

Korea's Wartime Command: Sovereignty, Security, and Independence

Alon Levkowitz

This article deals with South Korea's security policy and its strategic relations with the United States. It analyzes Seoul's policy vis-à-vis wartime command over the years, particularly the influences of complex internal and external elements. The article describes how and why the transfer of command in wartime was delayed for many years, and addresses the influences of former South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, the military forces, the South Korean media, and North Korea in the process.

Keywords: South Korea; North Korea; United States; alliance; joint command; military

Introduction

The debate concerning the balance between South Korea's dependency on the United States and its aspiration to develop an independent security policy has intensified in the past two decades. An important example of this process can be seen in the negotiations and agreements concerning the transfer of wartime command from the American forces in Korea to Korean hands. This process, which was supposed to occur in 2009, was delayed over the years, and is now due to begin in 2015.

Wartime operational control is important to discuss for various reasons. First, it influences the 686,000 South Korean soldiers and the 28,000 US soldiers stationed in the Korean Peninsula. It also indirectly influences over one million North Korean soldiers. Second, wartime operational control affects the shape and future of the US-South Korea military alliance, and

Dr. Alon Levkowitz specializes in Korean studies. He teaches in the Department of International Relations at Hebrew University and the Asian Program at Bar-Ilan University.

could influence future military relations between Washington and other allies in the region. Third, it is a symbol of South Korean sovereignty, and an indicator of the country's perception of its own security independence in years to come.¹

The public dispute over the need to decrease dependence on the US and the desired pace of this process involves the Korean political parties and security forces. This dispute reveals two conflicting groups – the “liberal/reformists,” who support a more independent policy and call for a rapid transition of incremental security independence, and the “conservatives,” who support Korea's continued US-dependent policy with a slower security independence transition that will allow Korea to better prepare itself for the future.

The debate over wartime command not only allows us to analyze these important fault lines in Korea's political and public spheres, but also gives us a better understanding of the dilemma that the “liberal/reformist” camp is confronted with. On the one hand, the camp embraces the deep-rooted belief in the merits of engagement, which has been promoted by the two previous presidents, Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) since the historic summit of the two Koreas (2000). On the other hand, the camp is also driven by the constant fear of being left without the American security umbrella.

The internal debate concerning wartime command has manifested itself in different political and public realms, involving technical, legal, political, and military arguments. This article will initially outline the wartime command issue, and later elaborate on the connection between wartime command and the broader concept of self-reliance. It will also explore the implications of wartime command issues for the evolving United States-Republic of Korea (US-ROK) relationship, and examine how the latest North Korean provocations influenced the process.

What is the Wartime Command Issue?

On September 14, 2006, President Roh Moo-hyun and President George W. Bush agreed in principle on deactivating the Combined Force Command (CFC). This new phase provided South Korea more independence in its security relations with the US² and allowed both sides to subsequently continue negotiations on the multiple facets of the issue. Although it was Seoul that initiated the call for the change of command, it also requested

to delay the transfer until 2012, when Washington attempted to schedule it for 2009. This time difference was not a technical issue; it demonstrated the differences between Seoul and Washington's concepts of security relations, as well as Seoul's perception of its dependency on the US.

In 2007, when Seoul and Washington agreed to postpone the wartime command to 2012, Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates said:³ "We are preparing for a historic transition in 2012, when the Republic of Korea military will take wartime command in the defense of their own country, and US forces will assume a supporting role." In 2012, however, President Lee Myung-bak and President Barack Obama agreed to delay the transition again, this time to 2015.⁴ One should understand that the wartime command transfer is a very complex process that includes several components, such as the implementation of the command structure, the change of military plans, updating the deterrence strategy of North Korea, and much more.

The transfer of wartime command to South Korea has been under discussion since the early 1990s. In 2002, South Korea and the US started a round of talks on the issue as part of the discussions regarding the new framework of the ROK-US alliance. The issue originates from the Korean War, when South Korea voluntarily placed the operational control of its military under the American-led UN Command (UNC).⁵ Following the war, operational control was handed over to US forces in Korea (USFK) as part of the ROK-US Mutual Security Agreement (MDT). With the creation of the Combined Forces Command (CFC) in 1978,⁶ wartime command was placed under the authority of the CFC commander.⁷ In 1994, peacetime control of the Korean forces was transferred to South Korean hands, but wartime control still remained under the control of the ROK-US Combined Forces Command, which was led by a four-star US general.⁸

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, the South Korean government had no choice but to be fully dependent on US and UN forces due to its limited military capabilities as it would not be able to win the war and deter another North Korean attack by itself. This attitude affected the South Korean decision to accept US command in the event of war by signing the postwar Mutual Defense Treaty. Indeed, during the Cold War era, the alliance with the US remained the bulwark of South Korea's security.⁹

Despite the end of the Cold War and the geostrategic changes in Northeast Asia, Washington signaled that it still mistrusted Korea's capacity for full independence by granting the South Korean army control

only during peacetime. To Seoul, this meant it would continue to be dependent on the US for its security, leaving its sovereignty incomplete.

One should indeed ask whether the South Korean forces are ready for the change of command, and why South Korea did not prepare itself for the possibility of assuming complete command earlier. The first factor is that of the regional environment: as long as the Cold War and the tension in the Korean Peninsula persisted, the United States and South Korea had no incentive to change their military relations. The second factor is economic: for South Korea, building an independent deterrent force would have been much more expensive than maintaining its relationship with the US. The third factor is psychological: over the last decade, South Korea has sought to develop its own military intelligence and surveillance capabilities as part of its incremental security independence process. It appears, however, that South Korea cannot overcome the fear of independently handling its own security after being dependent on the US for the past 50 years. Important and influential groups in South Korea do not believe the time is right to accept independent security responsibilities, or to pursue full military independence. This does not mean that they object to limiting South Korea's dependency on the US, or to Korea becoming fully independent; they merely prefer to postpone the process until Korea is ready to be less dependent.

It should be noted that until the beginning of the millennium, Washington did not support a more independent South Korean security policy. During the Cold War era, Washington feared that Seoul would be drawn into another Korean conflict. By increasing Seoul's dependency on Washington, it simultaneously increased America's control over Korea.¹⁰ Another example of Washington's constraint on Seoul's security policy can be seen in the range limitations of South Korea's missiles. Washington allowed South Korean missiles to reach up to 180 kilometers until 2011, when the range limit was extended to 800 kilometers, allowing Seoul to better deter North Korea.¹¹ Seoul was then able to show off a new cruise missile following the North Korean nuclear test in February 2013. South Korea's possession of better deterring missiles it was previously prohibited from having demonstrates an improvement in the US-South Korea deterrence policy.¹²

There are a number of reasons as to why Washington is prepared to relinquish wartime command to the Koreans after refraining from doing

so for many years. From the bilateral perspective, it is important to note that Washington is no longer concerned Seoul will react irrationally, as it did during the Rhee Syngman ("March to the North") and Park Chung-hee presidencies, thereby eliminating its concern that Seoul might be dragged into undesired conflicts.¹³ Other important reasons behind Washington's stance on the issue can be found in its geostrategic considerations, which include the reorganization of the US Global Defense Posture¹⁴ and its overall policy of increasing the cost-sharing burden of its allies around the globe. Pyongyang has not been able to invest in its army for the past two decades due to its shrinking economy. The gap created between Pyongyang's army and the current high standard of Seoul's military capabilities has surely also made the decision easier for American decision-makers.

Wartime Command and the Concept of Self-Reliance

The wartime command issue did not stay in the realm of professional military decision making. Instead, it became a subject for public debate in South Korea as part of President Roh Moo-hyun's promotion of the concept of self-reliance.¹⁵ An example of how President Roh raised the issue is evident in his speech given on August 15, 2003 at the 58th Anniversary of the Korean National Liberation:¹⁶ "During my remaining term in office, I intend to help lay a firm foundation for our armed forces to be fully equipped with self-reliant national defense capabilities within the next 10 years. To this end, the armed forces will solidify the capacity for intelligence and operation planning as well as readjust armaments and the whole national defense system."

South Korea has long been conflicted between its goal of achieving maximum independence as a sovereign country and its security needs, which require continued dependence on the United States.

The subject of South Korea's self-reliance and its ability to independently defend itself was first raised by President Park Chung-hee¹⁷ in the 1960s. It was then reiterated throughout the 1970s after the withdrawal of some US forces from Korea as part of Seoul's response to the Nixon Doctrine,¹⁸ and as well during President Park's response to President Jimmy Carter's plan to withdraw all US ground forces from Korea. When South Korea raised the issue of self-reliance during the Cold War era, it was more a negotiation tactic aimed at winning concessions from the US, but when the issue was raised again by President Roh Moo-hyun, the strategic environment

differed greatly from the one during President Park Chung-hee's era. With the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and China, which were North Korea's allies, normalized diplomatic and economic relations with South Korea, and the southern economy far outpaced that of the north.

For many years, the issue of self-reliance was predominantly handled behind closed doors by American and South Korean civilian and military officials.¹⁹ President Roh opened the debate to the public and political spheres, and the issue made headlines on the front pages of South Korean newspapers. As a part of his agenda to transform inter-Korean and ROK-US relations, President Roh acted to change the attitude toward wartime control from a technical security issue to a national symbol of Korea's sovereignty.²⁰ The issue became a part of the discussions concerning Korea's need to develop self-reliant capabilities. In President Lee Myung-bak's term, the issue of self-reliance continued to be discussed in public,²¹ but the media coverage at that point was more limited than in President Roh's term.

President Roh placed special emphasis on the psychological element of Korea's security dependence on the United States. This was manifested in his speech on August 15, 2007, which was given at the 62nd Anniversary of Korea's liberation:²² "To date, my Administration has made an effort to overcome the nation's psychological dependence on the United States while strengthening its potential for self-reliant defense. Guided by this strategy are the transfer of wartime operational control, redeployment of the US Forces Korea, relocation of Yongsan Garrison, and vigorous progress in implementing the National Defense Reform 2020. Self-reliant defense and the ROK-US alliance must go forward hand in hand. From this day onward, as it has in the past, the ROK-US alliance will grow into even more robust ties based on mutual respect and close cooperation."

According to President Roh's concept, Korea should not just achieve the objective goal of strengthening its military might, but also overcome the subjective disbelief in its own strength and independent capabilities. Achieving this should be done in parallel to the discussions with the US over this issue.

The internal Korean debate regarding the transfer of wartime command to Korean control raised serious questions:²³ What are the implications of the change of command for the Mutual Defense Treaty between Korea

and the US? Will American forces continue to be stationed in Korea, or will they withdraw? Will the US assist South Korea if North Korea invades it after the command change? And what might be the implications of the change of command on the relationship between North and South Korea, and will it decrease the tensions in the Korean Peninsula?

Some of these questions were raised by the opposition to President Roh's policy, who feared that the change of command will prompt Washington to completely withdraw its forces from South Korea. As Representative Park Jin from the Grand National Party (GNP) said:²⁴ "It is clear that the government's efforts to exercise unilateral authority to control its troops will help undermine the Korea-US alliance and eventually result in the full withdrawal of US troops from the Peninsula." Others sought to impede President Roh's plan by searching for alternative pitfalls in order to delay the command change.

The Internal Debate

There are many internal debates within South Korea itself regarding the wartime command transfer. Table 1 charts the main issues that are brought up.

The Media – Newspapers

Korean newspapers play an important part in the internal political and social debates, as well as in the discussions on democracy and US-Korea relations.²⁵ The media is controlled by the "big three" newspapers: *Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-A*, and *JoongAng*, which comprise 80 percent of the market and are very conservative. During his presidential campaign, President Roh was not supported by the conservative media. He had to contend with them and circumvent them by reaching his supporters through the internet.²⁶ While more liberal newspapers such as *Hankyoreh* supported the President's "self-reliant" policy on the wartime command issue, the "big three" criticized it.²⁷

Chosun Ilbo, for example, harshly criticized President Roh's wartime command issue: "It is becoming clear that we can no longer trust the president and his aides to handle the matter alone... Roh is a minority president struggling with the lowest approval rating ever for a Korean chief executive."²⁸

Table 1: The Arguments for and against the Change of Command under President Roh

Issue	Oppose	Support
Who's who?	Conservative party members and political groups; retired defense ministers; retired high ranking officers; the "big three" newspapers.	The outgoing President Roh; members of President Roh's cabinet; reformist political forces; <i>Hankyoreh</i> newspaper.
Legality	President Roh lacks legal authority to pursue this policy.	Article 74(1) of the South Korean constitution authorizes this policy.
US commitment to Korea	The change of command will weaken Washington's commitment to Seoul.	The change of command will not undermine Washington's commitment to Korea's security.
US-Korea alliance	This will be the first phase of the termination of the alliance.	The alliance will become more egalitarian.
Complete US withdrawal	This is the first step of a complete withdrawal of US forces from Korea, akin to 1949.	This will not affect the withdrawal of US forces from Korea.
Korea's military and intelligence capabilities	Korea does not have sufficient capability to assume command. It will suffer from "intelligence blindness."	The US will continue to support Korea until it develops its own capabilities.
Desired pace	Slower.	Faster.
North Korea's reaction	Might interpret this in the wrong way.	Will see this as a sign of decrease of tension in the Peninsula.

This was not the only editorial article that criticized President Roh on the relations with the United States, the wartime command, and his North Korean policy. *JoongAng* also published several articles that coincided with the other two conservative newspapers and disagreed with President Roh on these issues.²⁹ On the other side of the political spectrum, *Hankyoreh* published articles that supported President Roh's wartime command policy and stressed South Korea's nationalism and its need to become self-reliant.³⁰ The public debate between the conservative and liberal newspapers demonstrates the ideological gap between both camps on the wartime command issue. This debate reflects the newspapers' attitude on the Seoul-Washington security relations, and South Korean dependency on Washington.

Legality

The legal issue was mainly raised by politicians, retired high-ranking military officers, and conservative political parties who questioned President Roh's legal legitimacy to negotiate the transfer of wartime command with the US. Professor Moon Chung-in showed that Article 74 (1) of the Republic of Korea Constitution permits the President to negotiate these issues with the US:³¹ "The President is Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces under the conditions as prescribed by the Constitution and Law."

The legal objection to President Roh's negotiations with Washington on the command issue was mainly used when the impeachment process against President Roh was held within the constitutional court.³² Although the foundation of this argument seems somewhat shaky, it can be perceived as a legitimate democratic tool that the opposition parties used in order to impede President Roh's policy. The legal issue was not raised again by the opposition under President Lee Myung-bak's term, who delayed the transfer to 2015. Lee's successor, President Park Geun-hye, will have to pursue and synchronize South Korean forces with US forces in Korea. This synchronizing process, "Strategic Alliance 2015," had begun with the decision to delay the process and to prepare the gradual coordination between the South Korean and US forces.³³ The issues of sovereignty and of the tensions between Seoul and Washington regarding the command transfer, North Korea, and the alliance were set aside under President Lee, although they were originally emphasized during his campaign and through the beginning of his term. Instead, the security cooperation between the US and South Korea took center stage.³⁴

US Commitment to Korea and the US-Korea Alliance

Will the change of command lead to the end of the alliance with the US, and will it undermine the American commitment to Korea? As Representative Park Jin of the GNP, one of the opponents of President Roh's policy, said:³⁵ "Roh is gambling with people's lives ... South Korea will become marginal following the hasty command takeover." On the other hand, the President's camp stressed that the change of command is just one element of the alliance with the US. It does not symbolize the termination of the alliance, or a weakening of America's commitment to Korea, but can be seen as another stage in a process that might lead to a changed alliance.

The question concerning Washington's commitment to South Korea's security was raised again under President Lee's term. Washington reaffirmed its security commitment to Seoul in the statement made by US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta:³⁶ "The Department of Defense is already drawing up numerous measures to ensure that there is no loss in the South Korea-US joint combat readiness in preparation for the handing over of wartime operational control." The statements made by Panetta and other US officials were aimed at helping Seoul and additional US allies overcome their concerns, and as well as to reiterate that any change in command will not shake the US commitment to South Korea's security.

Complete US Withdrawal

The first withdrawal of US forces from Korea in 1947-1949 was a traumatic episode in Korea's modern history. The negotiations concerning the command transfer reignited fear of another US withdrawal, especially among the critics of Roh's policy who interpreted the change of command as the first step in Washington's plans.³⁷ In response, President Roh said:³⁸ "After the transfer, Washington could possibly downsize the US Forces Korea (USFK), but the number of American soldiers stationed here is not as important as the quality of their services." President Roh raised the idea of a US force withdrawal from Korea in his presidential election campaign³⁹ and continued debating the idea in public after his election in 2002.⁴⁰ Although the change of command was delayed after President Roh's presidency, his remarks fanned opposition fears that the plan would be implemented. The concern over complete US withdrawal is raised every time Washington reconsiders the change of allocating US forces within Asia, or the transfer of US forces from Asia to Iraq or Afghanistan.

Military and Intelligence Capabilities

A group of former South Korean Defense Ministers and retired high-ranking officers asked President Roh to reconsider his plan of accelerating the transfer of wartime command from the US to Korea:⁴¹ "We ask President Roh to take heed of security experts' advice on the matter, not that of 'idealists.'" These officials and Ministers questioned the nation's ability to assume wartime control at that time. They argued that South Korean forces would not be ready to assume command by 2009, and called on the

President to postpone the transfer of control to a time when South Korean forces would be better prepared.

One of the security issues that were raised by politicians and military officers was South Korea's dependency on US intelligence and surveillance. As Representative Song Young-sun, from the opposition Grand National Party and a member of the National Defense Committee, said:⁴² "Building up capabilities for gathering intelligence, monitoring enemies and intercepting incoming missiles accurately is a prerequisite to South Korea's independent exercise of wartime command." Others questioned South Korea's ability to develop independent intelligence capabilities by the time the command was to be transferred.⁴³

The change of command ignited criticism and planted fears as some thought it would lead Korea to "intelligence blindness." In order to overcome this, American and Korean military officers stated that Washington would continue to provide military intelligence to South Korea even after the change of command occurs, and until Korea is able to fill the vacuum with its own independent capabilities. Colonel Kang Yong-hee, the Ministry's spokesman, said:⁴⁴ "Working level officials from the two allies have agreed on a set of issues to draw up a final roadmap for the command transfer. The US side agreed to provide its advanced intelligence assets to the Korean military to fill the possible security vacuum in the Korean Peninsula after Seoul assumes a greater role in national defense." President Roh commented on this issue:⁴⁵ "Seoul and Washington will continue exchanging intelligence even after the transfer of wartime control. Is there any alliance that does not share intelligence assets?...The United States will continue intelligence gathering activities not only for us but also for its own sake. Washington will not bring down intelligence satellites due to the transfer."

In the last decade, South Korean defense forces have been pursuing an incremental process of upgrading their intelligence capabilities, which will allow them to have independent intelligence ability. Some of the technologies and equipment that are being used were purchased from Israel.⁴⁶

North Korea Reaction

How will North Korea interpret the change of command? In the past, Seoul opposed Washington's desire to withdraw its forces from Korea, stating

that Pyongyang might interpret this move as an opportunity to launch an attack as it had done prior to the Korean War.⁴⁷

The anticipated North Korean reaction has been assessed differently by the political camps: President Roh, who continued President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy, estimated that the change of command would reduce tensions in the Korean Peninsula. The conservatives, on the other hand, warned that Pyongyang might interpret this move as weakness, which would escalate tensions in the Peninsula.

The North Korean provocations during President Lee Myung-bak's presidency, such as the sinking of the Cheonan (2010), the Yeonpyeong artillery attack (2010), the missile/satellite launch (2012), and the third nuclear test (2013), led to the strengthening of military cooperation between the US and South Korea.⁴⁸ Both states share the same interest to prevent any unintended escalation that might lead to a regional conflict, including the pursuing of the command transfer, a process that might be used by Pyongyang to increase tension within the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang continues to threaten that if the UN Security Council approves sanctions against it, its third nuclear test of 2013 would not be its last nuclear or long-range missile test.⁴⁹ The newly elected South Korean President, Park Geun-hye, will have to work closely with President Obama in order to prevent Pyongyang from dragging the Korean Peninsula to an undesired conflict, following the newly expected provocations.

Conclusions

The negative reactions regarding President Roh's efforts to accelerate the process of wartime operational control transfer to Korean hands are difficult to explain. These reactions come from substantial sections of the political and military establishments in South Korea. One would expect that the President's concept of self-reliance, backed by the US statement that South Korea is capable of handling wartime operational control, would gain support from Korean political and security forces. The reality, however, is different.

President Roh succeeded in highlighting an important issue – the psychological element of the Korean fear of abandonment – but even his administration got cold feet when it came to setting a date for the transfer of wartime command. Facing fierce criticism of the plan by conservatives, President Roh asked the American administration to extend the transfer's

deadline from 2009 to 2012. President Lee Myung-bak postponed the process to 2015. A close look at both sides of the argument in Korea suggests that the gap between the two camps on these issues is not as wide as their passionate rhetoric suggests. It is more a matter of pace, image, and national aspirations.

Ultimately, the most important effect of this internal debate has been to expose the issue to public scrutiny. The question of South Korean readiness to accept the responsibility for wartime command enables the public to be a part of the process of redefining Korea's self-image and its relationship with the US. Roh's presidency ignited the internal political debate, while President Lee's term pacified the public debate, and improve relations with Washington. In the long run, it is likely that Roh's nationalistic argument concerning self-reliance will sink in and influence public opinion, helping the Korean political and military establishments to move toward security independence. The debate reveals that the change will have to include a close assessment of the objective military capabilities as well as the psychological elements of Korea's ability to stand on its own.

The change of wartime command is a delicate and complicated process. It involves the South Korean political arena, relations between South and North Korea and the United States, consultations between Seoul and Washington, and changes in South Korea's military command and legislation. In the best of circumstances, the Republic of Korea will move forward in an incremental process of achieving its own security independence. This, as always, will depend on Washington's commitment and on the military tension within the Korean Peninsula.

On October 6, 2008, a few months after his election, President Lee Myung-bak's spokesman said that "The Lee administration is determined to reevaluate and complement a 2006 bilateral agreement calling for South Korea to reclaim wartime operational control of its forces from the United States by 2012."⁵⁰ This policy led to postpone the command transfer 2015. President Park Geun-hye is expected to maintain the good security relations between Seoul and Washington, which will include the continuation of the wartime command transfer.⁵¹ President Park will have to balance between her promises to strengthen the alliance with Washington, engage North Korea, and deter Pyongyang from creating further provocations.⁵² In addition, President Park will perhaps have to readjust the balance between her three promises if Pyongyang's military provocations continue.

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