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# Strategic Flexibility of U.S. Forces in Korea



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## "Strategic Flexibility of U.S. Forces in Korea"

Essay by Lee Chul-kee

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### I. Introduction

Lee Chul-kee, a professor in international relations at the Dongguk University, writes, "We must build a cooperative multilateral security system for Northeast Asia, instead of a bilateral alliance system. Peace and reunification of Korean peninsula will be possible only when Northeast Asian order becomes multilateral, balanced and cooperative."

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## II. Essay by Lee Chul-kee

- Strategic Flexibility of U.S. Forces in Korea

by Lee Chul-kee  
The news flashed from Washington at dawn of the last 20th was in a word shocking. At the first Korea-US ministerial-level 'strategic dialogue' held in Washington, Korean side suddenly accepted the "strategic flexibility of the U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK)" which had been the top diplomatic and security issue pending between two countries.

At the Korea-US summit meeting held in November last year at Gyongju, the two presidents agreed to hold "a ministerial-level security dialogue" regularly. Korean government boasted this agreement as its diplomatic achievement. But what Korean side did at most at this first "security dialogue" was just to accept the "strategic flexibility of the USFK" which Washington has been persistently demanding from the Korean government.

The content of the joint statement issued after the strategic dialogue is almost unbelievable. It's like a 'document of surrender' to the U.S. in the field of diplomacy and national security. It has accepted not only "the strategic flexibility of the USFK" but also all what the U.S. has been demanding from Korea, namely: the strengthening of Korean cooperation to the "war on terror" which Washington is using as a pretext for its military aggression and pursuit of hegemony; cooperation to "the spreading of freedom", a new cause for the second-term Bush administration; Seoul's active participation in "the U.S.-led initiative against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction(PSI)" which is actually targeted on Pyongyang.

The joint statement is just disappointing to us. The efforts of our peace-oriented civic groups and sensible experts that have been warning against the potential danger of "the strategic flexibility of the USFK" seem to have come to nothing. The earnest desire of our people for a more balanced Korea-US relationship appropriate for the new era, freed from the current subordinate relationship of Korea to the U.S., and for the nation's future-oriented diplomatic and security policies, has been frustrated. There seems to be no more hope for a 'balanced diplomacy' and 'self-reliant national defense'.

Without going through any public debate and obtaining a national consensus, the Korean government has, behind closed doors, decided on such important issues that are directly linked to our peninsula's security and the nation's future, and has suddenly accepted the U.S. demands.

In a speech at the officers' commission ceremony at the air-force academy on March 8th last year, President Roh Moo-hyun said that "Korea will never be involved in conflicts in Northeast Asia without our consent" and that "this is a firm principle that can never be compromised". He has broken this promise even in less than a year. Then, we wonder why he created a fuss last year by bringing up the doctrine of "the Korea's balancer role in the Northeast Asia".

We cannot understand why Korean government hung out a white flag to the U.S. so hurriedly, accepting all of its demands. Perusing the content of the Korea-US joint statement, we cannot see any hint of Korean delegates having agonized over the pending issues and assiduously negotiated with the U.S. side. It seems that they agreed to the U.S. text only revising a few words for face-saving.

The responsible Korean negotiators should be held accountable for this outcome. They have

demonstrated their lack of vision for future, lack of insight into the situation, a blind kowtow to the U.S. and incompetency, deception to the people. They seem to be more tuned to Washington than to President Roh. It is a reprise of their negotiating stances previously displayed in the negotiations with the U.S. on the dispatch of Korean troops to Iraq and relocation of the Yongsan USFK base. security team's perception of the situation and negotiating strategies.

Their professed plan has been that Seoul accepts the U.S. demands on so-called "global issues", while Seoul plays the leading role in the issues of the Korean peninsula. So, Korean government seems to have dispatched its troops to Iraq and obediently accepted the U.S. demands on the relocation of the Yongsan US military base. On the other hand, Seoul expected to lead negotiations on Pyongyang's nuclear issues and South-North relations. But such a naive idea of the Korean government has been adversely exploited by the U.S. side. Our expectations that the Bush administration would moderate its policies on the North and its nuclear issues, in return for our sending troops to Iraq, have not yet been met.

It seems that Korean government has accepted the "strategic flexibility of the USFK" in anticipation of the U.S. changing its North Korea policies which Washington has been hardening recently by raising the issues of Pyongyang's human rights and counterfeiting of U.S. currencies. But also this time, Seoul was betrayed by the U.S. Now, the U.S. has an easy way to make its demands accepted by Seoul; if Washington increases the fear of war in Korea and takes a hardline, then Seoul government will become obedient to it. Now, both hard-liners and moderates in Washington are respectively toying with the Seoul government. In addition, this time Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon also might have had an illusion that Washington would support his candidacy for the post of Secretary General of the United Nations if he accepted the U.S. demands and pleased it.

We are afraid of the negative effect the Seoul's acceptance of the "strategic flexibility of the USFK" will soon have on the situation of Northeast Asia including Korean peninsula. The "strategic flexibility of the USFK" is the concept that the USFK will no longer be confined to Korea only dealing with the military situation of the peninsula, but they will also flexibly pursue various military objectives outside the Korean peninsula. It means that, from now on, the role of the USFK will be transformed to that of implementing Washington's Northeast Asian and global strategies rather than that of war deterrence to North Korea.

As a result, the USFK will be mobilized for America's military aggressions now being conducted here and there under the name of "war on terror". Especially, the main reason for Washington's pursuit of the "strategic flexibility of the USFK" is to prepare for a military action against China. In other words, the primary target of the "strategic flexibility of the USFK" is China. It's very certain that the USFK will be mobilized in case military conflicts occur in the Taiwan Strait between China and Taiwan.

Mr. Kim Sook, Director General of North American Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, has alleged that the possibility of the "strategic flexibility of the USFK" being applied in future is not high. On the contrary, it is a concept that can be applied immediately, because it is a core strategic concept for "military transformation" of the U.S. military forces, and for strengthening military hegemony of the United States.

It is a well-known fact that the global strategic goal of the United States is to check and blockade China that can potentially challenge the U.S. global hegemony in the 21st century. Therefore, the principal role of the U.S. forces in Asia including the USFK is changing to that of checking China. The current move to strengthen the naval and air power of the USFK and enlarge their naval and air bases is also intended for China.

The Korean Ministry points out that Korea-US joint statement includes a conditional clause which says that "in implementing the strategic flexibility, the U.S. will respect the Seoul's position that Korea will not be involved in regional conflicts of Northeast Asia without the consent of Korean people". The ministry boasts this as a diplomatic achievement of balancing the positions of the two sides.

However, such an assertion is a deception to Korean people or reveals their incompetence to perceive the situation.

First; Even though we admit the assertion of the ministry, it is either a big retreat from the existing government position or to admit that the government has so far cheated the people. The Korean government has maintained that although it recognizes the "strategic flexibility of the USFK", it is opposed to applying it to Northeast Asia including China. Though the conditional clause in the joint statement says that Korea will not directly be involved in regional conflicts in the Northeast Asia, it doesn't say that the USFK will not participate in any military action in the region. Seoul Government has to clarify why it has changed its position so much.

Second; even if Korean forces will not directly participate in the U.S. military action against China, Korea will be plunged into a military confrontation with China, if only the USFK are put into military operation against China or the USFK bases in Korea are used for anti-China military operations. Korea will be used as "an advance operation base" of the U.S. and the USFK will act as "foremost troops" to blockade China.

Furthermore, there is no guarantee that Seoul will not directly intervene militarily in the Northeast Asia at the heels of American troops. There is a great possibility that the U.S. will ask for a direct or indirect intervention of Korea, on the ground of the Korea-U.S. alliance. In this case, it is doubtful that Seoul can reject the U.S. demands and pressure.

It is also unrealistic to assume that the "strategic flexibility of the USFK" will not be applied to Northeast Asia, because the main target of this flexibility is China. It's like asking a cattle thief not to steal a cattle.

In this way, the USFK are being reorganized into regional forces for Asia whose main objective is to check China. The USFK bases are being transformed into advance bases for blockading China. The \$11 billion worth of weaponry that the U.S. is going to additionally deploy in Korea, allegedly for filling up the gap caused by the recent reduction of the 2nd division troops of the USFK, are in fact mostly Patriot missiles for Missile Defence (MD) and intelligence-gathering equipment intended for China. The U.S. is not only reinforcing its Patriot missiles (PAC-3) at Osan air base near Seoul but also deploying PAC-3 at Gunsan and Gwangju bases in South Korea. Deployment of such PAC-3 lengthwise on the peninsula is clearly targeted on China.

Meanwhile, acceptance of the "strategic flexibility of the USFK" signifies not only the change in the role of the USFK but also the fundamental change in the nature of the Korea-U.S. alliance. This is because the change in the USFK's role and that in the Korea-US alliance are like two sides of a coin. As the USFK will be transformed into regional mobile troops, the Korea-U.S. alliance will become a regional alliance. This means that, under the name of the Korea-U.S. alliance, Korean armed forces can be mobilized for the U.S. military operations and military needs outside the Korean peninsula. Korean troops will have to join any war of aggression waged by the U.S.

Already, we can read such intentions here and there in the joint statement. It suggests that the Korea-U.S. alliance should endeavor to overcome the challenges it faces regionally and globally. Just before attending the Korea-US "strategic dialogue", Minister Ban said at a regular press briefing on

last 11th that the fact the two countries have decided to hold a regular ministerial "strategic dialogue" reflects that "the Korea-U.S. alliance has developed to the stage of holding strategic consultations on Northeast Asian and global issues, beyond the Korean peninsula."

At the Korea-U.S. summit meeting held in May 2003, the two presidents said through a joint statement that they agreed to build up "a comprehensive and dynamic alliance". In this way, Korean side has in fact already accepted the U.S. demand.

In last May, Gen. Charles Cambell, commander of the Eighth U.S Army in Korea, said that "the Korea-U.S. alliance is transforming into a regional alliance and that the operational sphere of the Korea-US joint forces can be extended to Northeast Asia". This remark also reveals the U.S. intention to make the Korea-US alliance a regional alliance.

Such a change in the nature of the Korea-U.S. alliance violates the Korea-US Mutual Defense Treaty. The treaty stipulates its *casus foederis* as "the occurrence of armed attacks from outside" and limits its geographical bounds to "the territories under the administrative control" of the contracting parties. Thus, the original nature of the Korea-US alliance is a "defense alliance" which is confined to the Korean peninsula, pursuant to the objectives of the Korea-US Mutual Defense Treaty.

Therefore, acceptance of "the strategic flexibility of the USFK" is to deviate from the objectives of the USFK's stationing in Korea. Furthermore, If Korea-US alliance doesn't remain as a "defense alliance" limited to the Korean peninsula, and if its role and territorial coverage are expanded, it will be transformed into a "regional alliance" intended for the blockade of China, and into a "hegemony alliance" or "aggression alliance" contributing to the U.S. military hegemony. Therefore, if the Korean government accepts the "strategic flexibility of the USFK", it has to revise the Korea-US Mutual Defence Treaty and get an approval of the National Assembly beforehand. Otherwise the acceptance will be invalid.

It's hard for Seoul to accept such a transformation of the Korea-US alliance because it can lead to a military confrontation with China and the worsening of security environment for Korea. Korea may have to go to war with China if Korean troops are mobilized to military conflicts on the Taiwan Strait. This means a deterioration of security environment for Korean peninsula. In that case, the peace and reunification of Korean peninsula will be almost impossible.

Some argue that it is unavoidable to accept "the strategic flexibility of the USFK", if Korea-US alliance has to be maintained at all. Otherwise, they say the USFK may withdraw from Korea. Then, will the USFK really withdraw from Korea if Seoul does not accept U.S. demands? Now we have to think about this mistaken myth realistically.

Will the USFK withdraw from Korea, giving up its 105 military bases scattered all over the country? Can Washington so easily give up South Korea that provides, without a complain, \$700 million annually as a direct contribution to the USFK and bears \$3 billion annually as a direct or indirect share of expenses for them? Will the USFK withdraw from Korea, giving up the new, cutting-edge Pyongtaek U.S. military base that Seoul is going to build with billions of dollars, which will become the largest single U.S. military base in the world and the advance base for China? Will the USFK withdraw from Korea with their Patriot missiles that they are deploying in Osan and Gwangju bases along the western coast for missile defense against China?

The strategic importance of the USFK bases and South Korea for the U.S is growing further as the U.S. containment strategies against China become more concrete. As President Roh said in Los Angeles, "Korean peninsula is not a place which the U.S. can give up easily even if is not happy with South Korea, because of the peninsula's strategic position".

Also, we have to change the idea that an alliance can be maintained only by stationing a large army in the partner country. The U.S. doesn't keep a large army in Thailand and Philippines even though it has concluded military alliance treaties with them. New Zealand has the ANZUS Treaty with the U.S., but it is denying the calling and landing of U.S. naval vessels and war planes carrying nuclear weapons, on the strength of its denuclearization policy. But we haven't yet heard that this has resulted in any worsening of their bilateral relations and U.S. economic sanctions against New Zealand.

As a matter of fact, the U.S. will have an enormous strategic benefit just to keep South Korea as an ally, even though it cannot station any soldier on the Korean soil. The U.S. should be most thankful only for keeping Seoul from entering into alliance with China or becoming militarily close to it.

What the U.S. really fears is the emergence of a situation where growing anti-American sentiment and public opinion for the withdrawal of USFK necessitate American troops to leave Korea, because this will seriously jeopardize the global strategies of Washington.

The greatest danger of "the strategic flexibility of the USFK is that Korea will be firmly incorporated into the global hegemonic strategy of the U.S. The global strategy and Northeast Asian policy of the United States are to check and blockade China through the US-Japan alliance as the main axis and Korea-US alliance as the subsidiary axis.

But they will force a confrontation and a division in Northeast Asia, creating a new cold war order in the region. If confrontation and enmity persist in Northeast Asia, peace and reunification of Korean peninsula will become remote and national division will be perpetuated.

Korea cannot have a future-oriented security policy without a critical self-reflection on its security policy which is subordinate to Washington. Korea must make efforts to extricate itself from America's military strategy and policy framework. Korea must change its perception and idea. Self-reliant national defense and amelioration of security environment for Korea depend on how much room Korea will have for independent security strategies and policies free from the U.S. military strategies and policies.

If the existing Korea-US alliance system rather endangers our national security and aggravates our security environment, we cannot but raise a basic question whether such an alliance system is really necessary. Therefore, it is necessary to fundamentally reexamine the Korea's current security paradigm that entirely depends on the Korea-US alliance system. We must build a cooperative multilateral security system for Northeast Asia, instead of a bilateral alliance system. Peace and reunification of Korean peninsula will be possible only when Northeast Asian order becomes multilateral, balanced and cooperative. This depends on how much Korea can effectively play the role of a balancer in the Northeast Asia.

### **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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