

## **ROK-U.S. Wartime Operational Control Rift and the “Second Acheson Line”**

**Choi Kang**

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National Security Advisor Wi Sung-lac and Minister of National Defense Ahn Gyu-back emphasize the need for an early transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON), describing it as “a matter of political decision.” However, should an issue involving the survival of the state and the lives of its citizens be decided according to political timelines without sufficient verification of military capabilities and the security environment?

Consider the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Wartime OPCON over the armed forces of its 32 member states, including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, is exercised by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), who is an American military general. Yet these proudly sovereign European countries do not regard this arrangement as a ‘violation of national sovereignty.’ NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte likewise stated that “If anyone thinks that Europe can defend itself without the US, keep on dreaming. You can’t.” NATO is an institutional safeguard that binds the United States to the defense of Europe, preventing it from abandoning the continent.

The security situation on the Korean Peninsula is now more severe than ever. North Korea directly threatens South Korea with its 1.2 million troops as well as its nuclear, missile, and drone capabilities. By contrast, the South Korean military is expected to shrink to around 450,000 personnel this year and further decline to approximately 350,000 by 2040. The key deterrent forces that fill this

gap are U.S. strategic assets, such as aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, B-2 bombers, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance satellites. The link that ensures the rapid deployment of these assets is the current ROK–U.S. combined command structure.

If OPCON transfer is rushed before the ROK military has sufficiently put in place its own command-and-control frameworks and intelligence collection and analysis processes, the timely deployment of U.S. strategic assets will become difficult, and deterrence against North Korea will weaken. There is a strong possibility that the justification of “self-reliant national defense” could result in the weakening of the ROK–U.S. combined command structure.

The bigger concern is the wrong security signal this could send. The “Acheson Line” of 1950—which excluded the Korean Peninsula from the U.S. defense perimeter in the Far East—contributed to North Korea’s miscalculation and ultimately led to the Korean War. Likewise, discussions about the transfer of OPCON risk being interpreted as a “Second Acheson Line.” Deterrence is upheld when the adversary is convinced of an alliance’s resolve to intervene rather than just military capabilities.

We must not commit the fatal mistake of drawing a second Acheson Line ourselves. General Xavier Brunson, commander of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), warned of the dangers of an OPCON transfer driven by political timelines, stating that “political expediency should not precede conditions.” Meanwhile, the U.S. think tank Atlantic Council warned that North Korea could carry out limited nuclear provocations in areas such as the West Sea within the next decade and stressed that nuclear threat variables must be taken into account in any discussion of OPCON transfer. To deter North Korea’s nuclear threat, the principle of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula should be maintained, but realistic discussions such as the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons or nuclear sharing should not be ruled out.

The task South Korea should focus on now is the establishment of a multilateral collective security framework. In his keynote speech at the Asan Plenum 2026 last April, former Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru strongly called for the creation of an “Asian NATO.” An Asian NATO involving South Korea, the United States, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines would serve

as both an institutional safeguard against regional power vacuums and security instability, and it will become a tightly connected network among allies. Through this, South Korea must deter not only North Korean provocations but also the expansionist ambitions of China and Russia by clearly demonstrating both continued U.S. security engagement and the alliance's resolve to respond. National security cannot be protected through rhetoric about "political decisions" alone. This is the time to confront harsh security realities head-on and build a more credible and strengthened deterrence architecture.

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