Policy Forum 06-71A: Misunderstandings on the Transfer of Wartime Operational Control

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Essay by Chung-in Moon

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I. Introduction

Chung-in Moon, professor of political science at Yonsei University, writes, "...the most pressing matters of the present are two-fold. One is the stable and effective management of the alliance by

resolving American field officers' grievances, such as the provision of air-to-ground test firing sites as well as a smooth resolution of the return of polluted American military bases. The other is a more in-depth and candid exchange of views on an increasingly divergent common threat perception, namely North Korea, upon which the true future of the ROK-US alliance may hinge."

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II. Essay by Chung-in Moon

- Misunderstandings on the Transfer of Wartime Operational Control
by Chung-in Moon

Seoul's summer is simmering over the issue of the transfer of wartime operational control of Korean troops from the ROK-US Combined Forces Command (CFC) to South Korea. Since the CFC Commander is currently the Commander of U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK), the transfer could mean a fundamental realignment of the wartime allied command structure in which South Korean forces would take a leading role and U.S. forces assume a supporting role. However, negotiations over the transfer of operational control from the U.S. have in fact been underway since 1990 (Roh Tae-woo government), and peacetime operational control was first returned to South Korea in December 1994 (Kim Young-sam government). Subsequently, in 2002, South Korea and the U.S. began discussion regarding the transfer of wartime command within the framework of a new vision for the ROK-U.S. alliance.

Authority over wartime operational control is crucial because it directly relates to the deployment and assignment of combat missions for 650,000 South Korean troops, as well as defining the terms of engagement in wartime. Although it is a matter of national sovereignty for South Koreans, South Korea has delegated its authority to the U.S. on three separate occasions. The first occurred when President Rhee Syngman delegated command and control authority to General MacArthur, the Commander of the United Nations Command (UNC), in July 1950 during the Korean War. Thereafter, President Rhee transferred operational control to the Commander of USFK in 1954 after South Korea and the U.S. signed the Mutual Defense Treaty at the conclusion of the Korean War. The final transfer took place when President Park Chung-hee delegated operational control of Korean troops to the CFC in 1978, which was formed as a way of managing the would-be power vacuum in the wake of Carter's decision to withdraw American troops.

Why then did South Korea delegate its constitutional authority to American commanders? The transfers were designed both to bind the U.S. in times of crises as well as to gain crucial military support, thereby allowing South Korea to mitigate the fear of U.S. abandonment while maximizing its deterrence capability against North Korea. Despite the risk of entrapment, however, the U.S. accommodated such an arrangement to make a credible security commitment to its ally as well as to establish a more effective fighting capability through the combined command structure. Thus, the transfer was mutually beneficial.

However, the Roh Moo-hyun government has been accelerating bilateral negotiations with the U.S. over the re-transfer of wartime operational control, which is to be finally concluded during the ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in October 2006. It has been pursuing the re-transfer in the name of self-reliance, national pride, and normalization of the bilateral alliance. Nevertheless, the groundswell of domestic opposition has proven quite formidable. A coalition of conservative forces comprising the Grand National Party, retired military officers, and concerned citizens have been vehemently calling for an immediate halt to negotiations and the continuation of the existing

combined command structure. They oppose the government decision on five grounds: first, that the transfer is an improper unilateral action that compromises national security in the name of national pride and self-reliance; second, that the transfer will lead to the dissolution of the CFC, the reduction and withdrawal of American forces, and ultimately to the dismantling of the ROK-US alliance; third, that the timing of the transfer is too hasty and rigid; fourth, that the South Korean military is not ready to regain and exercise wartime operational control; and lastly, that the transfer will induce the U.S. not to dispatch its augmentation forces to South Korea in the event of war. Although these claims are valid concerns, they appear to be based on faulty premises and far-fetched rationales. Let's examine each of these accusations.

The decision to negotiate over the transfer was neither an improper action nor the result of a unilateral position on the part of South Korea. Article 74 of the ROK Constitution stipulates that "the President is Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces," and that decisions on war and operational control of Korean troops during war belong to the executive domain. Thus, recovering control is meant to normalize the constitutional mandate of presidential command and control over Korean troops, which had been relinquished for the sake of national security, and return both the responsibility and the directive for war back to the president and ultimately, the people. This is all the more appropriate in today's climate due to the changes in American strategic doctrine that do not guarantee an automatic engagement through the tripwire logic. Since the September 11th tragedy, the U.S. has radically realigned its global military strategy. In light of the Global Posture Review and the doctrine of strategic flexibility, no country is permitted the luxury of fixed American military assets as in the past, and South Korea is no exception. Thus, the return of wartime operational control could be based on the premise of positive sum gains. While it would accommodate the U.S.' strategic flexibility doctrine and help alleviate the American military burden of covering the entire globe, the transfer can also facilitate the strengthening of South Korean forces commensurate to its strategic needs and economic standing.

The transfer of wartime operational control is not likely to lead to the reduction and withdrawal of American forces, the dissolution of the CFC, and ultimately to the demise of the ROK-US alliance. Such a linkage of events requires an enormous leap in logic. The issue of wartime operational control is but one element of an alliance architecture. It does not exhaust the alliance *per se* , but simply concerns the mode of institutionalization of military cooperation between allies. The transfer would involve the transformation of combined command structure into a parallel command as found in Japan. Undoubtedly, the transformation could weaken alliance cohesion, but it would not necessarily trigger a reduction and withdrawal of American forces. What matters most is not the operational mode of military cooperation, but the shared threat perception, mutual interests, and common values between the two nations. As long as the ROK-US mutual defense treaty remains intact, as long as both countries continue robust joint military maneuvers, and as long as South Korea shares in the defense costs for American troops, the bilateral alliance will survive. American disengagement, were it to occur, will result not from a change in the operational mode of the alliance, but from the erosion of common threats, interests, and values.

The timing of the transfer seems neither hasty nor rigid. Despite the heightened tension surrounding the first North Korean nuclear crisis, the Clinton administration's surgical strike plan on the Yongbyon nuclear facilities in the North, and North Korea's verbal threat to make Seoul a sea of fire, the Kim Young-sam government regained peacetime operational control in 1994. In fact, the security situation in 1994 seems much worse than the present because of the high degree of uncertainty during the first nuclear crisis. Moreover, there has been a sixteen-year delay since the transfer process was first deliberated on, and further delay is not justified. Judged on the new American strategic posture, whose over-extended global coverage has made its security commitments increasingly uncertain, it seems prudent to actively prepare for the transfer with a well defined

roadmap for the division of labor between the two countries.

"ROK forces are not prepared for war with North Korea." "They are not even capable of deterring military aggression by the North." These claims by former defense ministers and retired generals seem utterly incomprehensible. More than three decades have elapsed since Park Chung-hee pursued a self-reliant defense (*jaju gukbang*) through force modernization and improvements. If South Korea cannot defend itself, the blame should be directed at their own negligence in public duties as military leaders. This defeatist attitude could even weaken South Korea's deterrence capability by inducing the North to consider military adventurism. Military planners in the North could accept their claims as a *fait accompli* and engage in military provocation by treating the South as a weak counterpart. Contrary to their claims, the ROK forces are not that weak. It has sufficient capability, both in terms of training and equipment, to make operational plans, engage in combat, and coordinate its forces through effective command, control, communication, and intelligence. In view of this, South Korea has sufficient deterrence capability against the North. However, in order to ensure a more formidable deterrence capability, the South would need American support in the areas of C4I, and asymmetric and counter-strategic forces, which the U.S. has willingly agreed to provide.

Finally, it seems difficult to establish causal relationships between the transfer of wartime operational control and the withholding of U.S. augmentation forces. According to Operational Plan 5027, the U.S. is known to have agreed to send significant augmentation forces (690,000 forces, 2,000 war planes, and 160 naval ships) in the event of an all-out North Korean invasion. However, the U.S. decision to send such augmentation forces is not fixed, but varies depending upon overall circumstances. If American engagement in Iraq continues or new conflicts arise elsewhere, it may be unrealistic to expect such a massive scale of augmentation. The deciding factor is not the mode of alliance management (combined vs. parallel command), but the quality of the alliance and the security environment America faces, as the implementation of any American security commitments is subject to the domestic and international milieu surrounding the U.S. Thus, it seems misleading to equate the transfer of wartime operational control with the suspension of additional military support from the U.S.

Regardless of the efficacy of the transfer of wartime operational control, the debate itself has become overly politicized, and no party stands to benefit from the politicization of national security issues. Neither obsession with 'self-reliance' in national defense nor blind adherence to the ROK-US alliance can be a solution. A middle of the road alternative should be sought that wisely synthesizes the strengths of both self-reliance and alliance. Let us keep eye on the progress of negotiations! Let us not derail the entire negotiation process, which only acts to undermine the bilateral alliance by precipitating a crisis of trust and possibly lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of the critics' worst concerns. If they are not satisfied with the outcome, they can change and amend them through public protest or by winning the presidential election next year. But the most pressing matters of the present are two-fold. One is the stable and effective management of the alliance by resolving American field officers' grievances, such as the provision of air-to-ground test firing sites as well as a smooth resolution of the return of polluted American military bases. The other is a more in-depth and candid exchange of views on an increasingly divergent common threat perception, namely North Korea, upon which the true future of the ROK-US alliance may hinge.

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