THE DIPLOMAT

South Korea: Who Should Have Wartime Command?

The saga over U.S. OPCON – wartime control of the South Korean military – continues.

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The continuing soap opera over the US "OPCON" in South Korea – US operational control of the Southern military in a shooting war (presumably with the North) – rolls on. Seoul has recently requested another push-back of the date when it would re-assume OPCON from the Americans. This is the second such request, raising the obvious question of whether this should go forward at all. Does it make sense to replace a joint structure with something less joint, when it would still need to function as such in a conflict? Especially now that North Korea is a confirmed nuclear power and recently provoked some of the most severe tensions since 1950? (If you have never heard of this issue and do not know the debate, here is a pretty good place to start).

Back in 2006, the South Korean government first insisted on the reversion of OPCON by 2012; the U.S. agreed. As a sovereign state, the Republic of Korea is fully entitled to such choices, and the decision was marketed as such by the South Korea left, which held the presidency at the time. Korea's sovereignty was being restored, America's semi-imperial dominance was being curtailed, and so on. The national security ramifications were generally glossed over; instead the government played to nationalist Korean voters and latent anti-Americanism (the beef protests would break shortly afterwards). And at the time, during the Sunshine Policy, North Korea seemed reasonably well-behaved.

The decision was immediately controversial. The move, by Roh Moo Hyun, the most left-wing (or "progressive," the preferred term in Korea) president in the history of the Republic, provoked conservatives who saw it as a weakening of the U.S. defense commitment. And indeed, Donald Rumsfeld did in fact embrace the deal as a way to manage U.S. commitments at a time when the war on terror was still called the "long war" and the "pivot" to Asia was nowhere in sight. Roh's successor, Lee Myung Bak, was content to request a delay, and it is not entirely surprising that Korea's second conservative administration since 2006 requested a second delay.

The current U.S. commitment to South Korean defense includes the wartime operational control (OPCON) of the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA). The military utility is fairly obvious: it provides unified command in wartime. Further, the more the U.S. is vested with command responsibilities, the more likely it is to say in Korea altogether. Former President Jimmy Carter sought to remove U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK) altogether, and today the military necessity of retaining troops in Korea is much diminished. One widespread school of thought in Korean studies is that the post-Cold War U.S. presence in Korea is now the strongest ideological prop for the North's continuing dictatorship, and that a departure would accelerate unification. In the

U.S., some rising voices, such as Ron Paul and the Cato Institute, have argued for years that a post-Cold War presence in Korea is unnecessary. Post-Iraq, perceptions that America is overstretched have risen, and Korea could clearly spend a great deal more on defense than it does. Hence, holding OPCON has always been a powerful Korean enticement to keep a U.S. military presence despite geopolitical shifts that might encourage withdrawal.

But in the context of South Korean politics, this has always met with some distaste. It smacks of neocolonialism and external control. The Korean left in particular has long been uncomfortable with the U.S. presence. Like many Western European leftist parties during the Cold War, the South Korean left is deeply divided over how to approach the communists. A minority could be fairly described as "pro-Pyongyang," although not nearly as many as Mccarthyite Southern conservatives would have you believe. More generally, there is some confused sympathy for the North's goals and a strong willingness to blame the Americans for making North Korea so paranoid and awful. Where conservatives tend to see a megalomaniacal, out-of-control monarchy, progressives tend to see North Korea pushed into harshness by U.S. imperialism. Hence a reversion of OPCON could reduce tensions by reducing the Northern perception that the U.S. is out to get it.

As was the case in Cold War Europe, there is lingering admiration for socialism even if its "real existing" version is horrid and corrupted. And there is some pride that North Korea is an independent Korean state, not as globalized and Americanized as the South, standing tall against the Americans, Chinese and the Japanese. In short, the South Korean left is fairly ambiguous on whether the U.S. or North Korea presents a greater threat to South Korea, and the OPCON reversion plays to both that anti-Americanism and ambiguity in dealing with the North.

Previously, during the Cold War, the U.S. retained control of the ROKA in peacetime as well. So long as the USSR existed, it was generally understood that North Korea was a continuing invasion threat. Also, South Korea was a military dictatorship until the 1990s. That military was tightly bound in training and socialization to the U.S. presence. So there was little resistance in traditional national security circles. Curiously, then, it is the left in Korea that is more nationalist – both anti-American and mildly pro-North – while the right is "internationalist" – pro-alliance and virulently anti-communist.

As these contending political forces ebb and flow in Korean political life, attitudes toward the OPCON transfer have shifted all over the place. In my own experience on the conference circuit and teaching undergraduates in Korea, I have seen little sympathy for the transfer and a fair amount of anxiety. But that concern is more of the free-rider than anti-communist variant. The U.S. presence is a shield that allows Seoul to spend a lot less on defense than it otherwise would and that is widely understood. Similarly, conscription terms in South Korea would almost certainly be longer without USFK. It is well known that South Korean interest in unification is fading and that there is great fear for the costs. Insofar as the OPCON transfer would force more of the load onto South Korea, that is the primary concern I have seen – not fear of North Korean attack or U.S. imperialism. In this way – to push the Koreans to take their own defense more seriously – the transfer might be a good idea.

On the other hand, there are the coordination costs. Today, U.S. and Southern commands are integrated into a Combined Forces Command. The OPCON transfer would abolish CFC and be replaced by "independent, parallel national commands" acting in close liaison. This works elsewhere, in NATO and Japan, for example, but none of those commands seriously envision a massive ground war in traditional fashion, potentially involving hundreds of thousands of casualties. This does seem a questionable choice on strictly security grounds, regardless of the

(rather bogus and manipulative) "neocolonial" claim. Why abolish CFC/OPCON if it will only replace it with something less organized and less unified?

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