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# Policy Forum 00-02: Korea 2000



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# Nautilus Institute: Policy Forum Online

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## Make South Korea the Real Party to North Korea

By Indong Oh, Korea 2000

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## I. Introduction

The following article is by Indong Oh, M.D., a fellow and director of Korea-2000, a Los Angeles-based research council on Korean unification. Dr. Oh argues that the continuance of US wartime operational control over ROK forces under the Combined Forces Command hinders the realization of ROK-DPRK dialogue. He calls for shifting the emphasis in peace talks away from US-DPRK bilateral talks and towards direct inter-Korean negotiations.

## II. Essay by Indong Oh

Two issues have recently emerged in the Korean peninsula, namely the massacre of hundreds of South Korean civilians by U.S. soldiers during the Korean War, and S. Korean soldiers who became the victims of exposure to the highly toxic defoliants used in late 1960s along the southern edge of the demilitarized zone (DMZ). The former is being investigated by the U.S. in cooperation with the South Korean authorities. In the latter case however, S. Korean civic groups already charge that the U.S. is responsible for the victims because its army did not have any authority in military operations on its own. Depending upon how the U.S. handle these cases, they may trigger tension and increase South Korean peoples' resentment against the U.S. As these incidents are examined, they bring up larger questions on the general issue of U.S.-S. Korea relations, specifically on military affairs. Up until late 1994, operational control of S. Korean Armed Forces during war or peacetime had been in the hands of the commander of U.S. Forces Korea. Accordingly, any military actions of S. Korean armed forces had been decided and conducted under the direction of the U.S., and therefore any resultant mishaps on the side of South Korean armed forces can be blamed on the U.S. military authority. This peculiarly paradoxical and subservient relationship of S. Korea to the U.S. was once again evidenced as recently as in the last June. It simply started with the North-South gunboat confrontation in the Yellow Sea; however as war preparedness rose, the U.S.-S. Korean military arrangement kicked in, whereby beyond Defcon 3 the U.S. is supposed to command the U.S.-S. Korean Combined Forces. With flurried Korean media reports that U.S. fighter planes, reconnaissance crafts, submarines, and a nuclear carrier were approaching the Korean peninsula, S. Korea's identity seemed to fade away from the scene, with the U.S. becoming the main player with N. Korea in the hostile theatre. This reflects well the intricate inter- and cross-relationships between the two Koreas and the U.S. It actually shows the limit of S. Korea's capacity to deal with its northern half on military and political fronts.

Not long ago the U.S. secured a moratorium on N. Korea's missile tests in exchange for further relaxation of economic sanctions and an improved diplomatic relationship. Returning the remains of American MIAs during the Korean War from North Korea is no longer through the UN Command. It now is a direct deal between the U.S. and North Korean governments. The U.S. has entered into a new phase of direct engagement with N. Korea without having to involve its ally, S. Korea. On the other hand, concurrently with an anticipated U.S.-N. Korea normalization process, S. Korea is gearing up for a better chance of North-South Korean governmental dialogue. However, that is not likely to happen unless there is a fundamental change in the U.S.-S. Korea relationship.

When it comes to military or political issues, N. Korea does not recognize S. Korea as a legitimate counterpart; the U.S. is the real party because N. Korea perceives the U.S. as the mastermind of the S. Korean military. The command authority of S. Korean armed forces was turned over to the U.S. general immediately following the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. After the truce the U.S. gave back some control to S. Korea, but it still retains operational control of South Korean armed forces during "wartime." Therefore, S. Korean military affairs are in reality under the control of the U.S. president. The North has capitalized on this, calling the South a puppet of the U.S. and insisting on dealing with the U.S. on any important issues. North Korea, after the armistice agreement in 1953, had initially proposed a peace pact to South Korea, until 1974 when it started demanding a peace pact only with the U.S. because S. Korea does not have the capacity to guarantee a peace treaty. In fact the U.S. has been calling the shots with N. Korea all along. A U.S. general talks with his Northern counterpart at the Military Armistice Commission at Panmunjom, and the U.S. negotiated with the North on its nuclear programs in Geneva, even though the primary target of such weapons would be the South. The same goes for the missile development and biochemical weapons programs of the North.

This uniquely subservient U.S.-S. Korea relationship acts as an obstacle to North-South Korean dialogue by providing a pretext for the North to exclude the South in negotiations. Even the Four-Nations' Talks have become a theater where mainly the U.S. and N. Korea talk and China and S. Korea play second fiddle. So the vicious cycle goes on. It has been a longstanding U.S. policy that peace and unification for Korea should be resolved by the two Koreas themselves and that the U.S. is willing to assist in their efforts. The U.S. often states that it encourages inter-Korean dialogue, and such a U.S. stance was even included in the Geneva Agreed Framework with North Korea in 1994. However, at the same time the U.S. seems reluctant to clear off obstacles toward advancing such a North-South dialogue. It may not be necessary for the U.S. to continue carrying S. Korea, which has now become the twelfth largest economic power in the world. S. Korea's population is twice that of the North, and its economic strength is over 20 times greater. As well, its military capability has been conspicuously upgraded with ultra-modern arms. Furthermore, recent statistics show that South Korea's annual military budget of about \$17 billion is almost the same as North Korea's entire GDP. Yet this \$17 billion is only about 3 percent of South Korea's GDP. Many speculate that N. Korea spends almost 28 percent of its GDP on its military, yet the total is less than one-third of the South's. Experts in military affairs profess that the balance of military power definitely favors the South. On the other hand, N. Korea has been in the mire of economic crisis since the early 1990s, and millions are now believed to be dead from famine. Out of desperation, N. Korea seems to be pursuing a strategic weapons program for its survival and as a bargaining chip.

Commanding authority of one's armed forces is a fundamental right of a sovereign state. Forty five-odd years have passed since the Forgotten War ended, and it seems the U.S. has really forgotten to return the operational control of a supposedly independent state's armed forces. What is more puzzling is the fact that S. Korea has not come forward openly to the U.S. to reclaim its sovereign right so that it can become the de facto counterpart to the North on military issues. No other allies of the U.S. have such an awkward relationship as the S. Korean military does. Neither does the U.S. need to be the hostage of North-South tension, nor does it need to be another scapegoat of potential military actions in the future by exercising an ally's command authority. In today's vastly changed landscape of the Korean peninsula, it is high time for the U.S. to consider fully relinquishing its reign over S. Korean military and letting our ally become a fully autonomous and legitimate real party to N. Korea. With such an insightful vision, the U.S. can help its ally help itself and bring the dawn of a long-overdue peace process to the Korean peninsula in the 2000s.

### III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: [napsnet-reply@nautilus.org](mailto:napsnet-reply@nautilus.org) . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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