

The U.S. and South Korea: Prospects for Transformation, Combined Forces Operations, and Wartime Operational Control: Problems and Remedies¹

Bruce E. Bechtol Jr.²
Marine Corps Command and Staff College

ABSTRACT

There will be many challenges to military cooperation between the militaries of the US and South Korea in coming years as each country strives for military excellence in Northeast Asia. Not the least of these challenges will be preparing for the ongoing and ever changing North Korean military threat. When it comes to defending South Korea against what continues to be a heavily armed and unpredictable government in Pyongyang, issues such as Seoul's "self-reliant defense," the ability of the government in Seoul to pay for badly needed capabilities as it transforms its military, the dissolving of Combined Forces Command to two separate structures that to date remain in a state of flux, and the visions of the two governments that have inherited many of the policies of their predecessors in Seoul and Washington, are all important and must be examined. South Korea has been a loyal and robust supporter of the United States in its military operations all over the world, and Washington has stood by Seoul in defending it against attack from the North for more than 50 years. South Korea must strive to build up its military capabilities in order to meet the challenge of an evolving North Korean threat - but Washington can play an important role by exercising patience and flexibility when it comes to the timeline for changing and, ultimately, dissolving an infrastructure in Combined Forces Command that has deterred North Korean aggression and maintained stability and security in the region since its founding.

Keywords: Wartime OPCON, ROK-US Alliance, North Korean military, Military Transformation, Combined Forces Command

The very real challenges and issues that face Lee Myung-bak government and the ROK-U.S. alliance have recently become the center of more focus by policy makers and analysts in the United States and South Korea. Perhaps most importantly, Lee has now stated that his policy toward North Korea is to seek eventual unification under a liberal democracy. This is a significant break from the policy of his predecessors in the Kim and Roh administrations who sought “peaceful coexistence” with North Korea but paid little attention to what will be a hugely expensive and problematic post-unification situation.³ This new policy points to the important issues that will be addressed in this article. In order for South Korea to be able to work toward unification under a liberal, democratic government, the government in Seoul must be able to develop its military capabilities in order to match the continuing North Korean threat posed by its conventional and unconventional forces. As Seoul looks to building its own capabilities, it must work very closely with its most important ally – the United States. Thus, the ROK-U.S. military alliance will be the key in factor in defending the South Korean landmass, building stability for the future, and protecting Seoul’s and Washington’s national security interests in the region.

ROK Military Development: Matching Capabilities to the Threat

There are many issues facing the alliance between the United States and South Korea, but there is no doubt that the bulwark of the relationship between these two nations is the ROK-U.S. military alliance. This is the alliance that has protected the stability and security of the Korean peninsula since the end of the Korean War. But the military alliance has undergone several important changes in recent years. Not the least of these is the “transformation” of ROK military forces with an original end date of 2020 that was estimated to cost 164 trillion won. The plan, set into place under the Roh Moo-hyun administration, also was supposed to give the ROK military the independent capability to operate under separate wartime operational control from the United States by 2012.⁴ Evidence that the process of transitioning to two separate wartime commands is going forward can be seen if one examines the Ulchi Focus Guardian exercise held during August of 2008. During that exercise the South Koreans and Americans simulated fighting a war under two separate operational commands, one led by the Chairman of South Korea’s JCS, and one led by the Commander of United States Korea Command (KORCOM – future successor to USFK).

The exercise was observed by several retired military officers from both the United States and South Korea, and is expected to aid in planning for the major changes that are expected to occur by 2012.⁵ According to press reports, the U.S. and South Korea also planned to adopt a new war plan that would reflect projected changes in the military alliance as they held their joint/combined annual exercise in the summer of 2009, and will conduct every summer through 2012.⁶

There has been a great deal of criticism regarding the “transformation” plan set into action by the Roh administration. This expensive transformation process will not only put a huge strain on the budget of South Korea’s government, but much of the planning put into this transformation process can legitimately be called very dangerous to the security of South Korea. There are several key weaknesses in the original transformation plan: 1) it called for cutting military forces by 180,000 men – before acquisition of modern programs can offset the reduction in forces; 2) the plan was not set up to counter North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats – which have proven to be significant since the events of 2006; and, 3) the plan did not include enough programs or programs that are robust enough in nature—or the proper security measures - to meet the requirements of Seoul’s planned take over of separate wartime operational control from the U.S. military in 2012. There are already press reports saying that the ROK government may push the plan back from 2020 to 2025 because of the reasons stated above and because of budgetary issues.⁷

As the South Korean military continues its transformation process and pushes on with the challenges it faces in the changing ROK-US military alliance, policy makers in Seoul cannot forget that the ominous North Korean threat remains very real. North Korea continues to maintain the world’s fifth largest military—a military that is equipped with a nuclear capability, ballistic missiles, and an asymmetric capability that has evolved since the mid-1990s.⁸ Pyongyang has yet even to discuss terms for eliminating its estimated six to 12 nuclear weapons, and continues to deploy 70 percent of its ground forces within 90 miles of the DMZ. These forces include four deployed mechanized corps (some converted to divisions), an armor corps (now reorganized into a division), and an artillery corps (also reorganized into a division) – plus a missile corps that has more than 600 Scud’s and 200 No Dong missiles capable of striking anywhere in South Korea or Japan.⁹ North Korea also poses a threat to the ROK through its large, well-equipped and

highly trained cadre of Special Operations Forces. These forces number up to 100,000 men (2008 estimates by the South Korean Ministry of National Defense now place the figure at up to 180,000 men) and are capable of attacking key nodes within South Korea (including American bases), disrupting command and control, and even carrying out acts of terrorism and assassination.¹⁰

In order for the Lee administration to make up for the mistakes made by the Roh administration's "transformation" program, it will need to focus on two key areas: 1) The North Korean threat, based on the simple intelligence doctrine that a threat is defined as capability + intent = threat;¹¹ and, 2) A renewed focus on interoperability with U.S. forces as ROK independent capability comes to fruition. The second key area was ignored for most of the Roh administration and will be very important as the ROK and U.S. militaries make an effort to continue deterring the North Korean threat during the transitions occurring in the ROK-U.S. military alliance.

Under the Roh administration the ROK government refused to acquire anti-missile systems capable of defending the ROK from the more than 600 Scud missiles in the North that target nodes all over South Korea. To exacerbate the situation, North Korea has now built, tested and deployed an advanced version of the old Soviet SS-21 (known as the KN-02).¹² This is one of the key examples in which the transformation of the ROK military as directed by the Blue House under the Roh administration in essence failed to take into account the very threat that it is supposed to be built to deter and defend against. Under the Roh administration, South Korea had agreed to purchase 48 second-hand PAC-2 Patriot systems from Germany—systems sadly lacking in their ability to shoot down Scuds.¹³ According to sources in the South Korean press, these systems are now being deployed to some locations in the ROK.¹⁴ In my view it should be stressed that the PAC-2 system will be highly ineffective in either providing deterrence against a Scud missile attack or in actually being capable of shooting down the missile. The PAC-2 system destroys its target by exploding a spray of shrapnel that is meant to destroy an incoming missile. The PAC-3 uses a "hit to kill" method that is far more accurate than the PAC-2.¹⁵ During the Roh administration, high level American officials repeatedly advised the South Korean government of just this fact.

Under the Lee administration, the South Koreans have taken important steps to remedy their land-based ballistic missile defense – but

these are only preliminary steps. Reportedly, the South Korean government has now begun preliminary efforts to buy up to 48 PAC-3 fire systems (the PAC-3 system is widely considered to be much more effective than its PAC-2 predecessor in bringing down Scud and No Dong missiles), at least some of which will be deployed by 2012.¹⁶ Press reports also indicate the South Korean military has decided to acquire Israel's Green Pine early warning radar system for tracking cruise and ballistic missiles (to enter service by 2010 or 2011).¹⁷ But these are only initial steps—and as it stands right now the only missile defense systems on the peninsula that are truly capable of defending against a missile attack are the PAC-3 Patriot systems currently manned, maintained, and operated by the U.S. Army. There are 64 of these systems currently deployed in South Korea.¹⁸

The Japanese model serves as an excellent example of what the South Koreans can look to for building a missile defense system that forms a realistic deterrent and defense against possible North Korean attack. The Japanese Navy successfully conducted their first test of the SM-3 (ship deployed) interceptor missile in December of 2007. The Japanese are building a two-tier missile defense system in close cooperation with the United States. The SM-3 will be launched from Aegis-class ships to intercept missiles at high altitudes and the PAC-3 systems (deployed on land bases) will intercept missiles at lower altitudes.¹⁹ The Japanese plan to deploy 36 SM-3 missiles between 2007 and 2010 on four Aegis-class ships. The Japanese also plan to deploy 124 advanced capability PAC-3 interceptor missiles by 2010 on several bases and key locations throughout their country. Finally, Japan has deployed the X-Band early warning radar.²⁰ Thus far, the South Korean government has made no plans to purchase the SM-3 system (the preliminary purchase plans for PAC-3 missile systems is for a much lower number of systems than Japan's and the threat from North Korean missiles is higher), for their own Aegis class ships (known as the King Sejong Class destroyers) and has not agreed to join the U.S. missile defense system – a carry over from the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations.²¹ The importance of missile defense for South Korea and Japan is highlighted by press reports that state the United States has positioned the majority of its Aegis-equipped ships with a ballistic missile defense capability in the Pacific Ocean.²²

The reason behind Seoul's failure to purchase a modern missile defense system with the capabilities necessary to deter the North Korean

threat is most certainly not a lack of encouragement from the United States. In fact, during the Roh administration General B.B. Bell, then the Commander of USFK, stated, “The Republic of Korea must purchase and field its own TMD system, capable of full integration with the U.S. system. The regional missile threat from North Korea requires an active ROK missile defense capability to protect its critical command capabilities and personnel.”²³ This assessment continues to be the view of the current Commander of USFK (General Walter Sharp), who stated in Congressional testimony that South Korea should build a “layered” missile defense system (probably a reference to the same type of system that is currently being built and deployed by Japan) and should look to being interoperable with the U.S. global missile defense shield (also a possible reference to the arrangement between U.S. and Japanese missile defense forces). General Sharp also stated, “in the short term, South Korea must develop a systematic missile defense solution to protect its critical civilian and military command capabilities, critical infrastructure and population centers.”²⁴ In an interview with the South Korean press General Sharp said, “The ROK does not have a robust missile defense capability in place and this would likely be one of the bridging capabilities the U.S. would provide until the ROK improves this.” The U.S. has invited Seoul to participate in its missile defense network (as Japan has already done).²⁵ During Lee’s successful campaign for president he reportedly stated that, if elected, his government might reconsider the Roh government’s stance on missile defense.²⁶ If South Korea is to be capable of defending itself against a missile attack from the North, significant steps must be taken to initiate this policy.

As North Korea prepared to test-launch a Taepo Dong II ballistic missile during February of 2009, the issue of South Korea’s participating in U.S.-led ballistic missile defense initiatives again resurfaced. There was a renewed call – particularly from conservatives in South Korea— for Seoul’s joining in the U.S. system as Japan had already done. There is no denying that this could serve as a significant deterrent. The South continues to develop an indigenous, independent system that will be semi-proficient at shooting down SRBM’s—largely based on the outmoded PAC-2 system.²⁷ The South Korean military is expected to pay around \$213 million for an independent defense system that will go online by 2012. An anonymous government source told the South Korean press that, “When the anti-missile system is completed, we may even collaborate with the anti-theater missile team operated

independently by the United States Armed Forces to defend against and shoot down theater missiles. Obviously as this (in many ways lacking) ROK system goes online and as the South Koreans look to hopefully upgrade it, there will be many issues that will have to be worked out.”²⁸ In an important first step, the South Korean Aegis-equipped destroyer, “King Sejong the Great” was reportedly scheduled to participate in Combat System Ship Qualifications Trials with the U.S. Navy in 2010. The drills would probably include training in engaging missile targets—and could be the first move Seoul is making to integrate its BMD system with that of the United States.²⁹

But as discussed earlier, missiles are not the only threat that North Korea has against the South which has evolved since the mid-1990s. The biggest issue is one that was largely ignored or at best under-rated during the Roh administration—the necessity to acquire an independent, modern, robust, C4I system (Command, Control, Communication, Computers, and Intelligence), a system capable of being fully integrated with U.S. systems and interoperable service wide (joint) within the ROK military. This is very important now as the United States has reportedly completed the transitioning of 10 major security operations from USFK to the South Korean military. The 10th and last mission (Search and Rescue operations with the U.S. Air Force—which will now be conducted with ROK forces in the lead role) transitioned in the fall of 2008.³⁰ Of key importance here is the fact that in 2005, the ground based mission of providing counter-fire against the North Korean artillery (including the long-range systems) was handed over to the South Korean army. Up until that time the mission had been handled by the 2nd U.S. Infantry Division, which was equipped with 30 multiple rocket launcher systems and 30 M109A6 Paladin self-propelled howitzers.³¹ The South Korean army reportedly plans to upgrade its multiple rocket launchers and other advanced artillery systems in both modernization and numbers to counter the North Korean threat—but these changes are unlikely to be fully implemented for several years.³²

The relationship of C4I to this artillery mission is quite simply a matter of life or death. Integration of these systems into a modern C4I system means that, when they are operating in counter-battery mode, they will have a quick reaction time and will be able to identify the location of North Korean artillery units with radar and take them out just as the enemy systems have been fired or are about to be fired. A lack of this capability means the South Korean systems that replaced the

American systems are simply guns that cannot react rapidly enough to target North Korean systems in a timely manner and thus protect allied forces, and indeed Seoul and the seat of government.³³ This becomes even more a matter of concern if one addresses the issue of integrating counter-battery fire with allied airpower. Without a modern C4I system (as their American allies have) this is next to impossible, and in fact severely degrades the South Korean capability to target North Korean systems and quickly destroy them. According to Representative Kim Dong-sung of the South Korean National Assembly (as reported in the South Korean press in 2009), South Korean internal communications equipment used for artillery systems near the DMZ is largely obsolete. Kim cited aging communications lines used at front line bases and said that, in some cases, it could take up to 90 minutes for South Korean counter-battery systems to receive coordinates on North Korean guns.³⁴

To be sure, Lee Myung-bak pledged during his campaign to turn the South Korean military into an efficient, high-tech force by establishing a network centric capability.³⁵ There are already signs that this is beginning to happen. During August of 2008 it was announced that the United States and South Korea had reached an agreement on the ROK military acquiring the Global Hawk UAV. The Global Hawk system is an advanced, long-range, long-dwell-time aircraft, and can transmit its data via satellite to forces on the ground.³⁶ The South Korean military also reportedly plans to increase its monitoring capability by developing more advanced drones (which may be particularly important if the Global Hawk deal falls through).³⁷ There are also reports that the South Korean army will set up an experimental, regiment size unit that will “adopt new organization structures, weaponry, and tactics ahead of other units” (this likely will include C4I).³⁸ Under modifications to the plan scheduled to be completed by 2020, the South Korean military plans eventually to address shortfalls in C4I (probably by 2020) and to focus on reinforcing its capability (currently lacking) in countering nuclear and missile attacks by North Korea.³⁹

To put a finer point on it, the South Korean military (and its decision makers in government) continues to depend on the United States for almost all strategic information. In fact, at least for now, ROK forces are also heavily dependent on U.S. systems for much of their tactical battlefield information.⁴⁰ South Korea holds a significant edge in integrating, interpreting, processing, and utilizing battlefield information (such as the movement of forces, activities of missile units, mechanized

forces, etc.) over North Korea—especially on forces that are not fairly close to the DMZ—only because of the many high tech C4I systems that the United States currently mans, maintains, and deploys to the Korean Peninsula (or off-Peninsula) as part of its obligations in the ROK-U.S. military alliance.⁴¹

There is an important factor that must be addressed if one is to discuss South Korea's current capability to counter the North Korean SOF threat. This is the airlift of South Korea's own elite Special Forces and airborne brigades. South Korea currently has seven Special Forces brigades (all airborne) in its army, and five independent brigades (two infantry, and, three counter-infiltration). There are also other smaller units that would require airlift in any conflict or contingency. These are among the ROK's most elite forces and they are among the best trained in the world—but they cannot get to where they need to go to conduct their vital missions without airlift. The South Korean Air Force transport fleet is currently lacking in its capability to conduct this mission. There are only 10 C-130Hs in the ROKAF inventory and 15 smaller Spanish designed, twin-engined CN-235Ms (more transports may be on order but they will still leave the ROKAF sadly lacking in airlift capability).⁴² Thus, as it stands right now, a major source of airlift for the ROK special forces and other airborne units (because of capabilities lacking in the ROKAF) is the United States Air Force. This issue must be addressed and compensated for in order for the South Korean military to truly be able to counter the North Korean SOF threat in an independent way. Thus, as the Lee administration looks to the future, these are important acquisition and integration issues that will have to be addressed.

This article has addressed three key threats from North Korea—a “triad” of asymmetric threats if you will (the long-range artillery, SOF and ballistic missiles constitute this triad). North Korea has been able to successfully integrate these capabilities into its military forces as resource constraints have limited the training and ultimately some of the readiness of its more conventional traditional ground forces. But one must keep in mind that during a full-scale force-on-force conflict, these asymmetric forces would likely be able to create gaps and vulnerabilities in ROK and U.S. military forces defending South Korea that would then enable less capable DPRK forces—but still deadly ones—to move into these gaps and attack key nodes, causing significant damage in the essential early hours and days of any war. This is an important aspect of analyzing the threat that must be (and likely is) included in any planning

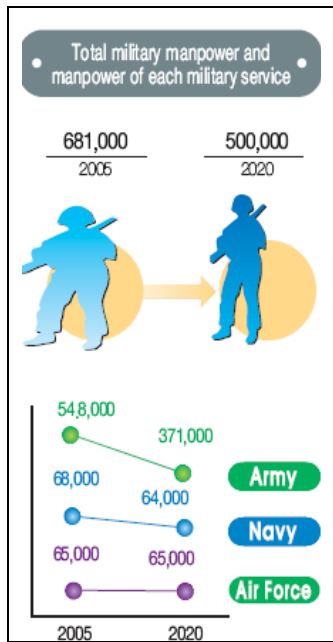
for conflict on the Korean Peninsula. One has only to look at the unique landmass of the Korean Peninsula along the DMZ to realize that the narrow invasion corridors into South Korea provide opportunities that can be exploited.

Can the ROK Government Pay for Needed Capabilities?

The world recession is likely to have a direct impact on another important issue for South Korea's military forces— "Defense Reform 2020," Seoul's transformation plan to upgrade and modernize its forces to prepare for independent national defense capabilities. According to press reports, the transformation plan, set to be finished by 2020, may end up undergoing intense revision. Reportedly, the primary reason for the drastic overhaul of the reform package is budget shortfalls, according to many military experts and defense officials in South Korea. Some experts have predicted a further decrease in defense expenditures for the plan. But there are other ramifications for the budgetary problems inherent in Seoul's current military transformation plan. First, it may end up getting pushed back to a finish date of 2025. Second, (as discussed earlier) the original schedule for systems acquisition and troop cuts is assessed by many experts to be inadequate to account for North Korea's asymmetric capabilities. And third (and perhaps most importantly), many military experts also believe that the defense reform did not include required arms procurement plans and security measures for Seoul's transition to independent wartime operational control of its forces, scheduled to occur in 2012.⁴³

The South Korean military has begun to unveil the basic change of the previous government's reform plan. Reportedly, it will slow down troop reductions over the next decade because of budget shortfalls—and the continuing North Korean threat. The military now plans to take a more pragmatic approach by also planning to defend against the North Korean nuclear threat – and to initiate troop cuts only after weapons systems have been brought on line that will make up for the decrease in manpower.⁴⁴ One has only to look at the massive troop cuts planned under Roh administration to understand why the changes are likely to be initiated (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Projected Troops Cuts From “Transformation 2020”



Source: “Defense White Article,” Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea, 2006

According to the South Korean press, sources in the Defense Ministry planned to cut its proposed budget for Defense Reform 2020 by 30 percent, as of April, 2009. The plan to reduce the cost of the budget will likely be accomplished (if the plan is implemented) by changing the priorities of some key arms acquisition programs over the next five years (apparently beginning in 2009). The Ministry planned to request procurement of more advanced Patriot missile defense systems and related early warning radars. But because of the expense of these programs, other important acquisitions such as air tankers and UAV’s may end up being pushed back. The Ministry has also planned to request that President Lee slows down previously planned troop reductions until acquisition efforts of high-tech systems can catch up and match the capabilities that will be needed.⁴⁵

Budget cuts have caused some controversy within the government. During September of 2009, the Ministry of National Defense reported that it planned to submit a 3.8 percent increase for spending in the next year—the smallest increase in defense expenditures since 1999. The surprisingly small increase in defense spending is reportedly due to economic difficulties in South Korea.⁴⁶ The Ministry of National Defense had earlier reportedly planned to submit a budget increase of 7.9 percent. In fact, the smaller budget request is said to have been suggested to the Blue House by Vice Minister Chang Soo-man, who is said to have gone over the head of the outgoing Minister of National Defense, Lee Sang-hee. According to sources in the South Korean press, Lee responded by writing a letter to presidential Chief of Staff Chung Chung-kil and others in which he urged the Blue House to accept the original version of the budget proposal (7.9 percent), saying budget cuts would dampen MND's efforts to strengthen defense capabilities, and also stating that it would send the wrong message to North Korea.⁴⁷

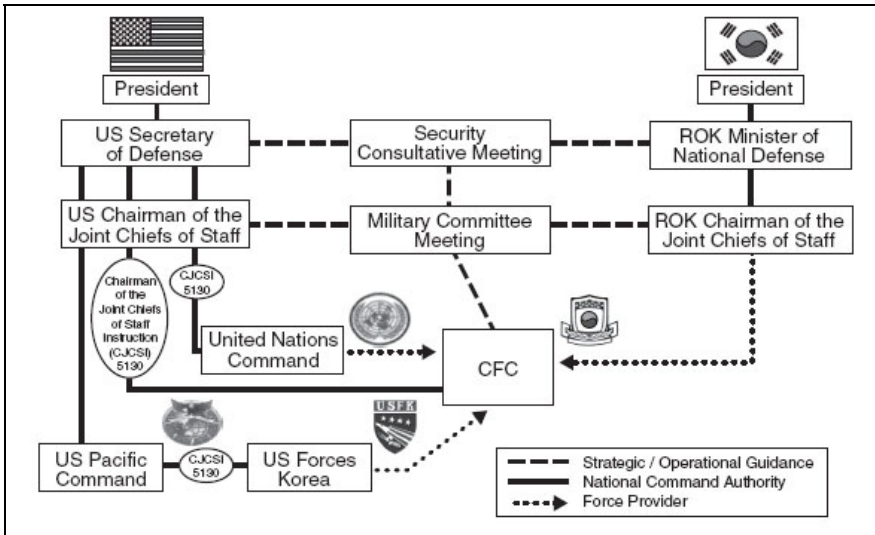
Wartime Operational Control: The Right Move at the Right Time?

The issues discussed earlier in this article all have direct relevance to and are also directly tied in with perhaps the most sensitive issue to be discussed in this article—the issue of wartime operational control. According to an agreement reached between Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Minister Kim in 2007, CFC is to be disestablished and the ROK and U.S. militaries on the Korean Peninsula will continue to function as allies with two separate wartime operational commands effective April 17, 2012.⁴⁸ The issue of ROK and U.S. forces fighting with North Korea under two separate military commands has been a huge source of contention with most ROK retired military officials and generals being openly critical of the change in wartime OPCON because they believe it is both premature and dangerous to the security of South Korea.⁴⁹ And the majority of South Koreans reportedly believe that President Roh made the wrong move at the wrong time for ROK security. As Cheon Seong-whun, a scholar at the Korea Institute for National Unification has said, “Simply because the North Korean military is most delighted to see the OPCON transfer and the CFC dissolution, the decision is worthy of delay.”⁵⁰ During the early months of 2008, U.S. officials reportedly said that ROK forces were making progress in C4I improvements that would be necessary in order to operate under separate wartime command beginning in 2012. But other

officials admitted that the South Korean R&D budget increased only nominally as compared to budgets of the three previous years.⁵¹ Indeed, tough financial times ahead may mean more of the same in the future.

Despite the outcry from many in South Korea—particularly now that the left of center government is no longer in power—several American officials have stated definitively that postponing the date for separate warfighting commands (and ending the successful tenure of CFC) is simply not an option. The outgoing Ambassador to South Korea Alexander Vershbow, stated this in December of 2007 when he said, “As I said, the strategic transition plan is already agreed upon and it is being implemented.”⁵²

Figure 2: Current Wartime Command Relationships: ROK/U.S. Forces



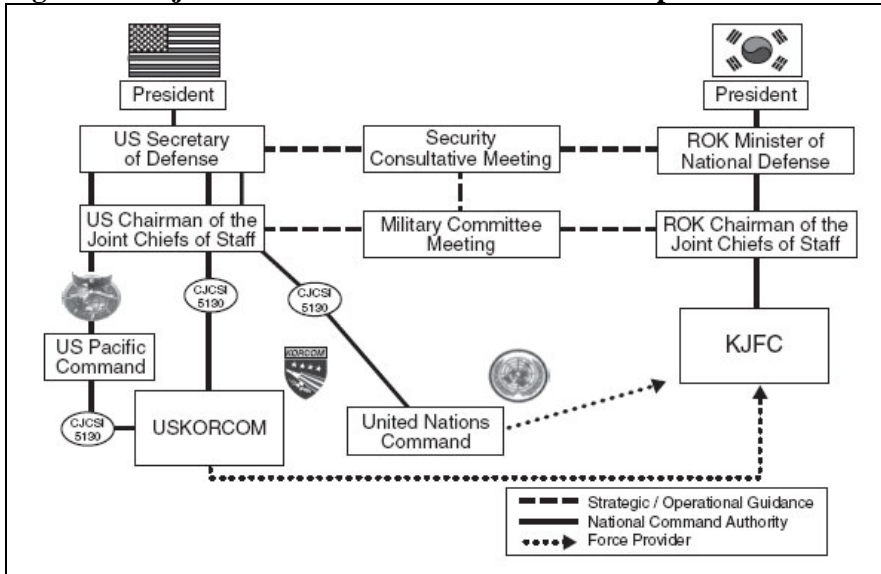
Source: Lt Gen Stephen G. Wood, USAF, and Maj Christopher A. Johnson, DM, USAF, “The Transformation of Air Forces on the Korean Peninsula,” *Air and Space Power Journal*, Vol. XXII, No. 3 (Fall 2008), URL: <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj08/fal08/wood.html>

Ambassador Vershbow's words were supported in a statement made by the Commander of U.S. forces in Korea, General Walter Sharp, who, according to press sources, said in 2009, "On the OPCON transfer, we

are on track. We will be prepared for 17 April 2012. By 2012, the Republic of Korea military leadership will be ready to take over."⁵³

In my view this is a premature assessment. While complete self-reliance and its own separate wartime operational control may seem like the right thing to do in the long run, it will quite simply be impossible for Seoul to complete all of the initiatives important for assuming separate wartime OPCON of its forces by 2012 or to have anything close to a self-reliant military by that time. Of course, one of the key reasons for this (as stated definitively earlier in this article) is because the threat from North Korea, and its government's intentions to use that threat have not subsided.

Figure 3: Projected Wartime Command Relationships after 2012



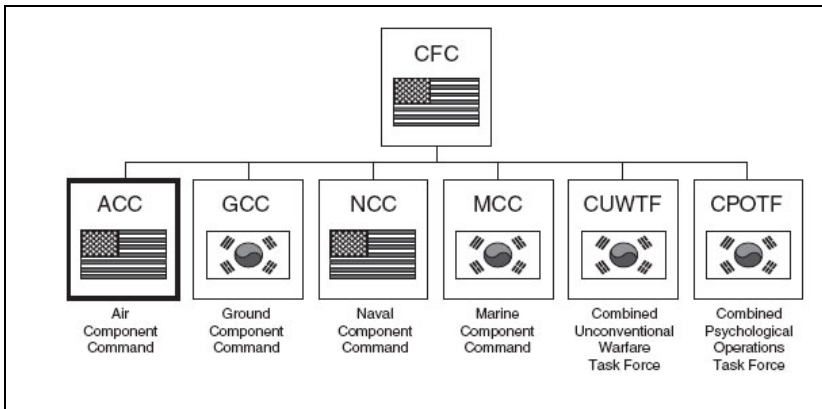
Source: Wood and Johnson, 2008

There are other important issues that in my view must be considered before CFC is disestablished and the U.S. and South Korea assume separate wartime operational control of their forces. The first is unity of command. The loss of a unified command (which exists today) is likely to curtail the high degree of coordination that exists between ROK and U.S. forces today. This is also likely to lead to higher casualties—including among South Korean civilians. The other issue is political.

The change in wartime OPCON could lead to misperceptions about the ability of the ROK military to conduct a war with the North on its own, and in the United States this could also lead to reduced Congressional and public support for a large-scale presence of U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula.⁵⁴ This would be extremely dangerous for South Korea's security and stability and would not bode well for regional security as a whole—particularly given the fact that some in the U.S. Senate have recently shown an impatience with the alliance, perhaps because of U.S. obligations elsewhere.⁵⁵

If one is to examine the command relationships as they exist today, it shows a seamless, transparent chain of command that extends from two separate national command authorities (NCA) in Washington and Seoul. In wartime, and when the NCA in Seoul agrees to it (the President in South Korea is the final authority), based on the advice of the Minister of National Defense and Joint Chiefs, designated ROK forces chop to the Commander of CFC—who then answers to both the U.S. and the South Korean NCA's and carries out their strategic decisions in command of ROK and U.S. forces as they carry out warfighting operations under a unified, combined force (see figure 2). If one examines the way command relationships are projected to change (see figure 3), during wartime, ROK forces will no longer fall under CFC (which will no longer exist). Instead, two separate warfighting commands will exist—Korea Command (KORCOM) for the U.S. and Joint Forces Command (KJFC) for South Korea (the name for South Korean Command is likely to change). Unity of command will no longer exist and forces will be fighting in the restricted terrain of the Korean Peninsula answering to two separate NCA's.

Figure 4: Current Wartime Structure of ROK/U.S. Military Forces



Source: Wood and Johnson, 2008

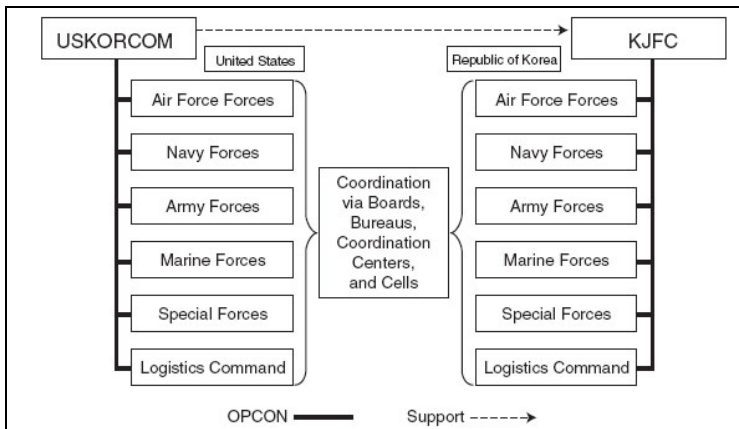
Figure 4 shows the current construct of CFC and its component commands. As the framework exists today, each component command has both American and South Korean military forces contained within it, fighting together (and planning for future military operations in a seamless, combined environment). This is not a structure dominated by U.S. commanders. In fact, if one looks at the flags on figure 4, identifying the country of the component commander, the result is that the majority of component commands (including the largest—the Ground Component Command) are commanded by South Korean General Officers. This is projected to change dramatically when CFC is disestablished.

As shown in figure 5, forces from both the U.S. and South Korea will be organized to fight separately. This will create difficulties in command and control of forces – particularly in the case of South Korea, which has an Air Force that is not projected to have the capabilities necessary to fight a large scale war on its own, C4I capabilities that are not yet fully developed, and a navy that is still building toward the maritime sealift and anti-missile capabilities that it will need in a fight with North Korea. General Walter Sharp has reaffirmed that the U.S. plans to provide stronger naval and air support to South Korea following the disestablishment of CFC.⁵⁶ In a speech at the 2009 Korean-American Association, General Sharp announced that there will be a

combined air force command following the disestablishment of CFC. Reportedly, a plan is also being drawn up for a combined intelligence group after CFC is gone.⁵⁷ Sources in the South Korean press have revealed that the U.S. will continue to lead air operations (both ROK and U.S.) after the projected wartime OPCON change in 2012.⁵⁸ U.S. forces will also lead combined amphibious operations and recovery of North Korean WMD.⁵⁹ Command and control for these entities is likely still to be coordinated as the ROK and U.S. forces will be commanded separately above the component level. As shown on figure 5, much of what is simply combined operations and planning today is projected to become coordination via boards, bureaus, coordination centers, and cells. Unity of command will vanish, and the battlefield environment will become more complicated.

According to a press release by the Ministry of National Defense, as the two allies build toward the disestablishment of CFC, many initiatives will occur. The ROK JCS will hold quarterly reviews to assess 114 tasks in six fields. The six fields include the “establishment of theater combat command systems, a ROK-U.S. military cooperation system, operational plans, command execution systems, joint exercises and basis for the transfer of OPCON.” The ROK JCS plans to build a new command headquarters by 2011 and will establish a military consultation group at the Camp Humphries garrison once U.S. forces are relocated there. Consultative bodies that will replace much of the CFC infrastructure are planned for both peacetime and wartime. There will also be a joint (combined) crisis management system—though its infrastructure and make up are unclear.

Figure 5: Projected Wartime Structure of ROK/US Military Forces



Source: Wood and Johnson, 2008

Of course, this entire system will be less streamlined than what has existed under CFC. Command and control will also be much more of a challenge. There will be two separate theater commands (ROK and U.S.) that will be independent of each other—but will work together within a joint defense system. According to a press release, air and at least some intelligence operations will remain combined as they are under CFC—though the structure and command of these extremely important elements continues to be worked out (Americans are likely to command these elements as the ROK military simply will not have the capabilities to do so by 2012).⁶⁰ Amphibious operations are also scheduled to be conducted in a combined environment—likely because of capabilities the ROK Marine Corps and Navy simply do not (and will not) have—as are operations for the recovery of WMD (both under U.S. command), but aside from these exceptions, as a press report notes, "the Korea Command will control operations of U.S. forces in Korea, U.S. reinforcements and some United Nations troops."⁶¹

And then, of course, when one is considering wartime OPCON, the most important reason for a ROK-US military alliance and a strong U.S. troop presence on the Korean Peninsula also comes to mind – the ongoing and menacing presence of a belligerent North Korean military with asymmetric capabilities. As Lee Jong-gu, the head of the Korea Retired Generals and Admirals Association said in an interview with the

South Korean press, “We must consider when, not under what conditions, when dealing with the transfer of wartime operational command. North Korea is highly unlikely to abandon its nuclear weapons, and South Korea is not expected to equip itself with a military strong enough to deter North Korea’s provocations by 2012. It is unreasonable to set a deadline for the transfer of the wartime operational command, which is directly related to South Korea’s security, when North Korea is heightening its nuclear threat.”⁶² Following the nuclear test that North Korea conducted in May of 2009, many retired generals and conservative members of the National Assembly echoed the assessments of General Lee Jong-gu—calling for a review of the date of 2012 as a reasonable time frame for disestablishment of CFC.⁶³

Conclusion

In previous publications I have addressed the four basic pillars of cooperation, both domestically and with the U.S., that the South Korean government can look to as they confront the threat of a rogue state to the North and the tough fiscal realities they will continue to face because of challenging economic times.⁶⁴ The first pillar is *closer technological cooperation*. This should involve bigger, more robust, longer range combat, communications and intelligence systems. Joint government and business ventures must be initiated that will enable quality focused programs that will upgrade defense capabilities and surpass threat systems while at the same time downplaying vulnerabilities that are likely to occur as CFC is dissolved. The second pillar is *closer intellectual cooperation* that focuses on a renewed and continuing commitment to combined doctrine, training, and education. The third pillar is *closer ideological cooperation* and a newfound commitment to democracy, human rights and free market economies as South Korea and the United States re-affirm an alliance that has faced tough times under the previous administration in the Blue House. The final and perhaps most important pillar is a *fiscal commitment to support the pillars listed above*. This can be accomplished through defense appropriations that enable the realistic, threat-based acquisition of important systems that will be needed for truly independent national defense capabilities.

As South Korea looks to improve its national defense, the United States can also play a major role—that of a strong supporting ally. By allowing the ROK government time to build up its capabilities and improve its forces—perhaps by delaying the implementation of a change

to wartime OPCON—Washington will prove that it supports its loyal military ally and seventh largest trading partner.⁶⁵ To any analyst who has done a thorough analysis of current correlation of forces, opposing firepower ratios, or terrain-dominated strategy, it is obvious that South Korea's military will continue to need the help of the U.S. in meeting the North Korean threat. The tyranny of proximity dictates that one can hardly draw any other conclusion. As Lt. General Edward Rice of USFJ remarked in 2008, "North Korea continues to be a regime that is not very transparent in terms of their capabilities and their intentions."⁶⁶ Thus, these two great nations must reinforce an alliance that will continue to contribute to the security of the Korean Peninsula and the stability of Northeast Asia as a whole.

Notes:

¹ Parts of this article were earlier published as, Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr. "Preparing for Future Threats and Regional Challenges: The ROK-U.S. Military alliance in 2008-2009," *Korea Economic Institute, Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies*, Vol. 19, (2009): 75-99. The author would like to thank the Nicole Finneman and the Editors and staff at the Korea Economic Institute. A longer version of this paper will be included as a chapter in Dr. Bechtol's upcoming book, *Defiant Failed State: The North Korean Threat to International Security* (Potomac Books: 2010).

² The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, the Marine Corps University, or the United States Government.

³ See Kim Sue-young, "Seoul Seeks Unification Under Liberal Democracy," *Korea Times*, August 3, 2008, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/08/116_28672.html

⁴ See Jin Dae-wong, "Military Arms Buildup to Cost W164tr Over Next Five Years," *Korea Herald*, July 19, 2007, URL: https://www.koreaherald.co.kr/SITE/data/html_dir/2007/07/19/200707190038.asp

⁵ Jung Sung-ki, "S.Korea-US Joint Drill Begins," *Korea Times*, August 17, 2008, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/08/113_29513.html

⁶ See: Sam Kim, "S. Korea, U.S. Pushing to Test New War Plan Against N. Korea," *Yonhap*, February 11, 2009, URL: <http://www.koreancenter.or.kr/news/>

news_foreign_view.aspx?menu_code=02001000&news_id=AEN20090211004100315

Kim Min-seok, "U.S. Eighth Army to Remain Stationed in Korea," *Joongang Ilbo*, November 6, 2009, URL: <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2912218>

⁷ Jung Sung-ki, "Timeline for Defense Reform Likely to Be Readjusted," *Korea Times*, July 6, 2008, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/07/113_27123.html

⁸ For current analysis on the North Korean military threat, see Andrew Scobell and John M. Sanford, *North Korea's Military Threat: Pyongyang's Conventional Forces, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Ballistic Missiles*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), URL: <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/PUB771.pdf>

⁹ See Bruce Klingner, "Supporting Our South Korean Ally and Enhancing Defense Cooperation," Heritage Foundation, Web Memo No. 1859, March 18, 2008, URL: <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Asiaandthepacific/wm1859.cfm>

¹⁰ For more analysis on numbers, strategy, tactics, and capabilities of North Korean Special Operations Forces, see Robert D. Kaplan, "When North Korea Falls," *Atlantic Monthly*, October, 2006, URL: <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200610/kaplan-korea> and "North Korea: Special Operations Forces," *GlobalSecurity.Org*, 1996, URL: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/dprk/1996/kpa-guide/part03.htm>. "Defense White Paper," *Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea*, 2008, URL: <http://www.mnd.go.kr/>

¹¹ For details on this definition see Melissa Applegate, *Preparing for Asymmetry: As Seen through the Lens of Joint Vision 2020*, (Carlisle, PA, Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), URL: <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/ssi/preparng.pdf>

¹² For analysis on the numbers and capabilities of North Korean SCUD and KN-02 missiles, see Jung Sung-ki, "S. Korea Vulnerable to NK Chemical Warheads," *Korea Times*, October 17, 2007, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2007/12/205_12072.html

¹³ "Defense Ministry Seeks 20% Hike in Purchases," *Korea Herald*, May 30, 2007, URL: https://www.koreaherald.co.kr/SITE/data/html_dir/2007/05/30/200705300037.asp

¹⁴ Jung Sung-ki, "Seoul Begins Deploying Patriot Missile Interceptors," *Korea Times*, September 16, 2008, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/09/205_31122.html

¹⁵ Brian Lee, "South Korea's Missile Shortage a Concern," *Joongnag Ilbo*, March 10, 2009, URL: <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2902014>

¹⁶ "Raytheon Begins SAM-X/Patriot Missile Work in South Korea," *Defense Industry Daily*, March 4, 2008, URL: <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/Raytheon-Begins-SAM-XPatriot-Missile-Work-in-South-Korea-04772/>

¹⁷ Jung Sung-ki, "Israeli Radar Chosen for Missile Defense," *Korea Times*, September 17, 2009, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/09/113_52006.html

¹⁸ See "U.S. to Withdraw Patriot Missiles From Gwangju," *Chosun Ilbo*, August 24, 2006, URL: <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200608/200608240011.html>

¹⁹ See "What Japan's Test Means for Korea's Missile Defense," *Chosun Ilbo*, December 19, 2007, URL: <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200712/200712190008.html>

²⁰ "Japanese Ballistic Missile Defense," *MissileThreat.com*, Claremont Institute, August 24, 2008, URL: http://www.missilethreat.com/missiledefensesystems/id.30/system_detail.asp

²¹ See "South Korea Plans Affordable Missile Defense Shield," *Chosun Ilbo*, December 21, 2007, URL: <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200612/200612210015.html>

²² "Most US BMD Warships Positioned in the Pacific," *KBS World*, January 9, 2009, URL: http://world.kbs.co.kr/english/news/news_In_detail.htm?No=60466

²³ General B.B. Bell, Commander, United Nations Command, Commander, Republic of Korea- United States Combined Forces Command; and Commander, United States Forces Korea, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, April 24, 2007, URL: <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2007/April/Bell%2004-24-07.pdf>

²⁴ Jung Sung-ki, "N. Korea Blasts US Missile Shield," *Korea Times*, April 28, 2008, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/08/120_22042.html

²⁵ Jung Sung-ki, "USFK Chief Urges Seoul to Join US BMD," *Korea Times*, February 25, 2009, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/02/205_40279.html

²⁶ "Lee MB Policies: Lee Seeks to Strengthen U.S. Alliance," *Korea Herald Special Edition*, December, 2007, URL: <http://www.koreaherald.com/>

-
- ²⁷ Kim Ji-hyun, "N.K. Threats Rekindle Missile Defense Debate," *Korea Herald*, February 19, 2009, URL: http://www.koreaherald.co.kr/NEWKHSITE/data/html_dir/2009/02/19/200902190025.asp
- ²⁸ Kim Ji-hyun, "Seoul Developing Anti-Missile Base," *Korea Herald*, February 16, 2009, URL: http://www.koreaherald.co.kr/NEWKHSITE/data/html_dir/2009/02/16/200902160042.asp
- ²⁹ Kim Min-seok and Yoo Jee-ho, "Korean Navy Will Join U.S. Ballistic Missile Drills," *Joongang Ilbo*, July 22, 2009, URL: <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2907749>
- ³⁰ Jung Sung-ki, "Korea to Take Over 10th, Last Security Mission From US," *Korea Times*, August 16, 2008, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/08/205_25999.html
- ³¹ Kim Min-seok and Brian Lee, "Key Defense Mission to go to Korean Military," *Joongang Ilbo*, 11 April 2005, URL: <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/200504/10/200504102253445679900090309031.html>
- ³² Jung Sung-ki, "South Korean Military to Triple Artillery Against N. Korea," *Korea Times*, June 21, 2009, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/06/205_47204.html
- ³³ Sang-ho Yun, "1,000 Guided Missiles to Be Introduced to Counter North Korean Artillery," *Donga Ilbo*, URL: <http://english.donga.com/srv/service.php3?biid=2005041158378>
- ³⁴ Sam Kim, "S. Korean Defense Flawed Against N. Korean Artillery: Lawmaker," *Yonhap*, Oct 12, 2009, URL: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2009/10/12/63/0301000000AEN20091012005100315F.HTML>
- ³⁵ "Lee MB Policies: Lee Seeks to Spur Defense Buildup Efforts," *Korea Herald Special Edition*, December, 2007, URL: <http://www.koreaherald.com/>
- ³⁶ See "U.S. to Sell Restricted Spy Aircraft to Korea," *Chosun Ilbo*, August 11, 2008, URL: <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200808/200808110007.html> "Buying the Best Eyes on North Korea," *StrategyPage.com*, August 12, 2008, URL: <http://www.strategypage.com/htmlw/htintel/articles/20080812.aspx>
- ³⁷ Sam Kim, "Army Plans to Develop Drones to Step up Vigilance Over N. Korea," *Yonhap*, August 19, 2009, URL: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2009/08/19/0200000000AEN20090819008300315.HTML>
- ³⁸ Lee Joon-seung, "Military to Operate 'Experimental' Unit to Test-Drive Restructuring," *Yonhap*, June 28, 2009, URL: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/>

national/2009/06/28/30/030100000AEN20090628001000320F.HTML

³⁹ "S. Korea Beefs Up Defense Against N. Korean Nukes," *Chosun Ilbo*, June 24, 2009, URL: http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/06/24/2009062400303.html

⁴⁰ For details of specific US systems that South Korea is dependent on the US for in providing both strategic and tactical battlefield and potential battlefield information and the current gaps in South Korea's military information systems, See Sang-ho Yun, "Korea Depends on US for Data on North," *Donga Ilbo*, June 22, 2006, URL: <http://english.donga.com/srv/service.php3?bicode=050000&biid=2006062283888>

⁴¹ For specific details of how ROK and U.S. systems integrate and collaborate in order to provide battlefield information, see Kim Min-Seok, "In Spy Versus Spy, Seoul Holds High-Tech Edge," *Joongang Ilbo*, May 19, 2008, URL: <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2889968>

⁴² Lt Gen So Chin Tae, "Recasting the Viability of a Small Ally's Airpower: South Korea in Focus," *Air and Space Power Journal: Chronicles Online Journal*, 1 October 2002, URL: <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/cc/tae.html>

⁴³ Jung Sung-ki, "Defense Reform Faces Overhaul," *Korea Times*, August 27, 2008, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/08/116_30141.html

⁴⁴ Jung Sung-ki, "S. Korean Military to Slow Troop Cuts," *Korea Times*, November 24, 2008, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/11/205_34989.html

⁴⁵ For details of requested ROK Defense Ministry changes to its projected budget plans, see Jung Sung-ki, "Less Spending for Military Modernization," *Korea Times*, April 7, 2009, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/04/113_42785.html

⁴⁶ Jung Sung-ki, "Fighter, Attack Helicopter Plans delayed," *Korea Times*, September 28, 2009, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/09/113_52640.html

⁴⁷ See Na Jeong-ju, "Top Defense Officials Clash Over Budget Plan," *Korea Times*, August 26, 2009, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/08/113_50746.html. Yoo Jee-ho, "Minister Says Defense Budget Cuts Unwise," *Joongang Ilbo*, August 27, 2009, URL: <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2909307>

⁴⁸ For details of the signed agreement between Secretary Gates and Minister Kim, see “Secretary Gates Holds Consultations with ROK Minister of National Defense,” *Defense Link*, February 23, 2007, URL: <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Feb2007/d20070223sdrok.pdf>

⁴⁹ “Former Generals Criticize Seoul-Washington Deal on Wartime Control Transfer,” *Yonhap*, February 26, 2007, URL: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/Engnews/20070226/610000000020070226140348E0.html>

⁵⁰ Cheon Seong-whun, “[Korea-U.S. Relations Under Obama (2)] Transfer of Troop Control: A Bush Legacy,” *Korea Herald*, January 23, 2009, URL: http://www.koreaherald.co.kr/NEWKHSITE/data/html_dir/2009/01/23/200901230070.asp

⁵¹ “South Korea Increasing Defense Budget, Advancing Toward Assumption of Military Control,” *Geostrategy-Direct*, April 30, 2008, URL: <http://www.geostrategy-direct.com/geostrategy-direct/>

⁵² “U.S. Envoy Hints at Gap Between Bush, Lee Over OPCON Transfer Time,” *Yonhap*, December 21, 2007, URL: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2007/12/21/77/0301000000AEN20071221002900315F.HTML>

⁵³ Hwang Doo-hyong, “Scheduled 2012 Transfer of OPCON on Track: U.S. Commander,” *Yonhap*, October 7, 2009, URL: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2009/10/08/0200000000AEN20091008000900315.HTML>

⁵⁴ For more analysis on the political and military dangers of initiating an early OPCON transfer, see Bruce Klingner, “Transforming the U.S.- South Korean Alliance,” Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder: No. 2155, June 30, 2008, URL: http://www.heritage.org/Research/asiaandthepacific/upload/bg_2155.pdf

⁵⁵ For an example of obvious impatience with the current transition in the alliance and perhaps misinformed perceptions about ROK military capabilities from Senators Levin and Warner, see statements reported on from Senate confirmation hearings held on April 3, 2008, in: “US Congress Says, Make OPCON Transferred Earlier,” *Yonhap* (in Korean) April 6, 2008, URL: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/>

⁵⁶ Jung Sung-ki, “USFK Chief Pledges Naval, Air-Centric Reinforcement,” *Korea Times*, February 1, 2009, URL: https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/02/116_38782.html

⁵⁷ “Korea, U.S. to Combine Air Force Command,” *Chosun Ilbo*, February 5, 2009, URL: <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200902/200902050009.html>

⁵⁸ Jung Sung-ki, "Korea, US Devise Broader Air Operations Command," *Korea Times*, September 27, 2009, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/09/205_52552.html

⁵⁹ "USFK to Continue Major Operations After OPCON Transfer," KBS News, October 31, 2009, URL: http://rki.kbs.co.kr/english/news/news_Po_detail.htm?No=67770

⁶⁰ See "Entire Military Working Toward Transfer Under Joint Chiefs of Staff," *Republic of Korea, Ministry of National Defense*, February 16, 2009, URL: <http://www.mnd.go.kr/mndEng/WhatsNew/RecentNews/>

⁶¹ Kim Min-seok, "U.S. Eighth Army to Remain Stationed in Korea," *Joongang Ilbo*, November 6, 2009, URL: <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2912218>

⁶² "Transfer of Wartime Command Should Be Delayed," *Donga Ilbo*, May 27, 2009, URL: <http://english.donga.com/srv/service.php3?biid=2009052732988>

⁶³ See Jung Sung-ki, "Calls Grow to Reschedule Command Transfer," *Korea Times*, May 27, 2009, URL: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/05/116_45798.html Sam Kim, "N. Korean Nuclear Test Renews Concerns Over U.S.-S. Korean Alliance," *Yonhap*, May 28, 2009, URL: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2009/05/28/93/0301000000AEN20090528006100315F.HTML>

⁶⁴ The four basic pillars of military cooperation were previously addressed in Bruce E. Bechtol Jr. "Forging a Common Approach on Strength: Challenges and Opportunities for the Lee Myung-bak Presidency and the ROK-US Alliance," in *Understanding New Political Realities in Seoul: Working toward a Common Approach to Strengthen U.S.-Korean Relations*, eds. L. Gordon Flake and Park Ryo-byug (Washington DC: Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, 2008), available on URL: http://www.mansfieldfdn.org/pubs/pub_pdfs/US-ROK_final_x.pdf

⁶⁵ See "Issue Brief: U.S. – Korea FTA," *Business Roundtable*, 2006, URL: http://trade.businessroundtable.org/trade_2006/korea/Korea_FTA4.pdf

⁶⁶ "U.S. Military Bills N. Korea 'Potential Threat,' Calls for More Info," *Japan Economic Newswire*, July 15, 2008, URL: http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D91U4QRG0&show_article=1