 17, 2021.