

The Realignment of the USFK in the Military Transformation and South Korea's Defense Reform 2020

Chang-hee Nam¹

Changing Global Defense-Posture of the US Forces in the Pentagon's Transformation Efforts

The United States Forces in Korea (USFK) is currently implementing changes in its defense posture unprecedented in its 50 year-long history of deployment in the Republic of Korea (ROK). Numerous small installations in northern Gyeonggi province near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) will be consolidated soon to bases in Dongducheon and Uijeongbu before moving south of the Han River within a few years. Large bases in Incheon, Chuncheon and Busan will eventually be returned to the South Korean government and consolidated to two large hub bases in the Osan-Pyeongtaek and Daegu areas respectively. Some parts of the realignment have something to do with the Land Partnership Plan (LPP), which basically aimed at enhancing public support for the alliance by responding to the land demands raised by local communities. The USFK had listed the purpose of the plan as enhancing public safety and strengthening the alliance by reducing the U.S. use of ROK-granted land through consolidation and increased joint use of the ROK training areas.³ When finalizing the relocation negotiation, the two sides agreed to combine the separate two agreements, namely, the LPP and the Osan-Pyeongtaek consolidation plan of both Yongsan Garrison and the 2nd Infantry Division (2nd ID).

By contrast with the LPP, the relocation of the 2nd Infantry Division to the Osan-Pyeongtaek area has more to do with a fundamental change in the Pentagon's global strategy. The foremost locomotive behind the structural realignment of the USFK comes from Secretary Rumsfeld's military transformation initiative, which gained more salience in the Pentagon's war on terrorism after the September 11 attacks. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld strongly argues that the U.S. military should adapt to new threats coming from terrorist groups who might use weapons of mass destruction. He believes that the old-fashioned basing of the U.S. forces during

¹ The author is a professor of Inha University, South Korea, who formerly worked for the Korea Institute for Defense Analysis until he joined his currently affiliated institution in 2001.

³ A fact verified from an interview in 2004 with a KIDA researcher who joined the briefing prepared by the USFK on November 28, 2000.

the Cold War-era has now become obsolete and can no longer help defend American interests from attacks in unexpected times and places. He contends, “The Pentagon decided to move away from the old ‘threat-based’ strategy that had dominated our country’s defense planning for the early half a century and adopt a new ‘capabilities-based’ approach -- one that focuses less on who might threaten us, or where, and more on how we might be threatened and what is needed to deter and defend against such threats.”⁴ The disastrous damage inflicted on Americans by the unprecedented attacks of September 11 awakened the American military thinkers to devise genuinely new ways of thinking. The White House hinted that America now needs a so-called third round of transformation in constructing its national security strategy -- as it did after the British invasion of the early 19th century and at the advent of the Cold War.⁵ The U.S. military now needs to reconfigure its military machine to be able to deal with elusive enemies whose activities are small in size, transnational and ubiquitous.

The proponents of Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) in the American military provided a timely solution for adapting to the new types of threats. Notably, the RMA refers to a fundamental transformation in military strategy and operations that transpired in the process of amplifying combat effectiveness by linking Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and Precision Guided Munitions (PGMS) with highly sophisticated C4I (Command and Control, Communication, Computer and Intelligence). This network-centric system-of-systems, which gathers accurate information through sophisticated battlefield awareness capabilities, relaying it to the shooter, has been proving its effectiveness in the most recent U.S.-led wars. Arthur Cebrowski, a retired admiral and a former Director of the Office of Force Transformation in the Pentagon, came up with the new concept of “Network-Centric Warfare (NCW).” Cebrowski’s men suggested a network-centric warfare for dramatically amplified war fighting effectiveness, which could be applied to suffocating by maximum vigilance of the terrorist groups to neutralization. A global network of real-time sensor-shooter linkage supported by agile and mobile forces dispersed around key nodes would successfully discourage any country to allow a haven for terrorist groups. “Network-centric warfare is characterized by the ability of geographically dispersed forces to attain a high level of shared battle-space awareness that is exploited to achieve massed effects swiftly without the physical massing of forces required in the past.”⁶

This global rapid response system necessitates the reduction and relocation of forces still surrounding the Russian Federation following the old containment strategy. The Pentagon needed to find relevant force projection space to replace that of the past in its reconfiguration of the U.S. ground forces stationed around the globe. In the eyes of the Pentagon’s transformation planners,

⁴ Donald Rumsfeld, “Transforming the Military,” *Foreign Affairs*, 81:3 (May/June 2002), p. 24.

⁵ The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2002).

⁶ Office of Force Transformation, *Elements of Defense Transformation* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2004), p. 8.

large contingents of U.S. ground forces on the Korean peninsula, equipped with heavily armored vehicles, impeding mobility, look somewhat outdated and less adaptable to the requirements of new missions in America's war on terrorism.

Other encouraging changes include enhanced lift capabilities and improved deployability of Rapid Deployment Forces (RDF). Transport aircraft like the C-17 now allow for rapid airlift of soldiers and even armored vehicles, reducing the need for advance deployment of large-scale ground forces. The Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), a crucial component of the Army's multifunctional Unit of Action (UA) under future chain of command such as UEx and UEy, will replace the army brigades. The future combat team of light infantry troops can be dispatched together with light armored vehicles to any part of the world. This attests to the desire of the U.S. Department of Defense for a global basing system that would reshape U.S. troops overseas to be smaller, modular, mobile, and thus adaptable to carrying out network-centric warfare against scattered and invisible enemies. Rumsfeld has specially emphasized speed, noting that, "In order to defend the American cities, allies, and deployed forces the United States is required to have rapidly deployable, fully-integrated, forces capable of reaching distant theaters quickly and working with air and sea forces to strike adversaries swiftly and with devastating effect."⁷

Accordingly, the Pentagon's Office of Force Transformation laid out their requirements in the Global Defense Posture Review (GPR), noting that only forces oriented around "speed" are able to define or alter the initial conditions on terms favorable to the U.S. interests, effectively dissuading and defeating asymmetric threats of non-state adversaries.⁸ Their report again proudly states, "The U.S. military is developing an enhanced forward deterrent posture through the integration of new combinations of immediately employable, forward stationed and deployed forces; globally available reconnaissance, strike, and command and control (C2) assets; information operations capabilities; and rapidly deployable, highly lethal, and sustainable forces that may come from outside a theater of operations."⁹ According to the transformation research team, ubiquitous, seamlessly joint, and virtually omniscient forces with capabilities for overcoming distance are expected to effectively break the will or otherwise shape the behavior of the elusive enemy.¹⁰ Allowing no safe, hardened sanctuary anywhere in the globe, the potential adversary would no longer retain the will to fight, or would be so disoriented that they can no longer fight or react coherently.¹¹

⁷ Rumsfeld, *Op. Cit.*, p. 27.

⁸ Office of Force Transformation, *Military Transformation: A Strategic Approach* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2003), p. 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰ Chang-hee Nam, "Relocating the US Forces in South Korea: Strained Alliance and Emerging Partnership in Changing Defense Posture," *Asian Survey*, 2006, forthcoming.

¹¹ Office of Force Transformation, 2003, *Op. Cit.*, p. 34.

The USFK in the Global Defense Posture Review

In accordance with the needs raised by the Pentagon on global repositioning of the U.S. forces, the U.S. PACOM and the USFK were required to reorganize the 2nd ID into light mobile infantry forces and realign them to locations where they can be airlifted or sealifted swiftly. The U.S. Forces Commander in Korea, General LaPorte, suggested that most of the 2nd ID move to Osan and Pyeongtaek, where it would facilitate airlift and sealift from a nearby port by way of naval vessels. Thus, the Pentagon's Global Defense Posture Review (GPR) was first implemented to the U.S. Forces in Korea.

Many military strategists have already raised concerns about the outdated base structure of the current U.S. military stationing in Korea—that it is based upon the warfare doctrine formulated back in the Korean War. The old defense posture of the USFK does not reflect the noticeable technological and strategic innovations that have transpired during the past decades. For example, the USFK officers have pointed out that key weapons systems such as the Multiple Launcher Rocket System (MLRS) have already exceeded the capacity of some firing exercise ranges, thus weakening readiness of the combined forces. The capability to strike and detect enemy at a distance and the mobility of troops and equipment has improved significantly, compared to the times when the allied forces fought during the Korean War. To the frustration of the USFK's engineering officers, most of the USFK bases still remain where they were first established a half century ago.

From the abovementioned perspective, the relocation plan appeared feasible and necessary, even though some conservatives in South Korea raised concerns over decreasing deterrence as a result of discarding the traditional trip-wire function of the U.S. installations located along North Korea's possible invasion routes. These worries did not, however, dissuade the determined proponents of the transformation. The architects of NCW in Washington claim that high-quality shared awareness, dynamic self-synchronization, dispersed and demassed forces, deep sensor reach, compressed operations, and rapid speed of command enable the U.S. forces to generate dramatically increased combat power.¹² The 140 items of force enhancements promised by the U.S. for compensating force reduction and realignment are mainly composed of the weapon systems for enhancing battlefield awareness, automated C4I system, precision deep strike, and rapid mobility. The USFK has announced that it will introduce UAVs (Hunters, Predators), precision-guided bombs, Apache Longbows, F-117s, PAC-3s and High Speed Vessels (HSVs). The USFK told the ROK MND officials that this sophisticated weaponry would sufficiently compensate for the reduction in numbers of the U.S. forces in Korea.

¹² Office of Force Transformation, *The Implementation of Network-Centric Warfare* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2005), pp. 4-10.

Against this backdrop, the USFK came up with its own alliance transformation plan entitled, “ROK-US alliance transformation based on ‘enhancement’, ‘shaping’ and alignment’ concepts.” By “enhancement” of the alliance, the USFK means increasing deterrence and enhancing combined warfighting capabilities with aforementioned force reinforcements. By “shaping,” it implies leveraging the alliance force structure, based on enhanced capabilities and mission transfer. At the 35th Security Consultative Meeting (SCM), the ROK and the United States agreed on the transfer of missions in 10 categories for changed division of tasks and responsibilities between the allies.¹³ The third concept, to align, means to promote the consolidation and relocation process, creating a less-intrusive, stable presence in Korea.¹⁴

After the two sides finally reached to an agreement in the relocation negotiations termed “Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance Policy Initiative” (FOTA), the ROK government started to secure new grant land in Osan and Pyeongtaek for preparing to house repositioned forces. On July 10, 2005, there was a violent demonstration against the relocation waged by some NGOs and the farmers whose land was to be newly granted to the USFK. The ROK government had suggested quite generous incentives for the farmers asking them to give up their land, even enacting a special law with respect to administrative and financial support for the community. At a conference held in Seoul, Korean security specialists unanimously voiced strong support for the successful relocation process, praising the government for its commitment to the future alliance.¹⁵ In the 37th Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) between the ROK MND and the Pentagon, Secretary Rumsfeld and the Korean Defense Minister jointly noted that the successful relocation of the U.S. forces in Korea would serve as a cornerstone for the future alliance between the ROK and the United States.¹⁶

At a roundtable interview of President Bush with the foreign print media at the White House on November 8, 2005, the U.S. president praised the way the relocation is being respectfully handled in Korea, adding his appreciation for South Korea’s assistance in joining the stability operation in Iraq. Critics say that the decision of President Roh to send the third largest number of forces, after the U.K., was primarily driven to stabilize the strained ROK-US alliance amid the friction over the North Korean nuclear problem. The half century-long alliance is sometimes labeled as “paralyzed” by skeptical observers in Washington, owing to the diverging views on the

¹³ Those transfers of missions include counter-fire Command and Control Task Force HQ missions, JSA security missions, and counter-Special Forces Air Force Support missions.

¹⁴ For a detailed introduction of the USFK transformation, see http://www.usfk.or.kr/kr/multimedia/briefings/transformation_briefing.html

¹⁵ The leading security specialists in Seoul assembled at the meeting sponsored by the Commission on USFK Affairs under the Prime Minister, on April 9, 2005, where the author’s call for strong support for the successful relocation secured a wide consensus among the participants.

¹⁶ In the meeting, Secretary Rumsfeld is said to have described the shared aims of the U.S.-ROK alliance today as a transformation of the posture and the joint reinforcement of capabilities on the peninsula. For detailed coverage, see *The Korea Herald*, October 22, 2005.

appropriate methods to stop North Korea's nuclear blackmail. However, the alliance—considered by some to be in peril—continues to demonstrate health and strength since Seoul's support for Washington's global war on terrorism.

The plans to reduce by one-third the current strength of the USFK, to be completed by 2008, has raised concerns among Koreans, which in turn resulted in public criticism of President Roh's perceived mismanagement of the alliance. Conservatives among the concerned Koreans within the ROK military strongly demanded to send ROK contingents to Iraq to demonstrate South Korea's commitment to the alliance. Officers in the ROK military made their point that South Korea should come to the help of America in joining stability operations, even if the Pentagon had mistakenly started a war because of receiving misinformation on the alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Most Koreans, even though not necessarily applauding the Iraqi war, did not object to sending the ROK forces, recalling the assistance the United States provided them during the Korean War.

A new partnership between Seoul and Washington thus emerged from South Korea's contribution to the Iraqi stabilization mission. The Zaitun Unit, composed of about 3,200 soldiers, is stationed in a Kurdish town of Iraq performing stability mission and escorts for UN officials. Demonstrating to the Middle East countries Korea's remarkable success in democratization and economic development, Korea can contribute a lot to America's difficult tasks there. South Korea is an important model for America's expansion of democracy in the region and its unrelenting diplomatic efforts to defeat terrorism in the so-called 'arc of instability'. The military strategy of suffocation through a preventive network will not succeed in fully neutralizing the angry fundamentalists, unless it is accompanied by value-laden persuasion. The majority of South Koreans firmly believe in democracy and market economy even though the current administration is sometimes leaning slightly toward leftist policy preferences. In this sense, the reshaping of the USFK led to a concurrent move on the part of the ROK armed forces to join America's diplomatic efforts and military war on terrorism.

Furthermore, by agreeing to relocations during the FOTA, Seoul had already given the USFK a de facto mandate for strategic flexibility. To the disappointment Washington, Seoul added certain strings to the moving out of the U.S. troops in the joint statement of February 16, 2006, stipulating that it should not draw Korea into an unwanted conflict with China. Many Korean security specialists however believe he will reconsider this, realizing his mistake, once he fully understands the preventive nature of America's hedging strategy vis-à-vis China. In that sense, the embryonic division of mission concentration— meaning the ROK forces primarily dealing with North Korea and the USFK with regional and global security—may evolve into a newly emerging partnership against the transnational threats.

South Korea's Defense Reform through 2020

The RMA studies had attracted keen interest and were taken seriously, especially among a small number of researchers of the Korea Institute for Defense Studies (KIDA), since the early 1990s. Some of them later joined, and took a leading role in, the RMA Promotion Office of the Ministry of National Defense in the late 1990s. Stimulated by their pioneering research on future warfare, each service of the Korean Armed Forces was engaged in turn in producing their long term vision for building future combat units. The Defense Reform 2020, which was released in September of 2005 by the Minister of National Defense (MND), is based on those accumulated long-term plans of the three services, the Joint Chiefs of Staffs (JCS) and the MND.¹⁷

The Korean military thinkers however contend that South Korea's defense reform must naturally be different and limited compared to that of the United States, which involves the efforts and transformation to dissuade potential competitors and to confront the global terrorist network. The fundamental idea behind the Defense Reform 2020 is to modernize equipment and construct an efficient joint force networked with advanced ISR and precision munitions via advanced C4I infrastructure. Amplifying the war fighting effectiveness with Effect Based Operations (EBOs) by modeling America's Network Centric Warfare (NCW) has been set as the primary goal in the ROK's defense transformation. Being a mere medium-sized power surrounded by major powers of the world, the basic concern for South Korea is survival and protection of its lines of communication as a trading power. The concept of "denial capability sufficient for defense" (Geobujeok Bangwi Chungbunseong) is widely understood and shared among leading military strategists in the Republic of Korea.¹⁸ The line of their logic is that for its nuclear umbrella the ROK depends on the alliance with the United States, while a limited conflict with neighbors should be dealt with through the ROK's own capabilities. Airborne intelligence gathering assets and other precision strike capabilities to be procured by 2020 therefore are limited in numbers and range.¹⁹ Different from the American transformation, the ROK armed forces envisioned in the plan would not have large sealift or airlift capabilities required for long-range power projection capability and mobility.

Those South Korean military thinkers valuing self-reliance have long believed that the ROK needs to possess a military power not capable of posing threats to its neighbors but able to inflict

¹⁷ Taiyoung Kwon, "21segi Hangukjeok Gunsahyeoksin kwa Kukbangaehyeok Chujin [The Korean RMA in the 21st Century and Promotion of the Defense Reform]," A paper presented at the seminar sponsored by Korea Research Institute for Strategy at the Capital Hotel, Seoul on November 8, 2005.

¹⁸ The prime example for success of this strategy is often taken from the Goguryeo Empire's decisive victories (in A.D. 598, 612, 614) over the invading Chinese forces with the numerically overwhelming forces of the Sui Dynasty, which due to their repeated failures in the Goguryeo campaign, costing them enormous national revenue, eventually collapsed.

¹⁹ In the Defense Reform 2020, the ROK MND plans to procure 40 F-15Ks fighter aircrafts, and four AWACS surveillance planes by 2012, together with four high altitude UAVs and some airborne refueling aircrafts.

sufficient damage to dissuade potential aggressors' preemptive invasion of Korea. Perhaps, their emphasis on limited self-reliance for sufficient denial with the U.S. nuclear umbrella may concur with Washington's repeated demand for a bigger role for the ROK military in the defense of the peninsula.

Since the ROK military has long wished to enhance its war fighting effectiveness by employing the NCW and EBOs concepts, the USFK's transformation propelled the ROK to proactively embrace reform. Incidentally, President Roh told the military leaders to strengthen the ROK forces with high-tech weaponry, and at the same time, suggested that the military slim down the size of its forces and shed inefficiencies in the armed forces. He reportedly promised sufficient budget support at a meeting with the military leaders on April 28 of 2005. Perhaps, believing that the ROK security is overly dependent on the alliance, President Roh encouraged the ROK military to develop a formidable, self-reliant military power even if it requires large military spending. Consequently, the ROK military willingly set about shaping its own reform process, driven by both the USFK's realignment move and the suggestion made by President Roh.

The South Korean Defense Reform 2020 contains a wide range of policy agendas comprising four major aims—establishing a civil-controlled system, the military concentrating on executing its battle mission; establishing force structure in accordance with modern warfare; reform into a low-cost, highly-efficient defense management system; and improving amenities and the quality of life for servicemen. To achieve the four goals, in order to establish a future-oriented force, the Defense Ministry demanded an 11.1 percent annual increase in military spending over the next 10 years.²⁰ Another focus of the reform is reshuffling of the military organization by cutting the number of the current 680,000-strong troops to 500,000 by 2020, while streamlining most of the Army's middle echelon combatant commands. The MND will slash the number of divisions to 20 from the current 47, and the number of its corps will decrease to six from ten. The key idea is to balance out the Army-oriented proportion in the number of forces and staffing in the military organizations. Notably, the Army comprises 80 percent of the ROK armed forces, causing discontent among airmen and sailors.

As another indicator of the influence resulting from the American transformation, Defense Minister Yoon, a former admiral of the ROK Navy, said in a press conference that the objective of the reform is to transform the ROK armed forces to a quality-based structure from a quantity-based one. He further stated that he wants to transform army units into more mobile and networked forces, implying that the ROK Army needs to pay close attention to America's reorganization of its Army units into three new echelons— the Unit of Action (UA), Unit of

²⁰ "Seoul Aims to Boost Defense Budget by 11% Annually," *The Korea Times*, Sept. 14, 2005; The Senior Policy Advisor to the ROK Defense Minister has told the author that the updated and precise figure is 8 percent annual increase for 15 years, and the detailed information is available in *Gukbang Ilbo* [The National Defense Daily] of October 27, 2005.

Employment X (UE_x), and Unit of Employment Y (UE_y). In short, the direction of the reform can best be summed up as constructing “smaller, but stronger and agile armed forces.”

Critics of the reform plan have, however, pointed out that the 11 percent annual increase is unrealistic considering the much lower GDP increase rate of South Korea. Labeling it as another reckless handling of national security with populist rhetoric to the young generation, an opposition party lawmaker even argued that the reform will only end up reducing the number of soldiers, destabilizing the power balance between the two Koreas.²¹ Especially, there emerged serious concerns among conservatives in Seoul over President Roh’s idea of gaining greater operational control in wartime. The wording of the “JCS-centered operation execution system” was understood by conservatives to imply a plot leading to a possible diversion from the current combined defense structure.

High-ranking U.S. military officers have confirmed, however, that they are receptive to the reform efforts envisaged by their South Korean counterparts in the briefings and consultations with the ROK MND. In the meeting between the Commander of the USFK and Chairman of the ROK JCS, Gen. Laporte reportedly welcomed the plan, saying that the comprehensive plan makes sense while some parts appear visionary.²² General Campbell, Commander of the 8th Army noted that the USFK is quite receptive to the reform efforts proposed by the ROK military.²³ For one, there is no reason on the part of the USFK to object to the Korean efforts to replicate the American transformation. The successfully transformed Korean armed forces could contribute as indispensable, interoperable ally in America’s globally networked war on terrorism and proliferation. Secondly, determined to decrease the role of ground forces in future warfare or contingencies on the peninsula, the USFK is less resistant to the ROK army commanders’ desire to command their own ground forces. Thirdly, the USFK might not wish to confront the ROK government’s determination to expand its wartime operational control rights and thus appear to withhold a part of South Korea’s sovereignty from the Korean people.

To sum up, in accordance with the Pentagon’s military transformation, the USFK has already taken steps to reshape its posture by relocating its units to south of the Han River. Stimulated by the USFK’s move and encouraged by President’s Roh, the ROK military has set about its own version of transformation in the name of Defense Reform 2020. However, the rationale and the objectives of the ROK’s reform fall short of the global reshaping initiated by the Pentagon. Instead it aims at modernizing equipment by budget-saving through reducing inefficiencies and then implementing highly lethal, precise, and synchronized EBOs in expanded battle space with agile and mobile forces.

²¹ “Military reform raises concern,” *The Korea Herald*, Sept. 13, 2005.

²² “Ministry eyes 11% budget increase or military reform,” *The Korea Herald*, Sept. 14, 2005.

²³ A point made at his address before security specialists and senior journalists held at the USFK HQ on October 7, 2005.

In realizing the need for change, the network-orientedness of the Korean society and relatively strong IT infrastructure may allow the ROK armed forces adapt with less difficulties to the challenges demonstrated by the rapidly transforming U.S. forces.