Preparing for the Future on the Korean Peninsula: OPCON Transition and Northeast Asia Command

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Abstract

The long-standing bilateral U.S.-South Korean agreement to transition wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean forces from Washington to Seoul has been constrained by South Korean nationalism and political factionalism as well as conflicting U.S. desire and reluctance to relinquish primary control. More broadly, the U.S. insists that its Indo-Pacific allies assume greater responsibility for their defense to enable U.S. forces to prioritize defense of the first island chain, including Taiwan. This has triggered conflicting recommendations for reorganizing the U.S. military command structure in the Pacific along with concurrent Korean fears of abandonment and entanglement.

Keywords: Operational control, OPCON, USFK, U.S.-South Korea alliance, Northeast Asia Command, Lee Jae Myung

Introduction

The transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean military forces from the United States to South Korea has bedeviled the alliance for decades. The two countries agreed in 2007 to a long-term plan in which South Korea would assume greater responsibility for its own defense. The path has been fraught with South Korean nationalism and political factionalism, concurrent Korean fears of abandonment and entanglement, evolving U.S. objectives to reduce or redirect its overseas security commitments, and conflicting U.S. desire and reluctance to relinquish primary control.

In the United States, the issue is largely unknown outside a small coterie of government officials, alliance managers, and non-government experts. However, OPCON transition resonates strongly with the South Korean government, legislature, and populace. The South Korea quest for OPCON transition surges during progressive administrations and ebbs during conservative governments. Progressives perceive having their nation's military forces under the control of a foreign general as an affront and depict reclaiming OPCON as regaining national sovereignty and

redressing the imbalanced relationship between South Korea and the United States. Conversely, conservatives fear that changes to the alliance structure could weaken the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea and embolden North Korea to act more provocatively.

The United States insists that South Korea fulfill agreed upon conditions for attaining OPCON transition as well as more broadly assuming greater responsibility for its national defense. While consistent with decades of U.S. efforts to transfer security obligations, it also carries the perceived risk that OPCON transition could potentially enable Seoul to drag the U.S. into an unwanted conflict brought on by "adopting a disproportionate retaliatory response" to North Korean provocations.[1]

The concurrent election of progressive Lee Jae Myung as South Korean president and the return of Donald Trump to the White House have created a unique bilateral alignment that makes OPCON transition a greater possibility than ever before. Monitoring South Korean progress toward achieving the agreed-upon military conditions for OPCON transition remains important. However, more significant is the broader context of the Trump administration's notable departure from traditional, bipartisan U.S. views of its overseas security commitments. Trump's transactional and disdainful view of alliances reflect a greater U.S. willingness to transfer alliance security responsibilities with less regard of potential consequences. This is coupled with a willingness to use economic coercion to browbeat America's international partners into greater security responsibilities while promising less U.S. commitment to its allies.

Beyond navigating the rocks and shoals of OPCON transition, Washington and Seoul must also address differences over South Korean defense roles, modernizing the alliance, the level and focus of U.S. forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula, as well as assess whether the United States should reorganize its command structure in northeast Asia.

Defining Operational Control

The U.S.–South Korea military relationship is the most cohesive command and control structure in the world. The Combined Forces Command (CFC) is an integrated binational command whereby subordinate units are led by either a U.S. commander/South Korean deputy or South Korean commander/U.S. deputy. During armistice (peacetime) conditions, the Chairman of the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) has day-to-day responsibility for defending the country as well as

equipping, training, and maintaining the country's forces. If war on the Korean Peninsula became imminent, the presidents of both countries would approve placing their military forces under the operational control of CFC, which would then become the alliance's warfighting headquarters. The CFC commander would lead combined U.S.–South Korean forces to defend South Korea and defeat the North Korea threat.

Since CFC's inception in 1978, its commander has always been a U.S. four-star general who concurrently serves as commander of United Nations Command (UNC) and U.S. Forces Korea (USFK). The CFC commander remains subordinate to the Military Committee, including the chairmen of both nations' Joint Chiefs of Staff—which provides strategic guidance, direction, and oversight—as well as the National Command Authorities (NCA) of both countries, including the Secretary/Minister of Defense and both presidents.

After wartime OPCON transition, the CFC commander would be a South Korean general with a U.S. general as deputy commander. The U.S. general would continue to serve as commander of UNC and USFK. The South Korean CFC commander would remain subordinate to the binational Military Committee and the NCA of both countries. As such, contrary to popular misperception of South Korean progressives, Seoul would not have "regained" command of its forces nor national sovereignty since it had not previously ceded either.

Contrary to the fears of South Korean conservatives, OPCON transition does not by itself lead to an "unzipping of the alliance." As part of the existing OPCON agreement, the United States has promised to provide "bridging capabilities" to assist in transition and "enduring capabilities" after OPCON transition. The second-term Trump administration has promised it will continue to provide "critical but more limited support"[2] though without defining how this might differ from previous agreements. Even after OPCON transition, the U.S. remains inexorably connected to the defense of South Korea by remaining a party to the 1953 mutual defense treaty, its continuing responsibilities as Commander of UNC, and the continuing presence of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula.

Operational Control vs. Operational Command

A potentially contentious issue for the American public and the U.S. Congress after OPCON transition would be placing U.S. troops under a foreign commander. However, it should be emphasized that U.S. troops

would be under foreign operational *control*, but not foreign *command*. The seemingly slight difference is significant since the presidents of both countries always retain command of their forces, even if they are placed under operational control of another country. Even today, South Korean forces would not be under U.S. command in wartime, but rather under its operational control and the CFC commander remains subordinate to both the U.S. and South Korean National Command Authorities.

Presidential Decision Directive 25, signed by President Bill Clinton in May 1994, delineated the difference between command and operational control of U.S. forces. The document underscores that the "President retains and will never relinquish command authority over U.S. forces. However, as Commander-in-Chief, the President has the authority to place U.S. forces under the operational control of a foreign commander."[3] The directive explains that command "constitutes the authority to issue orders covering every aspect of military operations and administration…. The chain of command from the President to the lowest U.S. commander in the field remains inviolate." Operational control, on the other hand, is a subset of command. It is "given for a specific time frame or mission and includes the authority to assign tasks to U.S. forces already deployed by the President, and assign tasks to U.S. units led by U.S. officers." However, the foreign commander cannot "change the mission or deploy U.S. forces outside the area of responsibility agreed to by the President, separate units, divide their supplies, administer discipline, promote anyone, or change their internal organization."[4]

U.S. forces have been placed under the operational control of foreign commanders since the Revolutionary War, including in World War I, World War II, Operation Desert Storm, and NATO operations. In all cases, U.S. commanders "maintain[ed] the capability to report separately to higher U.S. military authorities, as well as the UN commander…. The U.S. reserves the right to terminate participation at any time and to take whatever actions it deems necessary to protect U.S. forces if they are endangered."[5]

The Long History of OPCON Transition

U.S. military forces arrived on the Korean Peninsula in September 1945 to accept the Japanese surrender south of the 38th parallel and serve as the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) until 1948. During the time, the U.S. exercised OPCON over the Korean national police, constabulary, and coast guard. In August 1948, after the formal

establishment of South Korea, President Rhee Syngman and the U.S. commander signed an executive agreement "whereby the South Korean government would gradually assume command of their security forces," though the U.S. retained OPCON until the last occupation forces left Korea in 1949. After the North Korean invasion of the South in June 1950, Rhee transferred OPCON to the United Nations Command, ending the short period when Seoul had full OPCON over its military forces.[6]

Following the 1953 Armistice, and as a condition for ratifying the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty and keeping some U.S. forces in South Korea, Rhee accepted the November 17, 1954 "Agreed Minute" to the treaty. It stated South Korean forces would remain "under the operational control of the United Nations Command while that command has responsibilities for the defense of the Republic of Korea, unless after consultation it is agreed that our mutual and individual interest would best be served by a change."[7] In 1978, the bilateral U.S.-South Korea Combined Forces Command was created and assumed OPCON of South Korean forces from United Nations Command. In 1994, CFC transferred armistice (peacetime) OPCON of South Korean forces to Seoul, while retaining wartime OPCON.

During the 2002 South Korean presidential campaign, Roh Moo-hyun capitalized on prevalent anti-American public sentiment due, in part, to the tragic deaths of two schoolgirls caused by a U.S. military vehicle. As a candidate, Roh declared, "What's wrong with being anti-American?"[8] As president, he pushed for OPCON transition, declaring that the country would become "a truly independent military power" only by reclaiming wartime command.[9] Secretary of Defense Donald Rumseld wrote to subordinates in December 2002 that "rather than pushing back" against Roh's request to review the military relationship "we should accept it as a good idea." Rumsfeld was receptive to the idea of reducing the U.S. military footprint in South Korea and "using the country as a lily pad to reinforce in the event of a conflict initiated by North Korea [or to] have our forces there stop being so Korea-centric and instead be regionally oriented."[10]

Rumsfeld later told Roh, "You are pushing on an open door," which Richard Lawless, Rumsfeld's top official on Korea policy interpreted as, "We are ready tomorrow (for the transfer.)"[11] But Rumsfeld's willingness to reduce U.S. forces in Korea triggered a South Korean backlash due to fears of weakening defenses against North Korea, a reduction of the U.S. security commitment, and even that Washington might reduce its forces

as a prelude to a U.S. attack on North Korea.[12] Roh's prime minister requested Washington not remove its forces until tensions with North Korea over its nuclear forces were resolved."[13]

In 2007, President Roh again requested that the United States return wartime OPCON as a means of regaining South Korean national sovereignty and pride by "overcoming the nation's psychological dependence on the United States."[14] The U.S. accepted Roh's appeal, and both nations agreed to the Strategic Transition Plan that would dissolve the CFC and replace it with two separate, parallel commands—a Korean command under the South Korean JCS and a supporting U.S. Korea Command. After transition of wartime OPCON scheduled for April 2012, the Chairman of the South Korean JCS would command all South Korean forces and be responsible for the country's defense during both peace and war.

The planned dissolution of CFC was dangerously ill-advised because it violated the key military precept of unity of command during hostilities. The ability of a single commander to direct multi-service forces from two countries ensures unity of mission and achievement of objectives. Replacing a single integrated command with two parallel commands risked seriously degrading U.S. and South Korean deterrent and war-fighting capabilities. Delaying or overturning the transition became a quest for conservative South Korean legislators and former military officials, as well as both the subsequent conservative Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations.

The Bush and Obama Administrations sought to maintain the original OPCON plan and assess the situation closer to the deadline. The transition plan included an integrated assessment and certification process to ensure South Korean security was not jeopardized. To allay Korean concerns, Washington pledged that its military capabilities, including air combat and strategic intelligence assets, would remain after the OPCON transition.

In June 2010, the United States acceded to President Lee Myung-bak's request for delaying the planned 2012 reversion of wartime OPCON until December 2015. In April 2014, President Barack Obama and President Park Geun-hye agreed to a second postponement. More significantly, Washington and Seoul agreed to shift from a time-based transition to a conditions-based transition. The 2015 Condition-based Operational Control Transition Plan (COTP) stipulated three primary prerequisites for OPCON transfer:

1. The South Korean armed forces must have acquired requisite military and command means to be able to lead the combined U.S.-South Korean forces;
2. to have sufficiently developed indigenous missile defense and preemptive attack capabilities against North Korean nuclear and missile threats; and
3. the security environment must have improved due to complete or significant North Korean denuclearization.[15]

Progress toward these conditions and the more extensive Combined Mission Essential Task List is to be evaluated in three phases - Initial Operational Capability (IOC), Full Operational Capability (FOC), and Full Mission Capability (FMC). IOC certifies the ability of South Korea to exercise wartime OPCON authority through a South Korean 4-star general. FOC tests the capability of the South Korean commander to manage the bilateral U.S. and South Korean military forces. FMC tests the material conditions of the South Korean military to perform all its possible missions.[16]

The progressive Moon Jae-in administration was largely a replay of Roh Moo-hyun's quest for OPCON transition. Finding a seemingly receptive environment with the first Trump administration's eagerness to transfer security responsibilities to allies, Moon pushed for OPCON transition during his five-year term. The 2017 Trump-Moon post summit communique included an agreement to "expeditiously enable the conditions-based transfer of wartime operational control" and Seoul's commitment to acquire critical capabilities. Subsequent bilateral Security Consultative Meeting statements outlined plans to achieve initial operational capability (IOC) certification in 2019 and Full Operational Capability (FOC) in 2020. The two sides reaffirmed their commitment that "all conditions of the mutually agreed COTP must be fully met before wartime OPCON transition to the F-CFC (Future Combined Forces Command)."[17] The Moon administration overplayed its hand by appearing overly eager to prematurely certify progress towards OPCON transition. U.S. officials worried that necessary conditions would not be met to the detriment of alliance deterrence against North Korea. Despite the Trump administration's interest in Seoul assuming greater defense responsibility, Washington resisted moving forward rashly.

The Biden administration did not share Moon's enthusiasm for rapid OPCON transition nor Trump's downplaying of alliances. Instead, the

Biden administration prioritized greater coordination amongst Indo-Pacific nations to create a "latticework of strong and mutually reinforcing coalitions" of flexible, overlapping partnerships amongst like-minded democracies to address regional security, technology, and economic challenges.[18] The election of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration returned a conservative administration wary of any action that risked weakening the alliance in the face of escalating North Korean capabilities and provocative behavior.

Renewed Advocacy for OPCON Transition

The election of a progressive South Korean president coinciding with a second Trump administration has aligned those in both countries who advocate OPCON transition but for vastly different, even contradictory reasons. South Koreans seek greater autonomy from the United States and to be less susceptible to Washington's security demands. Conversely, the Trump administration seeks to reduce U.S. responsibilities and perhaps its military footprint in South Korea while pushing Seoul to acquiesce to integrating itself into American plans to contain and confront Chinese actions against Taiwan.

In 2021, future president Lee Jae Myung echoed his progressive predecessors by asking: "What sovereign nation entrusts wartime command of its military to another country?"[19] Later as president, Lee continued to describe OPCON transition in sovereignty terms, "Self-reliant national defense is the most basic of basics amid the unstable international situation. [South Korea], with the world's fifth-strongest military, cannot be unable to defend itself."[20] In August 2025, the Lee administration released a five-year policy roadmap calling for the return of OPCON by 2030 during Lee's term. The government indicated it would develop an implementation plan in coordination with Washington while enhancing the South Korean military's command and control capabilities.[21]

Joint U.S.-South Korea statements following the Trump-Lee summit in October 2025 and bilateral defense meetings pledged commitment toward OPCON transition with Seoul pledging to "*accelerate* efforts to strengthen its military capabilities necessary to lead the combined conventional defense against [North Korea]."[22] During the November 2025 Security Consultative Meeting, the two sides reaffirmed that OPCON transition should "only occur once all [agreed upon] conditions…are met" but sought to *expedite* efforts for Seoul to acquire

the necessary conditions to "pursue the certification of Full Operational Capability (FOC) of the future Combined Forces Command headquarters in 2026."[23]

General Xavier Brunson, commander of UNC/CFC/USFK, emphasized that adhering to conditions is more important than transferring OPCON during a certain time period, "The main thing here is the conditions. We cannot say we're going to slide away from the conditions just so that we can get this done in time."[24] Yet, General Brunson told Congress that the allies have submitted a road map to the Pentagon to meet the required conditions "not later than the second quarter of fiscal year 2029."[25] However, the Lee administration may find it is pushing on an open door since the Trump administration seems more willing than previous U.S. administrations to lower the conditions-based requirements in order to reduce U.S. responsibilities in Korea. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth commented in May 2026 that, "It's a breath of fresh air for an ally to want to take more control more quickly. That is an instinct we want to continue to incentivize."[26]

Is South Korea Ready for OPCON?

The South Korean military is a highly capable force with advanced weapons and extensive training. South Korean military spending has increased and Seoul has devoted considerable resources and effort to improve its capabilities. However, while substantial progress has been made, significant deficiencies remain in the country's Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR), its ability to conduct joint and combined operations, and to push tasking to U.S. or multinational forces. These shortfalls raise doubts about the viability of South Korea receiving wartime OPCON as quickly as President Lee is pressing for.

In July 2025, South Korean military officials told incoming Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-back that the South Korean armed forces still fall short of the operational benchmarks needed for full command responsibility—especially in critical areas such as command and control, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Seoul remains heavily reliant on U.S. intelligence assets and battlefield command systems. Military experts assess that the military would need to dramatically increase its munitions stockpile and augment logistical capabilities to conduct autonomous wartime operations.

Tempestuous Time for the Alliance

While the biggest threat to the alliance remains North Korea, the biggest challenge to the alliance now comes from the United States. Donald Trump has long held negative views towards alliances, seeing them in transactional terms rather than the long-standing bipartisan consensus that alliances are in America's strategic interests as security force multipliers. Having bullied Seoul into a disadvantageous trade deal that violated the U.S.-South Korea free trade agreement and the U.S. Constitution, the Trump administration is demanding more and promising less to its security and economic partners. The U.S. pressed South Korea to increase defense expenditures to 5% of its GDP and Trump advocates that South Korea increase its annual payment to offset the cost of U.S. forces stationed in South Korea. During Trump's first term, he sought to literally make a profit off American's sons and daughters in uniform stationed in Korea and Japan. More recently, he called for Seoul to increase annual contribution from $1 billion to $10 billion, claiming that South Korea "would be happy to do it."[27]

The U.S. has called for "modernization of the alliance," the new moniker given to the long-standing bilateral debate of "strategic flexibility." [28] Washington promotes a structural realignment of the bilateral defense relationship in which the potential invasion of Taiwan should be given precedence over other dangers in the Indo-Pacific region and that Seoul would assume greater responsibility to counter the North Korea threat. Doing so would enable to the U.S. to reorient the primary mission of U.S. forces in South Korea toward the China threat and reduce U.S. force levels in South Korea.

Growing Doubts of U.S. Credibility as an Ally

The dangers of international security threats that were highlighted in the first Trump term have been muted in the second term in favor of prioritizing economic objectives. Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) described North Korea as a ruthless dictatorship which threatened the American homeland by seeking "the capability to kill millions of Americans with nuclear weapons." [29] The first Trump administration declared that Pyongyang's determination to destabilize regions and threaten Americans and its allies was a global threat that required a global response. Washington vowed to achieve complete denuclearization and respond with overwhelming force to any North Korean aggression.

Gone from the 2025 second-term Trump NSS are the damning description of the heinous nature of the Chinese, Russian, and North Korea regimes and the numerous security threats that they pose to U.S. and allied interests.[30] A media report quoting several administration officials indicated Trump directed the softening of the NSS language of China being a security threat and to adopt a more conciliatory tone.[31] North Korea and the U.S. objective of denuclearization were not mentioned once in the 2025 document, their first omission from an NSS in over a decade. Instead, Trump has repeatedly extolled his "great relationship" with and desire to meet again with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.[32] Similarly, the U.S.-South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group joint statement of December 2025 omitted *all* references to North Korea. The NCG statement during the Biden administration warned that any North Korean nuclear attack would be unacceptable and result in the end of the regime, but no such language appeared in the latest version.[33]

To respond to Indo-Pacific security threats, the first Trump administration NSS pledged to redouble its commitment to established alliances and partnerships, seek to expand relationships with new partners that shared U.S. values of respect for sovereignty, fair and reciprocal trade, and the rule of law, and maintain a strong military presence in the region. By contrast, the second-term Trump NSS of November 2025 directed a retrenchment to more narrowly defined American objectives. The document repudiated past American idealism in which the U.S. would sally forth in defense of other nations' democracy and sovereignty. There was no mention of the U.S. defense of treaty ally South Korea. The 2025 NSS accurately highlights the threats to Taiwan and the South China Sea but fails to identify China as the culprit. The concerns are framed as economic and trade challenges rather than as threats to defending the sovereignty of democratic countries that share American values and principles.

To its credit, the 2025 NSS document vowed to "strengthen U.S. and allied capabilities to block attempts to occupy Taiwan by linking maritime security issues along the First Island Chain."[34] However, there is a far greater focus on demanding that allies share and shift the burden of defense, with the statement that "...the American military cannot, and should not have to, do this alone." The document proclaims that "the days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over" and that America's allies and partners must assume primary responsibility

for their regions and contribute far more to collective defense while the U.S. serves as "convener and supporter."[35]

The Trump administration's focus on defending the First Island Chain while neglecting any mention of deterring North Korea or defending South Korea has raised concerns of a repeat of the U.S.-declared Acheson Line, that many believe convinced Stalin to give the green light to Kim Il-sung to invade South Korea, igniting the Korean War.[36] Downplaying the importance of U.S. defense of South Korea is at odds with UNC/CFC/USFK General Xavier Brunson's depiction of South Korea as a vital cog in U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy for deterring and confronting regional threats including China. He used a reoriented Indo-Pacific map placing East at the top to emphasize the strategic geographic location of South Korea and U.S. forces stationed there to conduct military strikes against North Korea, China, and Russia, including China's Northern Theater Army and Northern Fleet as well as the Russian fleet in Vladivostok.[37]

Prioritizers - Sheep in Wolf's Clothing

The prioritizer faction of the Trump administration downplays the importance of the U.S. defense of South Korea. Elbridge Colby, the U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, asserted in a 2024 interview prior to returning to government, that the U.S. "shouldn't keep its forces hostage on the Korean Peninsula for a problem that's not central to American interests," adding that the [OPCON] handover should happen "as quickly as possible."[38] Colby emphasized that it would be "an imprudent assumption [that] the United States is going to break its spear fighting North Korea."[39] He argued that South Korea should "take primary, essentially overwhelming, responsibility for its own self-defense [since] the fundamental fact is that North Korea is not a primary threat to the U.S. It would not be rational to lose multiple American cities to just deal with North Korea."[40] Therefore, South Korean security "should not depend on trusting the U.S. to sacrifice five American cities to do something to North Korea."[41]

More broadly, while prioritizers depict their advocacy for downgrading U.S. defense commitments to NATO, South Korea, and other allies in order to enhance the defense of Taiwan, Colby commented that Taiwan "isn't itself of existential importance to America."[42] During his 2025 confirmation hearings, Colby commented, "I believe the costs of explicitly committing to Taiwan's defense outweigh its benefits." To

maintain current policy that the U.S. has deep interests in Taiwan's security "poses serious risks on a number of fronts" such as inflaming relations with Beijing and offering a pretext for military action.[43]

Schrödinger's Alliance

U.S. policy changes during Trump's second term have strained relations with Seoul. There are now strongly divergent assessments of the vitality of the alliance and overall relationship. The aggressive second-term U.S. approach on tariffs alienated U.S. allies and partners who now see Washington as a more immediate threat to their economic well-being than Beijing. The protectionist economic tactics will hinder Washington's strategic objective of rallying an international coalition against China' predatory business practices and security transgressions.

Trump's demands that South Korea and other allies send warships to reopen the Strait of Hormuz followed by harsh invective against Seoul's reluctance to do so exacerbated underlying stresses in the partnership. As a result, allies now perceive a price tag for America's adherence to alliance treaty commitments and severe punishment for any aversion to pay it. The U.S. may have degraded military deterrence by undermining the perception—in the minds of both allies and opponents—that Washington is a dependable security partner. Japanese, [44] South Korean, and Taiwanese [45] public opinion polls show decreased trust in the U.S. commitment to their countries' defense under the Trump administration.

America's War with Iran Exacerbates Indo-Pacific Allied Concerns

Prior to returning to government in the second Trump term, Elbridge Colby argued that the Middle East was a "tertiary region" and that "there was good reason to believe that Washington, Tel Aviv, and their associates can deter Iran from transgressing their vital interests even if Tehran gets a nuclear weapon."[46] Colby recommended that "U.S. forces everywhere in the world need to be prioritized for dealing with China, including in Europe, in the U.S. and U.S. Forces Korea need to be available to assist in that effort."[47]

America' attacks on Iran, like Ukraine's defense against the Russian invasion, underscores the high rate of expenditure of expensive offensive and defensive missiles during modern warfare. The conflicts revealed that U.S. stocks of such missiles are woefully inadequate and that the U.S. ability to produce replacements is severely constrained and will take years to replenish missile magazines.

The United States has been forced to divert military units and critically short munitions from other theaters to support operations in the Middle East. Doing so has weakened deterrence against the North Korean and Chinese threats, signaled a constrained American ability to fight or deter two simultaneous major conflicts, downplayed the prioritization of the Indo-Pacific as the primary U.S. security objective, and eroded the credibility of the U.S. commitment and ability to defend its Indo-Pacific allies. The inability of the world's most powerful military to subjugate a second- or third-tier military force raises serious doubts about the American ability to defend against China.

As a result of military actions against Iran, the United States has stretched its resources and accepted risk to its deterrent posture in the Indo-Pacific:

Indo-Pacific Units Diverted

- The USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier and its strike group were diverted from military exercises in the South China Sea to sail to the Middle East. Last year, the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier had to similarly divert from the Indo-Pacific due to the previous U.S. attack on Iran;[48]
- The USS Tripoli amphibious assault ship and the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit were redeployed from Japan;
- Components of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and Patriot systems were moved from South Korea to the Middle East. President Lee Jae Myung said his government had expressed "an opposing view" on moving U.S. assets from Korea but to no avail.[49]

Munitions Stockpiles Depleted

- The Pentagon launched 150 THAAD air-defense missiles in last year's 12-day war against Iran and an additional 150 in this year's conflict out of a total inventory of 534. There have been no new deliveries of THAAD interceptors since August 2023, and none are expected until April 2027;[50]
- The U.S. reportedly used $5.6 billion worth of munitions during the first two days of this year's military assault on Iran;[51]

- In the first few weeks, the U.S. launched over 1,000 Patriot air defense missiles but only purchased 600 last year;[52]
- Washington redeployed almost the entire U.S. inventory of stealthy JASSM-ER air-launched cruise missiles to the Middle East leaving only 425 JASSM-ER (18%) for other contingencies. The U.S. launched more than 1,000 JASSM-ERs during the first four weeks of the war. Lockheed Martin is scheduled to produce only 396 JASSM-ER in 2026;[53]
- The U.S. has fired hundreds of Tomahawk cruise missiles during the attack on Iran out of a total inventory of 4,000 Tomahawks. RTX Corp. produced 100 new Tomahawk missiles in 2025[54] and only 57 will be going to the Pentagon this fiscal year. At this rate, replacing the depleted stock would take more than five years.[55]
- Japan's $2.35 billion order for 400 Tomahawk missiles could be delayed as the U.S. depletes its stockpiles.[56]

Is OPCON Transition Enough? Conceptualizing Broader Realignment

Successfully resolving the contentious OPCON transition does not necessarily determine the optimum way for the U.S. and its allies to counter not only the North Korean threat, but also the broader China menace to the Indo-Pacific. Perhaps one can take advice from Dwight D. Eisenhower who postulated, "If a problem cannot be solved, enlarge it," meaning a seemingly intractable problem may be better envisioned in a broader context.

Government officials and outside experts have long recommended reorganizing the single U.S. military command in the Pacific region. Advocates for a new command structure cite the enhanced military capabilities of opponents, increased cooperation amongst the North Korea-China-Russia axis, greater cooperation amongst regional democracies, the potential for simultaneous Korean and Taiwanese conflicts, the tyranny of distance of the vast region, and the span of control problems for a single command whose geographic area of responsibility (AOR) is literally half of the globe.

While there is some expert consensus on the need to merge U.S. Forces Korea and U.S. Forces Japan into a single Northeast Asia Command (NEACOM) for a more efficient U.S. response to the North Korean threat, there are differences over the new command's authorities, geographic AOR, and relationship with U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM).

The new NEACOM could be a new regional sub-unified command that exercises operational control over all forward deployed U.S. forces in Japan and South Korea but would remain subordinate to PACOM.[57] The command would be focused on North Korea. Some experts suggest that creating NEACOM might stimulate discussion to establish additional unified/sub-unified commands to cover the operational flanks in the Southwest Pacific area and South Asia.[58]

Others envision creating a new U.S. NEACOM responsible for the region surrounding the Korean Peninsula as well as a parallel Combined U.S.-South Korea NEACOM that would oversee the warfighting mission of the CFC to defeat North Korea, integrate alliance counter-nuclear and all-domain operations, deter intervention by China or Russia, and coordinate U.S.-South Korean alliance support to PACOM military actions throughout the Asia-Indo-Pacific region. The bilateral NEACOM would be co-chaired by the U.S. commander of NEACOM and the South Korean Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. PACOM would remain responsible for the defense of Taiwan and the broader Indo-Pacific (South China Sea, Oceania, South Asia).[59] The U.S. and allied forces in South Korea and Japan, while focused primarily on defending South Korea, could concurrently deter aggression along the First Island Chain and support contingencies involving Japan, Taiwan and key maritime approaches.[60]

Beyond the Korean Peninsula

Others advocate a NEACOM more broadly covering China, Japan, the Korean Peninsula, and Taiwan which would not be subordinate to PACOM but rather a separate combatant command with equal status. Proponents argue that northeast Asia hosts "five of the six largest militaries in the world and [is] a subregion too critical to the United States to be subsumed under an umbrella-like regional command including the entire Asian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific."[61]

Even more broadly, the existing PACOM could be divided into two equal theater commands. The newly created command would be based in Japan and, in addition to northeast Asia, would also be responsible for South Asia and the Indian Ocean. PACOM would prioritize contingency plans for Taiwan conflicts and refining mutual defense plans with allies in East Asia.[62]

To address the PACOM span of control problem and fragmented nature of the Indo-Pacific's alliances and security partnerships, others

advocate using a transformed United Nations Command as the means to create a NATO-like structure in the Indo-Pacific. The existing Combined Forces Command would remain the primary entity to combat North Korea. However, it is argued, returning the UNC into a multinational warfighting organization would enable it to "organize free world military and humanitarian contributions, ready to intervene and reinforce the CFC to repel authoritarian aggression and return peace and security to the area." The UNC headquarters could also return to Japan where it originally resided.[63]

In one of the most extensive recommendations, an analyst proposed a new security architecture to synchronize all U.S. and allied forces in the PACOM theater that integrated U.S. allies—including Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea. Rather than creating a new command, the initiative would develop a comprehensive theater-wide strategy as well as harmonize allied defense-industrial bases into a combined military production plan, including shipbuilding and munitions production. Allies in disparate sub-regions would be integrated as components into a regional alliance network whose combined capabilities would be organized to deter aggression from China and North Korea.[64]

Historic Precedent for Two Commands

Advocates for splitting PACOM highlight that the vast Pacific region was previously divided between military commands, including during World War II when Admiral Chester Nimitz and General Douglas MacArthur oversaw two separate commands. After the war, the National Security Act of 1947 and the Unified Command Plan established the U.S. Pacific Command and U.S. Far East Command (FECOM), the latter responsible for occupation duties in Japan, Korea below the 38th parallel, and other recently liberated areas throughout East Asia. Pacific Command (PACOM) was also established to maintain security over all other Pacific areas not assigned to FECOM. In 1956, the United States deactivated Far East Command and transferred its missions and responsibilities to U.S. Pacific Command. USFK and U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) were created as sub-unified commands under PACOM the same year.[65]

In 1974, the Chiefs of Staff of the Army and Air Force "proposed disestablishing PACOM, making the Pacific Fleet a specified command, and creating four new unified commands: western Pacific, eastern Asia, northeast Asia, and southwest Pacific." Northeast Asia Command would have been responsible for Japan, Korea, and Okinawa.[66] However,

Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger decided to retain PACOM but, in the event of war, the Secretary could decide whether to activate a separate Northeast Asia Command or other regional commands as necessary.[67] In 1997, USFK proposed to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs the establishment of a unified command responsible for Northeast Asia citing the high tensions in the region and an overtaxed PACOM responsible for an overly expansive area.[68]

Assessing the Proposals

Cumulatively, the proposals provide contradictory recommendations on carving out northeast Asia as a separate command in order to reduce PACOM's span of control limitations, but which runs counter to advocacy for treating North Korea and China as inter-connected threats that cut across sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific.

General Xavier Brunson's 'east-up map' article[69] underscores the geographic proximity of South Korea to North Korea, China, and Russia which enables forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula to conduct military attacks against any or all opponents. Brunson also highlights the need for closer military cooperation amongst South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. As such, would a NEACOM limited to North Korean responsibilities hinder cross-command coordination with PACOM on Taiwan or southeast Asian contingencies?

There is a growing consensus that Korean and Taiwanese contingencies could occur simultaneously, leading to a regional conflagration, requiring the involvement of South Korea, Japan, and other allies and partners in integrated military operations throughout the Pacific region. Both South Korea and Japan are developing greater power projection capabilities and, in recent years, have restored previous bilateral cooperation.

Given those circumstances, should NEACOM also assume responsibility for Taiwan from PACOM? Would creating a separate unified command that is *not* subordinate to PACOM help or hinder coordination on U.S. responses to two concurrent conflicts? Since U.S. forces in Japan, including Okinawa, and Guam would be critical follow-on forces for both Korean and Taiwan contingencies, which command would allocate and prioritize those forces for responding to pending or ongoing crises?

Any command structure will be hindered by the restrictions that Japanese Self-Defense Forces operate under. The U.S. is upgrading USFJ

from an administrative command for peacetime coordination between U.S. and Japanese forces into a joint force headquarters with greater warfighting and operational responsibilities. Similarly, Japan has established a Joint Operations Command to exercise unified command of the ground, air, and naval branches of the Japan Self-Defense Forces.[70] While both are significant improvements to the U.S. and Japanese command structures, there is still no joint combined command of U.S. and Japanese forces as exists in Korea with Combined Forces Command.

Combining U.S. commands in South Korea and Japan, even without incorporating local forces, could be problematic for both allies. Given historic animosities, Seoul would be particularly sensitive to any perceptions of linking its defense to that of Japan or subordinating its national interests to those of Japan, particularly if NEACOM headquarters were in Japan. Both allies may also harbor concerns that subordinating U.S. forward deployed forces stationed in their countries under one command could increase the risk of entrapping them in an unwanted conflict.[71]

Recommendations for Successful OPCON Transition

1. **Maintain conditions-based OPCON transfer.** Returning wartime OPCON to South Korea is a question of when, not if. But prematurely transitioning to a South Korean command of CFC before Seoul has ameliorated deficiencies in C4ISR and joint/combined operations could have detrimental consequences in wartime. Both countries should adhere to fulfilling the necessary military capability conditions and hold the line against politically driven decisions.

2. **Redress deficiencies in military capabilities.** South Korea and the U.S. should have secure communications between their units down to battalion level for ground forces and individual ships and planes for navy and air force units. South Korea should implement sufficient communications across its military services without requiring U.S. communications as an intermediary amongst their own services. Seoul should ensure it has munitions and logistics stocks for the first 60 days of conflict, including offensive and air defense missiles, artillery ammunition and POL (petroleum, oil, and lubricants). To assume command of CFC,

the South Korean military should establish communication and coordination means with the militaries of other countries that would be participating under UN Command.

3. **Delineate the respective roles, missions, and authorities of CFC and UNC after OPCON transfer.** The relationship amongst UNC, CFC, and USFK is seamless when the same general commands all three entities. OPCON transfer could lead to uncertainty over the chain of command, particularly of the U.N. sending state forces during wartime.

4. **Define the future of the alliance.** While North Korea must remain the predominant threat focus of the alliance, the allies should also focus on security challenges over the horizon. As South Korea continues to improve its military capabilities, Seoul should be called upon to assume greater responsibilities in regional and global security challenges. South Korea could play a larger role in ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. The country's economic vitality is dependent on safe passage of foreign energy supplies, which are threatened by China's expansionary actions.

South Korea Must Look Beyond the Horizon

Through successive Administrations, the United States sought to create coalitions of like-minded Indo–Pacific nations to defend democratic values, uphold international laws, and rebuff Chinese encroachment on the sovereignty of its neighbors. As part of this effort, Washington has long urged South Korea to assume a greater security role beyond the Korean Peninsula, as well as more forthrightly defend the rules-based international order and values common to democracies. When the principles, values, and sovereignty of Indo-Pacific democracies are under attack, one would hope South Korea would, on its own, undertake actions to defend them.

Instead, Seoul resisted U.S. entreaties and sought to remain on the sidelines by refraining from criticizing Chinese actions or doing the minimal amount to satisfy Washington. South Korea pursued a risk-averse hedging policy in which it tried to balance its relations with its security guarantor (the United States) and its largest trading partner (China). This fear of Chinese economic reprisals led to years of South Korean conciliatory policies that avoided confrontation, conflict, and criticism.

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

There is a disparity between South Korea's stated aspirations and the actions it is willing to undertake. Seoul seeks the prestige of a global player while avoiding corresponding responsibilities. By self-*isolating,* South Korea self-*marginalized* itself, reacting rather than influencing the regional environment. One must be on the court to be in the game.

South Korea is economically dependent on a free and open Indo–Pacific, including freedom of navigation—99.7 percent of the country's trade volume is transported by sea.[72] Despite this, Seoul repeatedly demurred when asked by the United States to criticize China's expansionism in Southeast Asian waters and bullying tactics against Taiwan.

Seoul Needs to Play a Larger Regional Security Role

While remaining predominantly focused on the North Korean threat, South Korea has a formidable, highly capable military to shoulder greater responsibilities for addressing regional security challenges. Seoul should assess how to contribute to ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea as well as potential contingencies in the Taiwan Strait.

South Korea exists today because 70 years ago an international coalition defended it against attack and guaranteed its sovereignty. South Korean reluctance to defend another democracy in Taiwan could have significant repercussions for its alliance with Washington and relationships with UN sending states.

South Korea has global interests and needs to act like it, augmenting its efforts to defend them. Regional security threats require a multi-layered regional response. South Korea and Japan should enlarge their regional security roles, further strengthen trilateral security coordination with the United States, and accelerate efforts for integrating partners into collective regional security networks.

What the U.S. Should Do

South Korea, Japan, the South China Sea, and Taiwan are of vital economic and geopolitical importance to the United States. A defeat in any of those areas would have a devastating effect on U.S. and allied strategic interests and fundamentally alter the regional, if not global, military, diplomatic, and economic balance of power. The Trump Administration's strong criticism of America's allies, emphasis on the cost of deploying U.S. forces overseas, and downplaying of theater-level threats has increased

South Korean trepidation that the U.S. will not fulfill its defense treaty obligations.

Even a perceived degradation in U.S. commitment to defend its allies could have a detrimental effect on regional security and stability by weakening deterrence against the North Korean and Chinese threats, emboldening opponents to test American resolve, and undermining efforts to rally other Asian nations to resist Chinese demands.

That must never happen. The U.S. should make absolutely clear to friend and foe alike that it will defend its allies by continually reaffirming its pledge to respond to any North Korean attack. Washington must maintain the current presidentially and congressionally pledged level of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula as well as sufficient forces in the western Pacific to deter and, if necessary, defeat the Chinese and North Korean threats.

The U.S.–South Korean alliance has been indispensable in achieving Washington's strategic objectives, including maintaining peace and stability in northeast Asia. The U.S. security guarantee to Seoul provided the shield behind which South Korea recovered from the devastation of war to eventually become a beacon of democracy and an indispensable global military, diplomatic, and economic partner.

Conclusion

The Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington DC includes the homage, "Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met." It is a fitting reminder that freedom is not free, that it must be defended. To do so, service members from both countries have stood tirelessly on the ramparts of freedom. As Edmund Burke wrote: "People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf."

Since its inception, the U.S.-South Korea alliance has enjoyed both smooth sailing and intense squalls. Our two countries remained shoulder to shoulder, not only out of tradition and honor, but out of necessity. The North Korean threat remains, with even greater weapons of devastation. For over 70 years, the United States has maintained its pledge, including by putting its sons and daughters in uniform in harm's way as a tangible symbol of its commitment. Alliances are not transactional relationships but instead are based on shared values, principals, and strategic objectives. The value of alliances is not measured in dollars and cents.

Washington needs allies and partners to economically compete with and militarily confront the multi-faceted China threat. Instead, through its comments and actions, Washington has alienated potential collaborators and undermined collective action. Worse still, the United States has exacerbated allied fears of abandonment by raising grave doubts as to whether it will uphold its treaty commitments to defend its allies.

America's war with Iran has shown the difficulty of achieving objectives without international support and willing security partners. As Winston Churchill commented, "There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them."[73]

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