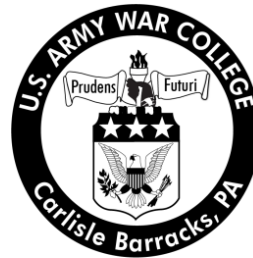


# Strategy Research Project International Fellow

## Wartime OPCON Transition and the ROK-U.S. Alliance

by

Colonel Young Sul Hwang  
The Republic of Korea Army



United States Army War College  
Class of 2013

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Colonel Young Sul Hwang  
The Republic of Korea Army

Colonel (R) Donald W. Boose, Jr.  
Department of Distance Education  
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College  
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013



## **Abstract**

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The wartime Operational Control (OPCON) transition from the United States (U.S.) command to Republic of Korea (ROK) national command that was decided upon during the No Moo Hyun Government (2003~2008) has progressed continuously during the Lee Myung Bak government and the Obama administration. This OPCON transition has been a historical turning point for converting “The ROK-U.S. Combined Defense System” that has maintained security for half a century into “A ROK-Supported, U.S.-Supporting Defense System.” This paper reviews the history of the ROK-U.S. alliance, the background of the wartime OPCON transition, the Northeast-Asia security environment, and the progress of its transition. This paper will also address related challenges and make several recommendations for continuing the successful transition and strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance.





## **Wartime OPCON Transition and the ROK-U.S. Alliance**

Northeast Asia is one of the world's most strategic hotspots. Economically, the region is advancing rapidly, with China and the Republic of Korea (ROK) developing into global powers quickly. Including Japan, Northeast Asia is well on its way to becoming the economic motor of the world. Unfortunately, the region is also troubled with a host of security challenges. To begin with, all major players (China, Japan and the ROK) have territorial disputes with each other, heating up the atmosphere regularly. On top of that, Russia also asserts itself from time to time. But the most critical security threat is North Korea, which is isolationist, difficult to understand, and determined to become a nuclear power, thus posing a constant regional threat. Together, the relations among the nations in the region are complex and include both economic and military cooperation and confrontation. Maintaining peace and stability in the region requires a constant balancing act among these nations.

Because of Northeast Asia's strategic importance and the delicate international balance, the United States has a keen interest in the region. After World War II, the main U.S. interest was to contain the communist threat. The United States therefore came to the rescue when communist North Korea tried to take over the peninsula in 1950. Ever since the armistice that ended the fighting in 1953, the United States has maintained forces in South Korea to deter North Korean aggression. For 60 years, the strong bilateral alliance between the ROK and the United States has been the foundation of peace and stability in the region. The U.S. presence on the peninsula has been crucial to the ROK as a deterrent against the outbreak of a second Korean war. The relationship with the United States has also contributed to the ROK's emergence as a major global power.<sup>1</sup> To this day, the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty between the ROK

and the United States continues to be one of the strongest bilateral alliances in the world. Together, the two allies have deterred North Korean aggression, maintained peace on the Korean peninsula, and contributed to the security and stability of Northeast Asia.<sup>2</sup>

The need for a strong ROK-U.S. alliance is obvious. Both the ROK and the United States have affirmed the importance of their mutual commitment. However, as the ROK has grown in economic and international stature and influence, the relationship has changed. This new relationship requires a reexamination of the ROK's security arrangement with the United States to make sure that it is consistent with current realities. For 60 years, the ROK has depended on the United States, but it is appropriate for South Korea to take on more responsibility and, without jeopardizing the alliance, to become a more independent military regional actor. The ROK armed forces have been under the Operational Control (OPCON)<sup>3</sup> of U.S. forces since the war, but now the ROK must regain full control over its own forces. In December 1994, the peacetime ("Armistice period") OPCON of ROK forces was transferred back to the Korean armed forces. Under the current arrangements, the commander of the Combined Forces Command (CFC) resumes OPCON of ROK forces in wartime. However, in 2006, the ROK Government offered to assume full responsibility of ROK forces in wartime and the United States agreed. If all goes as planned, the wartime OPCON will transfer from the United States to the ROK in December 2015.

Because of the complex regional balance of forces, any change in security arrangements, especially those concerning North and South Korea, must be done carefully. Therefore, the ROK and U.S. authorities have carefully worked out a plan, and

preparations for the 2015 transition are progressing on schedule. However, in recent years, the regional strategic environment has become even more sensitive. China is pursuing its territorial claims ever more vigorously, and North Korea's new leader Kim Jong-un has been particularly aggressive.

In this paper, I will evaluate the ROK's transition to the new security alliance with the United States in 2015 in view of the current security situation, will review the history of the bilateral security arrangement between the ROK and the United States, and address the challenges that lie ahead. However, before doing so, I will analyze the current security situation by assessing the different players in the region: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), China, Russia, Japan, the United States, and the ROK.

#### The Northeast Asia Security Environment

The former commander of the U.S. Pacific command, Admiral Robert F. Willard, has testified that Northeast Asia is a complex region with both daunting challenges and many opportunities for regional countries to influence the security environment positively. Many of the most influential economies and largest militaries in the Asia-Pacific region and in the world are in Northeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> A particular characteristic of the region is the fact that most of the nations confront one another and cooperate at the same time. This creates what the ROK Ministry of Defense has called a "complex security structure," in which the major regional powers conduct mutual cooperative activities, while at the same time they compete against each other, trying to secure a dominant position in the region.<sup>5</sup> There are many potential conflicts in the region, including North Korea's nuclear weapons, tensions between Taiwan and Mainland China, historical territorial and other disputes, and maritime demarcation issues. All

these conditions cause the concerned nations to compete against each other and build up their military power, which in turn destabilizes the region. I will now address the different major powers in the region, focusing on their influence on the strategic landscape.

### Democratic People's Republic of Korea

General James D. Thurman, commander of the CFC has said that North Korea remains the greatest threat to stability in Northeast Asia. North Korea is economically backward, refuses to operate as part of the global community, and is led by a regime pursuing its own objectives and in control of large conventional forces, asymmetric capabilities, and weapons of mass destruction.<sup>6</sup>

North Korea is a dictatorship ruled by the Korean Worker's Party, the only party in the nation. North Korea claims to be a socialist country that proclaims the "Juche ideology"<sup>7</sup> and the "Military First Policy." Since the 1990s, a period of instability caused by the inherent problems of socialism, catastrophic economic problems, and isolation from the international community, the North has pursued what it calls the "Military First Policy," using all of its resources and the skills of its people to build "a strong and prosperous nation."<sup>8</sup> But that prosperous nation has not yet appeared. When Kim Jong-il died in December 2011, power was transferred to his son, Kim Jong-un, who has continued to maintain the strong Military First Policy.

Despite international sanctions and the resulting economic hardships, North Korea continues to put its utmost efforts into constructing a strong and prosperous nation. North Korea is not prosperous, but it has the world's fourth largest conventional military force and has developed Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), including nuclear weapons, posing a serious threat to peace on the Korean Peninsula.

North Korea regards WMDs as a way to guarantee its survival. In spite of United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1874 and the economic sanctions that were imposed after North Korea's second round of nuclear tests in May 2009, North Korea is still holding its nuclear program as a negotiating card in its brinkmanship tactics, detonated another nuclear weapon in February 2013, and focuses all its resources on the survival of the Kim regime.<sup>9</sup>

North Korea thus presents a challenging problem for the ROK-U.S. Alliance, the region, and the international community. In the words of Admiral Robert F. Willard, "in addition to the conventional threat it poses to the ROK, its nuclear program, missile development, proliferation activities, provoke-bargain-cheat cycles, add to North Korea's capacity to disturb peace and stability throughout the region and globally."<sup>10</sup>

North Korea appears to have improved its diplomatic relations with China and Russia but its relations with the United States and Japan are stalled because of its nuclear weapons program and refusal to release abducted Japanese nationals. The North's relations with South Korea improved in the early 2000s with the prospect of cooperative projects, but the current South Korean administration insists that North Korea abandon its nuclear weapons program.<sup>11</sup>

#### People's Republic of China

China is becoming the world's second superpower through its economic and military strengths. This is the most significant strategic factor in Northeast Asia. China has raised the standard of living of its citizens and increased its international influence through sustained economic development. According to the U.S. Department of Defense estimate, if China remains politically stable and continues an economic growth of 7-8 percent, it will be the dominant Asian power by 2020. China's military has been

the beneficiary of this economic growth, which has made possible heavy investment in modern hardware and technology. Many of its modern systems have reached maturity and others will become operational soon.<sup>12</sup> China's official defense budget might be as high as \$500 billion and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has all the characteristics of a major modern military power, including aircraft carriers; modern surface combatants armed with medium-to-long-range air defenses, long-range anti-submarine cruise missiles, and anti-submarine warfare capability; a large submarine force; a credible sea-based nuclear deterrent; and a modern air force.<sup>13</sup>

China has supported the North Korean regime ever since the Korean War, shares a border with North Korea, and, therefore, is likely to play a key role on the Korean Peninsula and in the eventual unification of Korea. China is North Korea's most significant trade partner and may be the only nation able to influence Pyongyang's top leaders. However, the ROK and China established diplomatic relations in 1992 and have been making rapid progress on political, economic, social, and cultural issues. In May 2008, the two nations raised their relationship to what they call a "strategic cooperative partnership," with active interchanges and cooperation, even in the defense area.<sup>14</sup> China's relationship with North Korea and its economic and other ties with the ROK mean that it will always play a critical role in the stability and future unification of the Korean Peninsula.<sup>15</sup>

However, China has also taken an aggressive stance over the ownership of the Senkaku Islands claimed by Japan and the South China Sea, in which several Southeast Asian countries have competing claims. China constantly tries to expand its

power and influence into the East Asia region, and these actions threaten the destabilization of the region.

### Russia

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and its long economic eclipse, Russia has once again begun playing a diplomatic role in the Asia region to make sure it has a part in the region's growing economy and regional security arrangements. Russia has close economic ties to China, and they conducted joint naval exercises for the first time off China's east coast in April 2012. Russia is a member of the Six-Party Talks on North Korean denuclearization, but neither Russia nor China has supported U.S. efforts in the UN Security Council to put pressure on North Korea in response to its provocations.<sup>16</sup>

Russia's relationship with North Korea was strong during the Cold War, but greatly diminished after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, Russia recently renewed its diplomatic efforts with North Korea. Russia's economic interests in South Korea have changed the forces at work on the Korean peninsula, and someday Russia may support Korean unification. Russia must delicately balance its diplomatic ties with the North and its economic ties with the South to avoid alienating either side.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the United States remains suspicious of Russian motives. But Russia's relationships with the two Koreas might offer opportunities for positive change on the Peninsula.

### Japan

Japan is the world's third largest economy. Its defense policy goals include supporting international peace cooperation activities, trying to respond effectively to new threats and various incidents, to be ready for external attacks, and to improve its security environment. Therefore, the Japan Self-Defense Forces have been trying to

strengthen their joint operational and intelligence capabilities, build an efficient system equipped with advanced science and technology, and recruit talented personnel.<sup>18</sup>

The ROK and Japan are both U.S. allies and share the same basic values of liberal democracy and a market economy. The two countries raised their level of cooperation in various areas based on these common values, including bilateral and multilateral talks with a view to cooperating to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue and ensure regional security and peace.

For this reason, the defense authorities of the two nations have held periodic Defense Ministers' meetings since 1994. At the 14<sup>th</sup> Defense Ministers' Meeting held in 2009 in Japan, the two nations signed a "Letter of Intent on Defense Exchanges between the ROK and Japan," which provided for a mechanism for periodic consultation, personnel and educational exchanges, and joint training. Recently, the two nations have expanded their exchanges and cooperation to include Korea-Japan maritime search and rescue exercises, reciprocal visits, and mutual cooperation in international peacekeeping activities.

However, Japan's different historical perspective and its unjust claim to Dokdo Island, which is ROK sovereign territory, remain obstacles to the development of future-oriented defense exchanges and cooperation between the two countries.<sup>19</sup>

#### United States

The United States is a key security ally, characterized by the ROK as a friendship "cemented in blood." The ROK-U.S Free Trade Agreement (FTA) has also helped transform the relationship into an important economic partnership. The ROK has pursued three primary elements of its grand strategy: deep ties to the United States, strong economic relations with China, and active participation in multilateral



organizations and activities. The ROK-U.S. alliance, based on the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953, is fundamental to the ROK security strategy, which is naturally focused on the North Korean threat. The North Korean sinking of the warship *Cheonan* in March 2010 heightened South Korean threat perceptions. As a result, there is strong support for the ROK-U.S. alliance, with 91 percent of Koreans believing that the alliance will continue to be necessary in the future and 75 percent seeing a need even after unification of the peninsula.<sup>20</sup>

Based on the lessons learned from the 9/11 attacks, and the Afghanistan and Iraqi wars, the United States has been building its military capabilities to respond to a diverse array of new threats, including irregular wars and terrorism, as well as traditional threats. Because of the strategic importance of the Asia-Pacific region, the United States has increased its Navy and Air Force presence in the area. The ROK and the United States decided to relocate the U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK) to two different regions in order to ensure a stable and continuous U.S. presence. The USFK also plans to maintain its troop strength at 28,500 as agreed upon at the ROK-U.S. Summit in April 2008.<sup>21</sup> The U.S. military presence in the ROK furthers U.S. national interests by supporting a key ally in the Northeast Asia region.<sup>22</sup>

#### Republic of Korea

After World War II, the ROK (a democratic government) was set up in the southern half of the Korean Peninsula while a Communist government (DPRK) was installed in the north. During the Korean War (1950-53), U.S. troops and UN forces fought alongside soldiers from the ROK to defend South Korea from a DPRK invasion. An armistice was signed in 1953, splitting the peninsula along a demilitarized zone at about the 38th parallel. Since then, the ROK has grown significantly and has become a

major economy. The ROK is a member of the UN, World Trade Organization (WTO), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference (APEC), and the East Asia Summit. In November 2009, the ROK joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee, the first time a former aid recipient country joined the group as a donor member. The ROK also hosted the G-20 Summit in Seoul in November 2010 and the Nuclear Security Summit in March 2012, as well as serving as a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council from 2013 to 2014, and has been selected as the site for the 2018 Winter Olympic Games.<sup>23</sup> In 2012, the ROK ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of trade, and has become a respected and responsible member of international society.

The previous Lee Myung-bak Administration (2008-2013) established a national vision of becoming a “World-Class Nation through National Advancement” based on the principles of having a free democracy and a market economy. The ROK Government set its national security objectives as maintaining stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula, establishing the foundation for its citizens’ safety and national prosperity, and enhancing the country’s international capacity and stature.<sup>24</sup>

The ROK has developed strategic cooperative partnerships with Japan, China, and Russia built on the foundation provided by the strong ROK-U.S. Alliance. These cooperative relationships strengthen a stable strategic environment and help the ROK endure in the face of North Korea’s provocations. The ROK Army also continues to expand its cooperative military relationships with those three countries, including joint exercises, exchange visits of senior leaders and units, and exchange of military

students, which contribute to mutual understanding, enhance cooperation, and contribute to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Taking into consideration the overall situation in Northeast Asia, especially the situation on the Korean peninsula, it is clear that the circumstances are complex and fragile. The ROK-U.S. security alliance has played a crucial role in maintaining stability in the region and on the Peninsula. It is obvious that any changes to be made in such a crucial arrangement should only be decided upon for good reasons and after careful deliberation. The ROK's exceptional growth in national power and self confidence has created such a necessity, and this is the reason South Korea has decided to modify its security arrangements with the United States. However, implementing the changes should still be carried out carefully, with a constant eye on the ever changing conditions in the environment. Before exploring the challenges that the ROK-U.S. alliance faces in implementing the changes, this paper will first examine the background of the security arrangement itself.

#### Background of the ROK-U.S. Alliance and the Wartime OPCON Transition

##### The ROK-U.S. Alliance

In 1945, with the defeat of the Japanese Empire, the United States inserted a military presence on the Korean Peninsula to counterbalance the influence of its wartime ally, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. When the DPRK invaded the ROK in June 1950, the United States sent forces to support South Korea under the auspices of the United Nations. In 1953, after the armistice, the ROK and the United States signed a Mutual Defense Treaty. This treaty committed the United States to the ROK's defense, and remains in force today.<sup>25</sup> The U.S. military presence in the ROK supports U.S. national interests and those of its key ally in Northeast Asia.

In the years since the ROK and the United States fought together in the Korean War, the ROK has become an economically successful democracy and a trusted ally whose forces serve beside those of the United States in Afghanistan and off the Horn of Africa.<sup>26</sup> The ROK-U.S. Alliance has steadily evolved in response to changes in the security environment.<sup>27</sup>

In April 2008, the two nations agreed to move the relationship toward a “Comprehensive Strategic Alliance in the 21st Century” that would contribute to peace and security at the regional and global levels. In June 2009, President Lee Myung-bak and President Barack Obama announced a “Joint Vision for the ROK-U.S. Alliance,” which involves expanding the role of the alliance to a regional and global scope beyond the Korean Peninsula. In accordance with that Joint Vision, the ROK joined the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) in May 2009. Also, in July 2010 the ROK and the United States agreed to strengthen cooperation in economic sectors encompassing the ROK-U.S. FTA, low-carbon green growth, and exchange-rate stabilization.<sup>28</sup>

The two countries agreed to provide for continued extended deterrence, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella, thereby maintaining a strong combined defensive posture, and to pursue a firm and lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, including the peaceful unification of the South and North. The ROK and the United States also agreed to maintain a close mutual cooperative structure under the principle of complete and verifiable abandonment of nuclear weapons and ballistic weapons by North Korea. In addition, the two nations agreed to consult in response to global challenges, including the proliferation of WMDs, terrorism, piracy, organized crime and drugs, climate

changes, poverty, infringement of human rights, energy security, and contagious diseases.

Based on their 60-year-long friendly relationship, the ROK-U.S. Alliance has assured stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula. Because it is based on shared values, the ROK-U.S. Alliance will continue to expand and deepen as it develops into a comprehensive strategic alliance.

### The Wartime OPCON Transition

In July 1950, President Syngman Rhee handed over operational command of the ROK military to the Commander-in Chief of the United Nations Command (CINCUNC), General Douglas MacArthur. This choice was necessary in order to protect and defend the country during the extreme crisis of the Korean War. After the Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953, the ROK and the United States agreed to keep the ROK forces under the UN commander's OPCON to underscore and enhance the UNC's commitment to defending the ROK. The Mutual Defense Treaty between the ROK and the United States, also signed in 1953, committed the United States to help defend the ROK against external threats. The U.S. military maintains a strong military presence in the region in support of this commitment.<sup>29</sup> With the establishment of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) in November 1978, operational control was transferred from the UN Commander to the CFC Commander, who is also the commander of the UN Command and USFK. Discussions regarding the return of OPCON began in August 1987, when the then-presidential candidate Roh Tae-woo proclaimed "OPCON transition and relocation of the Yongsan garrison" as his campaign pledge. The matter of returning OPCON was also addressed in the United States through the Nunn-Warner Amendment and the East Asia Strategic Initiative (EASI,

1990-1992). Peacetime OPCON was transferred to the Chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) at the end of 1994.

During the ROK-U.S. Summit in September 2006, the two Presidents agreed to the basic principle that the ROK would retain wartime OPCON of its own forces. At the 38th Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in October of the same year, the two heads of national defense, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and ROK Minister of National Defense Yoon Kwang-Ung, agreed on the “Roadmap for the New Alliance Military Structure in the Post-OPCON Transition Era” (Roadmap). That agreement included a plan to disestablish the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command and complete the wartime OPCON transition to the ROK forces after October 15, 2009, but no later than March 15, 2012.

In January 2007, the permanent ROK-U.S. Military Committee (MC) signed the “TOR (Terms of Reference) on the Operation of the ROK-U.S. Combined Implementation Working Group,” which was finalized in a February 2007 agreement during the Defense Ministerial Meetings, with a view toward completing wartime OPCON transition on April 17, 2012. In accordance with this agreement, the Combined Implementation Working Group (CIWG) was formed to establish a “Strategic Transition Plan (STP)” to transfer wartime OPCON from the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command to the Joint Chiefs of Staff; in June 2007, the plan was signed by the ROK Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Senior U.S. Military Officer Assigned to Korea (SUSMOAK).

However, North Korea conducted a nuclear test and launched a long range ballistic missile in 2009 and attacked the naval ship *Cheonan* by torpedo in 2010. Also

key national leaders, included those of South Korea, the United States, and China, faced elections in 2012. Because of concerns that North Korea's military provocations and those national elections could cause instability on the Korea peninsula, Presidents Lee and Obama agreed to delay the transfer to December 2015. On June 26, 2010, the Presidents of the ROK and the United States agreed to the stable management of security on the Korean Peninsula, assurance of an internally stable wartime OPCON transition, and the deferral of the wartime OPCON transition from April 17, 2012, to the end of 2015 in order to alleviate national concerns regarding security issues. This agreement was followed by the ROK-U.S. Foreign and Defense Ministers' Meeting (2 + 2) to discuss a stable wartime OPCON transition.

At the 42<sup>nd</sup> ROK-U.S. SCM in October 2010, the ROK and the United States agreed to the "Strategic Alliance 2015," which covers the main alliance issues related to the wartime OPCON transition. The Strategic Alliance 2015 is a comprehensive implementation plan aimed at creating stable conditions for the wartime OPCON transition. A joint working group including the defense and foreign affairs officials of the ROK and the United States will evaluate and verify the status of the alliance's implementation through ROK-U.S. Security Policy Initiatives (SPI), ROK-U.S. Military Committee Meetings (MCM), and the ROK-U.S. SCM.<sup>30</sup>

#### Progress of Wartime OPCON Transition

Overall, the progress toward wartime OPCON transition has proceeded on schedule. The 44<sup>th</sup> ROK-U.S. SCM was held in Washington, D.C. on October 24, 2012. At this meeting, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta and ROK Minister of National Defense Kim Kwan-Jin acknowledged their comprehensive strategy to strengthen the alliance in years to come, including achieving the transition of wartime

OPCON for combined war fighting to the ROK JCS in 2015. The transition of OPCON will sustain and strengthen the Alliance's combined defense posture and capabilities and will support both partners' bilateral defense priorities and the future development of the Alliance. Secretary Panetta and Minister Kim also reaffirmed that the implementation of the Strategic Alliance 2015 plan is to be regularly assessed and reviewed at the annual SCM/MCM, paying particular attention to evolving North Korean threats, and that these reviews should be reflected in the transition process. They also noted the importance of the OPCON Certification Plan in ensuring that the transition is implemented methodically, and that the combined defense posture remains strong and seamless. Secretary Panetta reaffirmed the continuing U.S. commitment to provide specific bridging capabilities until the ROK obtains full self-defense capabilities, and further noted the U.S. commitment to contribute enduring capabilities for the life of the alliance. The ROK Minister reaffirmed that his country was committed to developing or acquiring the critical military capabilities necessary to assume the lead of the combined defense. The Secretary and the Minister also decided to establish a joint ROK-U.S. working group within the Strategic Alliance 2015 process to continue to refine the future command structure and maximize its military efficiency.<sup>31</sup>

Before the SCM, U.S. Chairman of the JCS, General Martin E. Dempsey, and the ROK Chairman of the JCS, General Jung Seung-Jo, presided over the 36<sup>th</sup> ROK-U.S. MCM on October 23, 2012. At this meeting, they determined that the progress of the wartime OPCON transition was 61% complete, reaffirmed that the wartime OPCON transition is proceeding on schedule, recognized the importance of the certification of



the war fighting headquarters, and reaffirmed the certification guidance on the implementation of the Strategic Alliance 2015 plan.<sup>32</sup>

The agreement between Secretary Panetta and Minister Kim was on the development of a new combined command structure reached at the 44<sup>th</sup> SCM based on the concern that the separated ROK-U.S. commands might have difficulty coordinating war execution after the dissolution of CFC. For this reason, a joint working group was established in December 2012 to develop a new combined command structure (a combined battle staff consisting of a ROK commander, a U.S. deputy commander, and other officers from the allied militaries) by March 2013. This new combined command structure will be approved at the ROK-U.S. MCM in April 2013 and will be tested in the ROK-U.S. Combined Ulchi-Freedom-Guardian (UFG) Exercise.<sup>33</sup>

On February 25, 2013, a new ROK president, Park Geun-Hye, took office. During the ROK defense policy briefing to the presidential transition committee on February 11, 2013, the ROK Defense Ministry was said to have reaffirmed that it would continue to prepare to retake wartime operational control as scheduled in December 2015. The transition team and the ministry agree that the OPCON transfer should be carried out as planned, unless North Korea carries out lethal provocative actions. To maintain a strong defense posture after the transfer, former Minister Kim Jang-soo, head of the transition team's subpanel on foreign affairs and defense, has proposed that a combined battle staff be established.<sup>34</sup>

So far, the ROK and the United States have identified tasks in three main areas to prepare for the wartime OPCON transition: military transition, planning and policy, and the management of the alliance. The military transition tasks included the

establishment of a military coordination system, establishing an organization and command relationship including a combined air command, agreement on the list of the ROK Army's Critical Military Capabilities, and an agreement on theater exercises for the Pre-OPCON period. Many of the planning and policy tasks have been achieved: the ROK and the United States jointly prepared Strategic Planning Guidance, reached agreement on the priority of development of a theater war plan and a revised agreement on alliance crisis management, and continued to work on a bilateral planning system and a Strategic Planning Directive. Other tasks have also been completed, including drafting a strategic communication implementation document and agreement on the main issues involving the repositioning of USFK forces under the Yongsan Relocation Plan (YRP) and Land Partnership Plan (LPP). All in all, preparations for the wartime OPCON transition are on schedule based on the Strategic Alliance 2015.<sup>35</sup>

There are about three years left before the wartime OPCON transition occurs in December 2015. Currently, the wartime OPCON transition execution is on schedule and no serious problems have been encountered. The next steps will follow in the Strategic Alliance 2015. The ROK and the U.S. joint verification group will verify the initial operational capabilities (IOC) of the ROK JCS and the U.S. Korea Command (KORCOM) - which will replace USFK - in 2013, as well as the full operational capabilities (FOC) of the ROK JCS and the U.S. KORCOM in 2014, and the full mission capabilities (FMC) of the ROK JCS and the U.S. KORCOM in 2015. The wartime OPCON transition will take place on December 1, 2015.<sup>36</sup>

#### Challenges Related to the Wartime OPCON Transition

Although the wartime OPCON transition has gone smoothly so far, and is on schedule thanks to the strong relationship and good coordination between the ROK and

the United States, it still presents some challenges to the stability of the Korean peninsula. These challenges are: establishment of a strong new combined defense system, strengthening of theater operation execution capabilities, strengthening of the joint operation capabilities, relieving anxieties over the wartime OPCON transition, and maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula.

Challenge #1: Establishment of a strong new combined defense system

The current ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command has successfully deterred the North Korean threat and has contributed to peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and in the Northeast Asian region for 60 years. To prepare for the wartime OPCON transition, the ROK-U.S. joint working group will now develop a new combined organization, which will function like a “mini-CFC” in order to minimize the combat strength vacuum that will follow the disestablishment of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command.<sup>37</sup> In spite of the ROK-U.S. efforts, some organizations, such as the Korean Veterans Association, still argue for the suspension of the wartime OPCON transition and oppose the disestablishment of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command.<sup>38</sup>

In order to address anxieties over the combat strength vacuum after the disestablishment of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command, and to ensure the new “supported-supporting” command relationship between the ROK and the United States, the establishment of a strong new combined defense system is essential. The ROK and the United States must construct a strong military coordination system for all units and over all functions for the efficient integration of operations, including at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Although the excellent understanding between the ROK and U.S. forces, the willingness of both parties to make the new relationship a success,

and the progress that has been made in this area over the past few years, this challenge still has to be met, and time is short.

### Challenge #2: Strengthening of the theater operation execution capabilities

Ever since U.S. forces deployed into the Korean Peninsula, ROK officers and soldiers have benefited from U.S. military training and guidance during side-by-side service.<sup>39</sup> The ROK army has learned about operation executing systems, doctrine, and skills from the U.S. forces during combined exercises. During Pre-and Post wartime OPCON transition, strengthening of hard combat power, such as long range surveillance equipment and precision strike weapons, is important. Strengthening the operational execution capability is even more critical. After the wartime OPCON transition, the ROK JCS should be able to lead theater operations supported by the U.S. KORCOM. To do this, the ROK JCS must build theater operation planning and executing capabilities, prepare the standard operating procedures (SOPs) and directives necessary for the execution of theater operations, develop combined exercise programs, and train personnel fluent in English for combined operations with U.S. forces.

### Challenge #3: Strengthening of the Joint Operation Capabilities

Jointness is a concept for effectively combining and exercising the power of each service-Army, Navy, and Air Force-together in the battle space, creating synergy through the combined efforts of the services. In response to a series of recent North Korean provocations, and in preparation for the proposed wartime OPCON transition, the ROK military is speeding up its efforts to improve its jointness.

The ROK JCS has recently established a Jointness Committee that is responsible for discussion and coordination about the development of the joint force and

support for joint operations, introduced a joint duty assignment system and a joint specialty system, and established a Joint Staff College. The ROK JCS is also developing joint doctrine.

The ROK military also intends to reorganize its operational command structure. Up until now, the ROK JCS has only exercised operational command over each service's operations, while the headquarters of the services, under the direct control of the Ministry of National Defense (MND), have provided operational support without operational command. Under the new streamlined structure, the ROK military will unify operational command and support by allowing the three service headquarters to directly participate in the operational chain of the ROK JCS. The National Assembly still has to approve legal revisions for the new command structure, but restructuring the operational command system is one of the key Defense Reforms to be implemented by the MND. The ROK JCS's effort to strengthen jointness will help deter future North Korean provocations and will also help prepare the ROK military to play a leading role in conducting wartime operations after the OPCON transition.<sup>40</sup> While the ROK is making progress in this field, there is still much room for improvement.

#### Challenge #4: Relieving anxieties over the wartime OPCON Transition

In spite of the ROK and U.S. government's official announcement that the wartime OPCON transition is proceeding on schedule, and despite their efforts to strengthen the combined operation capabilities, some people and organizations still argue for the suspension of the wartime OPCON transition and oppose the disestablishment of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command. The Chairman of the Korean Veterans Association has strongly argued that the wartime OPCON transition must be suspended until the achievement of peace on the Korean Peninsula, including

the abandonment of North Korea's nuclear weapons, a reduction of North Korea's military power, and a resolution of the Northeast Asia region's instability.<sup>41</sup>

The ROK and the U.S. governments need to step up their efforts to explain the meaning of the wartime OPCON transition to the public. They should stress that the wartime OPCON transition will lead to opportunities to increase the comprehensive strategic alliance between the ROK and the United States and will eventually lead to a strong military that can take the responsibility for security on the Korean peninsula. When the South Korean people understand the meaning of the wartime OPCON transition and the beneficial effects, they will support it.

#### Challenge #5: Maintaining the stability on the Korean peninsula

During the preparation for wartime OPCON transition, deterrence of North Korea provocation is very important. North Korea has recently taken provocative actions including the navy clash near Daecheong Island (November 10, 2009), the torpedo attack on the ROK ship *Cheonan* (March 26, 2010), and an artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island (November 23, 2010). On December 12, 2012, North Korea fired a long-range rocket and claimed to have put a satellite into orbit, despite international condemnation. The move, seen as a significant military threat by neighboring countries, resulted in strong condemnations from South Korea, Japan, and the United States as well as China, which is North Korea's economic supporter and its only real ally in the region.<sup>42</sup> Recently, on February 12, 2013, North Korea conducted a third nuclear test, defying U.N. resolutions, and announced that its nuclear weapons program is no longer negotiable.<sup>43</sup>

North Korean provocations may heighten the security crisis on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. The communist regime of North Korea has tried to

create tensions in the ROK-U.S. alliance and divisions in South Korean public opinion. It also continues to make military and nuclear threats against the South and is making no efforts toward military confidence building measures that could ease tensions and establish lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>44</sup>

In order to successfully complete the wartime OPCON transition, the ROK and the United States must continue to deter North Korean provocations and increase stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia through international organizations and in cooperation with the UN, Japan, China, and Russia. Unfortunately, recent developments, with North Korea testing both inter-continental ballistic missiles as well as nuclear devices, leave little reason for optimism in this respect.

#### Conclusion

There is no denying that the strength of the U.S.-ROK relationship is at an all time high.<sup>45</sup> The U.S.-ROK alliance, characterized as a blood alliance, is perhaps the strongest alliance in the world. Today, the ROK is the world's 13th largest economy, the United States' seventh largest trading partner, and a vibrant democracy. It is both a close ally of the United States and a nation that is looking for a greater role in global affairs. The ROK-U.S. alliance is a key element of U.S. efforts to deter North Korea and to influence the strategic situation in the Asia Pacific region.<sup>46</sup> The ROK has crafted plans to modernize its military and sees the ROK-U.S. alliance as the basis of its security strategy, both to respond to challenges and to support its efforts to have a greater influence regionally and globally. The wartime OPCON transition can make the comprehensive strategic alliance stronger by building a new security environment and supporting the two nations' national interests in the region.

To achieve the successful implementation of wartime OPCON transition and to maintain stability on the Korean peninsula, it is critical that the ROK and the United States cooperate closely. Between now and 2015, based on “Strategic Alliance 2015,” the ROK and the United States should establish the foundations for the wartime OPCON transition, certify the capabilities of ROK JCS and U.S. KORCOM, and insure that the capabilities of the two countries are complementary, using the strengths of one country to compensate for the other’s weakness. They should especially seek the establishment of an efficient operational coordination structure in the form of a new combined organization, which will increase efficiencies and better synchronize U.S.-ROK coordination after the disestablishment of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command.

The ROK and the United States should continue to execute the schedule of wartime OPCON transition by December 2015. On January 11, 2013, the new ROK presidential transition team and the Ministry of Defense expressed the view that the wartime OPCON transition should be carried out as planned unless North Korea poses a serious security challenge by launching lethal provocations.<sup>47</sup> Former CFC commander General Walter L. Sharp stated that OPCON transition will enhance the capabilities of the alliance because it is based on the transformation initiatives of both countries. The combined capabilities of the two countries will be able to meet any challenge and deter any threat to security on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>48</sup> The wartime OPCON transition can strengthen the ROK forces’ self-defense capabilities, provide for the ROK and USFK military transformation, and build a new military defense structure.



North Korea's recent provocations still threaten the region. The ROK and the United States must deter further future North Korean provocations through their strong alliance and in cooperation with Japan, China, and Russia.

The wartime OPCON transition can strengthen the comprehensive strategic alliance in the future and bring the two allies closer. By providing for ROK and USFK military transformations, it will build a new security environment, and further both countries' national interests.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Institute for National Strategic Studies, "Moving the U.S.-ROK Alliance into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", September 2007, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Terry A. Ivester, *Transfer of authority: the US-ROK alliance*, Strategy Research Project (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, March 9, 2011), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Operational Control (OPCON) is command authority to organize and employ forces, assign tasks, designate objectives, and give authoritative direction necessary to accomplish the mission. It does not involve direction for logistics or matters of administration, discipline, internal reorganization of a nation's units, or unit training. Joint Publication 0-2, *Unified Action Armed Forces (UNAAF)*, Washington: GPO, 2001, 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Statement of Admiral Robert F. Willard, US Navy, Commander, US Pacific Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee on US Pacific Command Posture, April 12, 2011. <http://www.armedservices.senate.gov/statemnt/2011/04%20April/Willard%2004-12-11.pdf> (accessed December 10, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Republic of Korea, Ministry of Defense (ROK-MND), "2010 Defense White Paper," 13, <http://www.mnd.go.kr>, (accessed December 10, 2012)

<sup>6</sup> Statement of James D. Thurman, UNC/CFC/USFK Commander, before the House Armed Services Committee, March 28, 2012, [www.usfk.mil](http://www.usfk.mil), (accessed December 15, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Juche means "self-reliance" and is a term created by Kim Il-sung, grandfather of current leader Kim Jung-eun. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, "Juche" refers specifically to a political thesis of Kim Il-sung, the Juche Idea, that identifies the Korean masses as the masters of the country's development. "Juche," Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juche> (accessed December 15, 2012)

<sup>8</sup> ROK-MND, 24.

<sup>9</sup> ROK-MND, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Statement of Admiral Robert F. Willard, US Navy, Commander, US Pacific Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee on US Pacific Command Posture, 5. “Provoke-bargain-cheat cycles” means, for instance, that the DPRK might first provoke the world community by threatening to conduct a nuclear test. Such provocation may lead to negotiations, resulting in a DPRK pledge not to conduct such a test. Finally the DPRK might conduct a test after all—a typical “provoke-bargain-cheat cycles”

<sup>11</sup> Terry A. Ivester, *Transfer of authority: the US-ROK alliance*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2011, [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011\\_CMPR\\_Final.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011_CMPR_Final.pdf) (accessed December 23, 2012), 1,5.

<sup>13</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, “U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region: An Independent Assessment”, August 2012, 41.

<sup>14</sup> ROK-MND, 93.

<sup>15</sup> Terry A. Ivester, *Transfer of authority: the US-ROK alliance*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, “U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region: An Independent Assessment”, 42.

<sup>17</sup> John Bauer, “Unlocking Russian Interests on the Korean Peninsula,” *Parameters* 39, no. 2, July 1, 2009, 52-62, <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/Articles/09Summer/baner.pdf> (accessed January 5, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, “U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region: An Independent Assessment”, 24.

<sup>19</sup> ROK-MND, 93.

<sup>20</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, “U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region: An Independent Assessment”, 29.

<sup>21</sup> ROK-MND, 17.

<sup>22</sup> James D. Thurman, “Opening statement to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations; Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies subcommittee,” March 29, 2012, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, Internet homepage, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ks.html>, (accessed January 13, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> ROK-MND, 34.

<sup>25</sup> L. Wayne Magee, Jr., *The United States-Republic of Korea Alliance: The Way Forward*, Strategy Research Project (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, March 13, 2012), 2-3.

<sup>26</sup> James D. Thurman, "Opening statement to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations; Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies subcommittee," March 29, 2012, [www.usfk.mil](http://www.usfk.mil), (accessed December 22, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> ROK-MND, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Park Won Gon, "Suggestions for Realizing Shared Vision of the 'ROK-U.S. Multi-dimensional Strategic Alliance,'" Korea Institute for Defense Analysis 59, November 22, 2011, 1-2, [www.kid.re.kr/eng](http://www.kid.re.kr/eng), (accessed December 20, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Terry A. Ivester, *Transfer of authority: the US-ROK alliance*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> ROK-MND, 80-86.

<sup>31</sup> "The 44th U.S. – ROK Security Consultative Meeting", October 24, 2012, [http://search.defense.gov/search?affiliate=DEFENSE\\_gov&query=44th+SCM&x=0&y=0](http://search.defense.gov/search?affiliate=DEFENSE_gov&query=44th+SCM&x=0&y=0) (accessed January 5, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Yonhap news, Internet homepage, [http://app.yonhapnews.co.kr/YNA/Basic/article/new\\_search/YIBW\\_showSearchArticle\\_New.aspx?searchpart=article&searchtext](http://app.yonhapnews.co.kr/YNA/Basic/article/new_search/YIBW_showSearchArticle_New.aspx?searchpart=article&searchtext) (accessed January 10, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Donha news, Internet homepage, <http://news.donga.com/3/all/20130105/52069127/1> (accessed January 11, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Korea Herald news, Internet homepage, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20130111000688> (accessed January 11, 2013).

<sup>35</sup> Republic of Korea, Joint Chief of Staff (ROK-JCS), "Where is 2015 OPCON Transition", Joint Publication 12-4, 28-30, <http://www.jcs.mil.kr> (accessed January 11, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>37</sup> Asiatoday news, Internet homepage, <http://www.asiatoday.co.kr/news/view.asp?seq=752398> (accessed January 15, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Korean National Security Net, Internet homepage, <http://www.konas.net/article/article.asp?idx=29673> (accessed January 15, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> INSS, "Moving the U.S.-ROK Alliance into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", September 2007, 2.

<sup>40</sup> No Hoon, "Strengthening Jointness of the ROK Armed Forces: The Current State and Ways Forward," Korea Institute for Defense Analysis 72, August 6, 2012, 1-4, [www.kid.re.kr/eng](http://www.kid.re.kr/eng), (accessed January 20, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Korean National Security Net, Internet homepage.

<sup>42</sup> FT.COM news, Internet homepage, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/0c4d68e2-f6e7-11df-8feb-00144feab49a.html#axzz2IIFYvHS9> (accessed January 20, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> Reuter's news, Internet homepage, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/12/us-korea-north-idUSBRE91B04820130212> (accessed February 13, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> ROK-MND, 27.

<sup>45</sup> Victor Cha, "Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific: What's next for the U.S. – KOREA alliance," June 6, 2012, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, "U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region: An Independent Assessment," 26.

<sup>47</sup> Koreaherald news, Internet homepage, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20130111000688> (accessed January 24, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> Walter L. Sharp, "Statement of General Walter L. Sharp, Commander United States Forces Korea," speech delivered to Association of the ROK Army, 2 July 2010, <http://www.usfk.mil/usfk/> (accessed January 24, 2013).