Transferring Operational Control of South Korean Forces
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Recent events have reignited the debate over the planned transfer in April 2012 of operational control (OPCON) of the Republic of Korea’s armed forces (ROK) in the event of a conflict with North Korea. This debate has existed for decades, but recently the political players both in South Korea and the United States have been shifting away from OPCON transfer (to ROK), which was planned by and agreed to by the previous administration in 2006. With the new conservative government in Seoul, and the continuing uncertain events in North Korea, fears have been raised that the transfer would be perceived as a U.S. withdrawal. This perception has created political momentum to preserve U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) OPCON in the event of a conflict.

I believe that moving forward with transferring CFC OPCON to the ROK, as planned in 2006, is the right policy. Delay does nothing for the interests of the United States on the peninsula or in the region, either militarily or politically. When the previous administration negotiated the withdrawal of the 2nd Infantry Division, the removal of the remaining U.S. forces to the south of the Han River, the return of the Youngsan Garrison, the expansion of the Camp Humphrey/Osan Air Base complex, and the timetable for OPCON transfer, it was based on discussions begun in 1988 when it was agreed that the strategy was to transition eventually from “leading to supporting.”

I am reminded of an event almost 15 years ago during Kim Young Sam’s presidency when a North Korean pilot defected in a MiG and flew across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and into Seoul undetected. President Kim angrily called for a meeting at the Blue House the following day of all those directly responsible for the defense of South Korea. His invitation did not include anyone from the Combined Forces Command. The dirty little secret revealed that day was that as far as the Blue House was concerned, no one really considered the U.S. CFC commander to truly have OPCON, and they further demonstrated that they did not consider him to be a key player in the defense of the peninsula.

ROK forces are among the most capable in the world. They are competent, sufficiently large, and well trained and equipped. The North Koreans haven’t maneuvered in decades. They don’t move, they don’t shoot, and they don’t communicate. One might even say that there is no more risk of a North Korean attack across the DMZ than there is of a Mexican attack across the Rio Grande (drug lords not withstanding).

Among the arguments against OPCON transfer is that there are strategic and geopolitical reasons for a delay and that a transfer would stoke fears of a U.S. withdrawal or lack of commitment. In fact, a reversal of policy with regard to the planned OPCON transfer in 2012 might be interpreted as an indictment of the ROK military—that they are not ready for this responsibility—which in itself could be provocative. To transfer OPCON is absolutely the right signal to send to the North Koreans, to the Chinese, and most of all to the South Korean people. The reduced U.S. military presence makes OPCON appear even more anachronistic, particularly given the relocation of the headquarters out of Seoul. If the South Koreans truly valued our
continued OPCON, they would insist that the CFC headquarters be located adjacent to the Ministry of National Defense in Seoul.

The U.S. commitment to the territorial integrity of the Republic of Korea does not depend upon OPCON. In 2010, it depends first and foremost upon the unequivocal expressions of support from our president and our Congress and secondly on the forward deployment of our military forces (strategic and tactical) in the Western Pacific and not just on the peninsula.

Finally, a thorough strategic review of the region and our enduring interests in a shared future should definitely be undertaken, not just with South Korea but with all of our allies in the Western Pacific.

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