

Op-ed

Asian NATO Urgent, Not OPCON Transfer

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The Trump administration stated in last month's National Defense Strategy (NDS), "South Korea is capable of assuming primary responsibility for deterring North Korea even under more limited U.S. support." This implies shifting the burden of defending the Korean Peninsula to us. In this context, the government aims to transfer wartime operational control authority (OPCON) during President Lee Jae Myung's term. In a reality where North Korea's nuclear threats are escalating, clinging to 'self-reliance' risks jeopardizing our security.

The rationale for OPCON transfer is 'self-reliant defense,' but the result could weaken the ROK-U.S. combined command structure. The ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command acts as an automatic U.S. intervention mechanism. This is because the wartime operational control authority held by U.S. military officers guarantees U.S. involvement in any contingency on the Korean Peninsula. In late January, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte stated in a European Parliament speech, "Europe cannot defend itself without the U.S." This suggests that Europe's 'independent defense theory' is unrealistic and would only please Putin. Similarly, OPCON transfer for us is a dangerous idea that would only please Kim Jong Un.

The choice we should make now is not OPCON transfer but establishing an 'Asian version of NATO,' a collective security system, to ensure U.S. engagement, deter North Korea, and counterbalance the rise of China and Russia. Some criticize the 'Asian NATO' concept as a hostile policy toward China. However, a collective security system is not about targeting a specific country but a institutional safeguard to prevent instability caused by 'power vacuums.' The primary motivation behind NATO's formation after World War II was a mutual calculation between the U.S. and Europe to overcome the risks posed by the Soviet Union's expansionist ambitions. From the perspective of European nations, NATO was not a tool to preemptively attack the Soviet Union but a mechanism to prevent the U.S. from abandoning European defense.

Today's situation in the Indo-Pacific region is more severe than when NATO was established in 1949. China's GDP has already reached 70% of the U.S. level, and its number of naval vessels has surpassed the U.S. Navy. A U.S. Department of Defense report warns of the possibility that China could possess 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030. Even if China currently has no aggressive intentions, the risk of miscalculation grows as power imbalances increase. Indeed, China repeatedly states it may use military force to prevent Taiwanese independence. Therefore, a collective security system in the Indo-Pacific would institutionally deter China's miscalculations. If Japan, Australia, the Philippines, India, Canada, South Korea, and the U.S. build a multilateral deterrence framework, China would exercise restraint.

Elbridge Colby, U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, who recently visited South Korea, emphasized that a force posture linking Japan, the Philippines, and the Korean Peninsula is key to regional deterrence. This is because while the U.S. and its allies have been individually connected, the allies themselves have not been interconnected. To strengthen solidarity and cooperation among U.S. allies, a multilateral security system must be jointly established. Only then can the ROK-U.S. alliance be reinforced.

If true self-reliant defense is desired, we should choose active autonomy—strengthening South Korea's voice through diversified alliances—rather than a hasty OPCON transfer. Within an 'Asian version of NATO,' U.S. engagement would be institutionalized, allowing the South Korean military to secure greater strategic space. This is genuine sovereignty enhancement and autonomy expansion. What is needed now is strategic thinking that multilayered alliance cohesion, autonomy, joint action, and the balance between sovereignty and alliances.

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