

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

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OPCON Transition: Changed Threats and Security Conditions Must Be Considered First

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Last September, the Lee Jae Myung administration announced 123 policy tasks to pursue during its term, including the “transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) based on the ROK-U.S. alliance’s comprehensive deterrence capabilities,” an issue that was also discussed at the ROK-U.S. summit on October 29, 2025. The administration’s approach may be interpreted as an effort to meet the conditions of the “conditions-based OPCON transition”—agreed at the 46th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in October 2014—as early as possible, and enabling the transition to occur during President Lee’s term. It can be reasonable to seek an early transition of OPCON if doing so can stably deter and defend against North Korea’s current and future threats and align with the broader development of the alliance. However, careful judgement is required in assessing whether this approach can truly generate such effects.

The Process of Pursuing OPCON Transition and Key Issues

1. The Nature of “Wartime Operational Control”

For broad support to emerge for completing OPCON transition within a presidential term, there must be consensus either that OPCON is an inalienable sovereign right or that its transition significantly enhances South Korea’s security. Although OPCON was often perceived as a sovereign right in the past, it is in fact “limited and temporary authority for executing specific missions or tasks,” and does not include comprehensive authority over personnel, administration, logistics, force structure, or unit-level training of the ROK military. The Commander of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) receives direction from the Military Committee Meeting (MCM) of the two countries’ Joint Chiefs of Staff, which operates under the SCM, the senior consultative body that reports to the presidents of both countries. Thus, the Commander of United States Forces Korea (USFK), even when serving as Commander of CFC, cannot arbitrarily exercise authority contrary to South Korean sovereignty. Moreover, South Korea’s OPCON has been gradually transferred in phases according to

changes in the security environment. Historically, OPCON arrangements were continuously adjusted between the two states when conditions were met.

2. Close Linkage with U.S. Security Commitments and the Provision of Military Forces and Assets

OPCON is directly and indirectly connected to U.S. security commitments, the stationing of U.S. forces, and the provision of critical military assets required to deter war on the peninsula. USFK symbolizes the U.S. security commitment to South Korea, providing both a peacetime deterrent and credible assurance of large-scale wartime reinforcement. U.S. aircraft carriers, B-2 bombers, nuclear-powered submarines, and military reconnaissance satellites serve as indicators of U.S. commitment amid North Korea's advancing nuclear threat.

Some may argue that since the U.S. commitment rests on the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty—an arrangement superior to OPCON—the United States would inevitably provide forces even after the OPCON transition. However, the current structure in which the Commander of USFK also commands CFC helps ensure a stable U.S. presence and credible wartime reinforcement. Even if the United States were to maintain its policies of wartime reinforcement and deployment of strategic assets in peacetime, there is no guarantee that a ROK general serving as Commander of CFC would have full insight into U.S. force posture, reinforcement plans, or strategic-asset operations. The United States is currently developing Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) and AI-enabled command systems, whereas the ROK military still requires significant time to build comparable structures. Even if the United States continues to provide high-altitude manned and unmanned reconnaissance aircraft, high-resolution reconnaissance satellites, Space-Based Infrared System (SBIRS), and other critical assets, it is uncertain whether South Korea can utilize the information effectively.

3. Political Coordination More Critical than Military Command Relationships

Although the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has traditionally been a U.S. general, operational authority is exercised only pursuant to decisions by the North Atlantic Council (NAC), a political body led by a European Secretary General. This structure of civilian supremacy has addressed concerns about sovereignty among member states. While U.S. influence over NATO operations remains substantial, the fact that a European serves as Secretary General and that there is a standing consultative mechanism for decision-making helps mitigate controversies about sovereignty. Moreover, the Secretary General is supported by a permanent secretariat and staff organization, enabling effective oversight of NATO's military structure.

In contrast, although the Commander of CFC in the ROK-U.S. alliance cannot disregard the intent of the South Korean president, there is no standing political-level consultative mechanism comparable to NATO's. Institutionalizing such a mechanism would, at minimum, symbolically mitigate concerns about sovereignty infringement.

A Fundamentally Altered Security Environment on and around the Korean Peninsula

Most importantly, the security environment on and around the Korean Peninsula has become far more severe than when OPCON transition was first agreed upon in 2006. In 2015, South Korea and the United States signed the Conditions-based OPCON Transition Plan (COTP), which stipulates three conditions for transition: (1) the ROK military's acquisition of "military capabilities required to lead the combined forces;" (2) the ROK-U.S. alliance's acquirement of "comprehensive [...] response capabilities against North Korean nuclear and missile threats;" and (3) the establishment of a "security environment on the Korean Peninsula and in the region that is conducive to a stable transition of the wartime OPCON."

The problem is that North Korea's nuclear threat has grown rapidly even as OPCON transition evaluations have taken place. Although South Korea and the United States are seeking to establish Conventional-Nuclear Integration (CNI), North Korea's accelerating nuclear advancement suggests that achieving this integration will require considerable time. Meanwhile, the security environment on and beyond the peninsula has become more confrontational, and the increasingly overt North Korea-China-Russia trilateral cooperation has heightened strategic uncertainty.

These developments indicate that any military conflict or war on the peninsula will involve nuclear weapons, necessitating the integration of the concept of "nuclear deterrence" into ROK-U.S. combined defense and operational planning. Institutionalized mechanisms for consultation and coordination must be established among the two presidents, political authorities, and the United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), which is responsible for nuclear operations. These must be reflected in the combined command structure and represent matters more urgent than OPCON transition itself.

Additionally, continued demands for expanded alliance roles and missions, including the "strategic flexibility" of USFK, must be taken into account. Given that the second Trump administration may emphasize burden-sharing and coalition-building against China, OPCON transition confined to the Korean Peninsula may lose significance. Moreover, if the United States accommodates Japan's pursuit of its "One Theater" strategy, a premature transition risks diminishing the strategic value of USFK and may contribute to the vertical integration of the ROK-U.S. alliance under the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Focusing on Expanding Allied Capabilities under Revised Conditions

The government's fixation on completing OPCON transition "within its term" must not undermine the fundamental principle of the "conditions-based OPCON transition." Some conditions must be revised or supplemented to reflect the altered security environment. Answers are needed regarding: (1) the development of a ROK-U.S. operational cooperation framework at both peninsula and regional levels; (2) procedures for recommending nuclear employment within a future combined command that integrates nuclear and conventional forces; and (3) enhancements to higher-level political consultative bodies related to nuclear retaliation.

ROK military capabilities must be restructured to lead nuclear and conventional deterrence, and the principle of “responding to nuclear weapons with nuclear weapons” must be clearly articulated to deter North Korea’s nuclear threat. U.S. tactical and low-yield nuclear weapons should be redeployed to or near the peninsula to render U.S. extended deterrence tangible for South Korea, North Korea, and potential adversaries.

Because the third COTP condition requiring a stable regional environment is increasingly less realistic, it should be revised to “establishing a regional security cooperation framework conducive to achieving a stable regional environment,” and efforts should be made to lay the groundwork for an Asian NATO in the long term. South Korea’s defense budgets must continue to support the Three-Axis system, future strategic weapons, and expanded deterrence capabilities, thereby countering criticisms of free-riding and demonstrating the ability to “lead” the defense of the peninsula.

Some argue that early OPCON transition enhances South Korea’s autonomous defense, but such an argument requires substantial and sustained increases in defense spending. Attributing delays in strengthening South Korea’s command and control capabilities to the U.S. retention of OPCON is effectively avoiding responsibility. Even within the current combined structure, command and control capabilities can be strengthened with sufficient will. This should be the direction that guides South Korea’s approach in discussions with the United States.

What matters more than the timeline of OPCON transition is identifying how to meet the necessary conditions under the changed strategic environment. Pursuing transition based on ideological autonomy or distorted perceptions of South Korea-U.S. relations does not contribute to peace on the peninsula or South Korea’s security. It is by moving beyond abstract debates of “autonomy” that a smooth OPCON transition can be possible.

About the Author

Dr. Cha Du Hyeogn is a North Korea Study expert who has shown various research performances on North Korean Politics and Military, U.S.-ROK Alliance, and National Crisis Management, etc. He is the Principal Fellow of Asan Institute for Policy Studies, holding an additional post as Visiting Professor of Graduate Institute of Peace Studies in Kyung Hee University. He also has served as Adjunct Professor of University of North Korean Studies (2017~2019), Senior Foreign Affairs Advisor to the Governor of GyeongGi Provincial Government (2015~2018), Visiting Scholar of Korea Institute for National Unification (2015-2017), the Executive Vice President of the Korea Foundation (2011~2014). Before these careers, he was also a Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA, 1989~2012) and the Acting Secretary for Crisis Information to the ROK President Lee Myung Bak (2008). He has worked more than 20 years in KIDA as various positions including Director of Defense Issues Task force (2005~2006), Director of Arms Control Researches (2007), Director of North Korea Studies (2009). Dr. Cha received his M.A. and Ph.D. degree of Political Science from Yonsei University. He has written more than 100 research papers and co-authored books on diverse fields of security and International relations. He has advised for various governmental organizations.

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