

Seoul to extend US control over South Korean military

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US operational control over South Korean military forces in time of war is likely to be extended after the South Korean government asked last month for a postponement of the scheduled transfer of command in December 2015. The matter was formally discussed at the high-level Korea-US Integrated Defense Dialogue this week and both sides have stated that the issue should be finalized by October.

The pretext for the proposal was North Korea's nuclear test in February. In March, Chung Mong-joon, former chairman of South Korea's ruling Saenuri Party, cited the North Korean "threat" and declared: "The plan to transfer OPCON [operational control] must be scrapped."

Although the request formally came from Seoul, there is no doubt that it was encouraged by the Obama administration as part of its "pivot to Asia," which is aimed at undermining Chinese influence in the region. The US is sending a message both to China and North Korea that American troops and bases will not be leaving the Korean peninsula in the foreseeable future.

General Curtis Scaparrotti, who has been nominated to take control of US Forces Korea, stated in a US Senate hearing this week that he agreed with the current 2015 handover timetable. At the same time, he left room for a postponement, emphasizing that South Korea would have to meet certain conditions, including bolstering its weapons systems, command and control systems and supply of munitions.

The US has had operational control over South Korean troops since the 1950–53 Korean War, when military strongman Syngman Rhee handed command of his troops to US General Douglas MacArthur. Rhee's successor was the current president's father, Park Chung-hee, who ruled the country for nearly two decades with an iron fist at the height of the Cold War.

For decades, the US had overall control of South Korean military forces in both peace and war time. Following the end of military rule in the late 1980s, however, sections of the South Korean ruling elite wanted to strike a more independent pose in relation to the US, while remaining a formal American alliance. In 1994, the South Korean military resumed peacetime control of its forces.

In 2006, Democrat President Roh Moo-hyun negotiated a deal with the US Bush administration to return wartime operational control to Seoul by 2012. Roh's move was aimed at placating public anger in South Korea over the US military presence. In reality, the Democrats fully support the US alliance and continued American bases in South Korea. At the same time, sections of the South Korean big business elite saw the decision as a means of improving relations with China, which had become the country's largest trading partner.

The installation of President Lee Myung-bak, from the right-wing Grand National Party (now Saenuri Party) in 2008, followed by the election of US President Obama, resulted in a marked rise in tensions on the Korean peninsula. Lee scrapped the "Sunshine policy" of former Democrat administrations, aimed at opening up North Korea as a cheap labour platform, and embraced the Obama administration's "pivot."

Lee exploited the standoff with North Korea over its alleged sinking of a South Korean frigate, the Cheonan, in 2010 to call for a delay in the OPCON transfer from 2012 to 2015. The Cheonan incident led to a deadly artillery exchange later that year on Yeonpyeong Island, near the border with North Korea. The US took the opportunity to hold large-scale US-Korea military exercises in the Yellow Sea, despite China's protests.

Lee's policy was deeply unpopular in South Korea.

His successor, the current President Park Geun-hye, had to publicly distance herself from Lee in order to win the presidential election in December. She promised to reach out to North Korea through a “trust-building process.” Nevertheless, since taking office in February this year, Park has been carefully strengthening the US alliance.

The request for a delay in the OPCON handover is a further sign of Park’s commitment to Obama’s “pivot,” which over the past four years has led to a strengthening of US alliances and basing arrangements throughout Asia.

South Korea, with a large and well-equipped military, is effectively a US forward base in any conflict with China in North East Asia. The South Korean army has half a million men, with 4,900 tanks and armored vehicles, and 5,300 pieces of artillery. Its air force operates 600 combat aircraft, while its navy has 20 destroyers and frigates, with 12 submarines. The US itself has 28,500 troops in the country.

In April, Park presided over large-scale US-Korea military exercises, including the flying of nuclear-capable American strategic bombers to the Korean peninsula—a move aimed at intimidating not only North Korea, but China. During Park’s first summit meeting with Obama in May, she declared her initiative would “reinforce President Obama’s strategy of rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific.”

The opposition Democratic Party’s stance on retaking wartime control of the country’s military command is entirely tactical. The Democrats are equally prepared to cooperate with the US, including its “rebalance” to confront China. Democratic presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh deployed thousands of Korean troops to boost the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s, despite large anti-war protests at home.

In fact, the transfer negotiated under Roh, if ever implemented, would be largely symbolic. When the new command structure was released on June 1, it became apparent that very few changes would occur. The highest position—currently occupied by the commander of US forces in Korea—was to be taken over by the South Korean Joint Chief of Staff. A South Korean defense ministry official acknowledged: “You could say that the US and South Korea are swapping seats in the current arrangement.”

Both major parties are intent on maintaining the US military alliance. The Saenuri Party, which was the party of the US-backed military dictatorship, has longstanding ties to the Pentagon. The Democrats have adopted a more independent posture in relation to the US, in part to boost economic relations with China. But they understand that the US alliance is essential for South Korean capitalism to prosecute its interests in a region with far larger economic and military powers: China, Japan and Russia.



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