

Tensions over US operational control of South Korean military

Ben McGrath
20 October 2026

Simmering tensions have grown between the United States and South Korea driven by Washington's intensifying preparations for war against China. At present, in the event of conflict, the US would assume operational control (OPCON) over the huge South Korean military—a situation that has its origins in the Korean War (1950–53).

On October 14, United States Forces Korea (USFK) commander General Xavier Brunson questioned whether a long-planned transfer of wartime OPCON of the South Korean military from Washington to Seoul could take place given what he called the changing conditions in the region.

Speaking at the second annual Indo-Pacific Summit hosted by the Washington-based Gold Institute for International Strategy, Brunson stated, “None of us are also able to say conditions haven’t changed.” He added, “Because the conditions have changed, because we’ve changed our plan, we have new standards which we have to uphold.”

Brunson made similar comments the previous day at an event hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), stating that South Korea did not have adequate military capabilities in place. A week earlier, retired General Robert Adams, who led USFK from 2018 to 2021, told another CSIS event, “I think there's a lot of risk that hasn't been properly explained to everyone about hastening this (transfer) and putting it on a timeline.”

The changed conditions refer to the unfolding world war already underway in the escalating US-NATO war on Russia in Ukraine and the expanding war in the Middle East fueled by the US war of aggression on Iran. The US is already waging economic war on China and is engaged in advanced preparations for conflict with China, in which South Korea's involvement

factors heavily in the Pentagon's calculations.

With the onset of the Korean War in 1950, US imperialism behind the threadbare façade of a UN mandate led the international military intervention. The US-installed dictator Syngman Rhee in Seoul rapidly handed control of the South Korean military nominally to the UN forces, but, in reality, to the US. A truce was signed in 1953 but the war never formally ended and as a result the US retained full control over the South Korean military for more than four decades. Washington only handed back peacetime control to Seoul in 1994.

In 2006, the US first agreed to transfer wartime OPCON back to South Korea by 2012, though this date was repeatedly pushed back. Current President Lee Jae-myung of the Democratic Party has set a goal of regaining wartime OPCON by the end of his term in 2030. Defense Minister Kang Shin-chul reported that the government had protested to Washington over Brunson's comments.

Other South Korean officials have rejected US claims that Seoul has not met the conditions for the return of OPCON. “If we stick to the conditions the two sides agreed on in 2015, South Korea has already met them,” said an unnamed former senior national security official to the *Hankyoreh* newspaper. “The US keeps adding new requirements, and many within the Defense Ministry are frustrated that the goalposts keep moving.”

Seoul's determination to regain control over its military is not a repudiation of Washington's war plans. Under successive administrations, Seoul has supported Washington's war drive and Lee's government is no different. Instead, Seoul is seeking a greater voice when conflict erupts in East Asia.

South Korea already belongs to the bilateral Nuclear Consultative Group, which Seoul and Washington

agreed to establish in April 2023 under rightwing President Yoon Suk-yeol. The body gives Seoul a say in the use of nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea.

Under Lee, Seoul has pledged to increase military spending to 3.5 percent of GDP in line with Washington's demands while also preparing to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. Lee stated last October, "We are not proposing to build submarines armed with nuclear weapons; rather, diesel submarines have inferior submerged endurance, which limits our ability to track North Korean or Chinese submarines." This would "ease the burden on US forces."

In August, Lee sought to reassure Washington that the OPCON transfer would help prepare Seoul and its military for war by giving South Korea greater military responsibility. "A strong South Korea-US alliance and stronger independent defense capabilities are both necessary and sufficient conditions for each other. A strong alliance reinforces the foundation of our security, while strengthening our own capabilities increases our value and importance as an ally," he stated.

At the same time, the government is concerned about the response of the working class, among whom there is longstanding opposition to war. Despite the sustained anti-China campaign driven above all by the far-right, there is not widespread support for military action against China or significant anti-China sentiment.

Furthermore, the Democrats have traditionally favored closer relations with China, South Korea's largest trading partner, and fear that antagonizing Beijing will affect business interests. SK Group Chairman Chey Tae-won, for example, stated earlier this month in Shanghai that his company "has grown into the largest foreign investor in China over the past 35 years" in sectors that include semiconductors, batteries, and petrochemicals.

Lee and the Democrats have therefore framed the OPCON issue as one of sovereignty, appealing to nationalist sentiment. Lee stated on October 19, "We are a sovereign, independent country, and we must get OPCON back to meet the basic requirements of a state."

There are undoubtedly other calculations as the US is increasingly seen as less reliable, particularly given the disputes that have erupted with traditional European and Canadian allies. In August, Trump unilaterally

announced at the last minute the scaling back of the major joint war games with South Korea—Ulchi Freedom Shield exercises—prompting Lee to declare that the "transfer of wartime OPCON must be completed within my term without disruption."

However, Washington is not about to relinquish control over the South Korean military as it sets its eyes on war with China and plans to escalate the Middle East conflict following the US midterm elections.

The Trump administration has been particularly irked by Seoul's reluctance to send military forces to aid in the subjugation of Iran as well as what it sees as its hesitancy to carry out investment negotiated in the \$US350 billion trade deal package.

In addition to shortening the Ulchi Freedom Shield exercises, Washington reduced intelligence sharing with Seoul over North Korea in March, that is shortly after the US attacked Iran, on the unsubstantiated grounds that the government had leaked classified information.

Ultimately, Lee and the Democrats are not opposed to war or Trump's overall agenda and will seek to work out an accommodation with Washington that will do nothing prevent conflict expanding to East Asia.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact