

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

OPCON Transition in Korea

By General (Ret) Walter Sharp
December 2, 2013

General Sharp graduated from West Point in 1974 and was commissioned an Armor officer. He has earned a Master of Science degree in Operations Research and System Analysis from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. General Sharp commanded the United Nations Command, Republic of Korea – United States Combined Forces Command, and United States Forces Korea from 3 June 2008 to 14 July 2011. Earlier in his career, General Sharp's command positions included: Squadron Commander 1st Squadron, 7th U.S. Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood Texas; Regimental Commander 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment, Fort Polk, Louisiana; Assistant Division Commander for Maneuver 2nd Infantry Division, Camp Red Cloud, South Korea; and Division Commander, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, Georgia. He commanded troops in Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti, and SFOR's Multinational Division (North) in Bosnia. General (Ret) and Mrs. Sharp live in the Washington, D.C. area. He is consulting for several U.S. and Korean firms, is on the Board of Directors of the Korea Society, and involved in strategy and policy discussions at several D.C. area Think Tanks.

The Republic of Korea (ROK) and U.S. are again discussing whether to transition wartime Operational Control (OPCON) to the ROK on 1 Dec 2015. This is the third such discussion (previous ones were in 2006 and 2010). There has been much written about the pros and cons to do this and also what it would mean. Since the initial discussions, several key factors have changed so I thought it would be good to put together an article that describes the current command structures in Korea, what they will look like if the planned transition occurs in 2015, some alternative structures folks are examining, the issues that are being discussed in Korea and in the U.S., and my recommendations.

Current Command Structures in Korea

During Armistice (what we are currently in on a day to day basis) there are several top level headquarters. On the ROK side the top warfighting command is the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (ROK JCS) headed by the ROK Chairman. This headquarters is responsible for the day to day defense of the ROK. The ROK JCS has Operational Control of all ROK forces (those patrolling the DMZ, fly air patrols, guarding the seas, etc.). Also on the ROK side are the Service Headquarters that have what we call Title 10 authority (man, train, and equip) of ROK forces. On the U.S. side there are three headquarters that the U.S. four star general commands. The first headquarters is United States Force Korea (USFK) which commands the 28.5 thousand U.S. troops in Korea. These troops do not patrol the DMZ, nor fly air patrols, nor guard the seas. They are in Korea to immediately help the ROK in case we go to war (mostly counterfire and air operations) and to facilitate reception of the hundreds of thousands of troops that would come from the U.S. in case of war. They are also responsible to conduct the NEO of all U.S. civilians. USFK is not a warfighting headquarters. Their main function is make sure U.S. troops in Korea are trained. This headquarters is a subordinate command of PACOM. Next there are two



combined headquarters commanded by the U.S. four star general during Armistice: United Nations Command (UNC) and Combined Forces Command (CFC). UNC has representatives from 17 nations, including the ROK. Their job is to insure the Armistice agreement from 1953 is being followed by all sides. CFC is the final and arguably the most important headquarters commanded by the U.S. four star general. CFC is the headquarters that is most effected by the OPCON Transition decision. CFC is a truly combined headquarter with U.S. and ROK servicemen and women in all staff sections. Its deputy commander is a ROK four star. During Armistice, CFC's responsibility is to insure both ROK and U.S. troops are trained to be able to accomplish the combined OPLANs agreed to by both nations. During Armistice CFC does collect intelligence and conduct exercises to deter North Korea and to insure they are ready for a warfight. CFC does not have as a mission the defense of Korea during Armistice, again this is ROK JCS responsibility.

If it were to become evident we are about to go to war with North Korea both the U.S. and ROK Presidents would agree it is time to transition to a warfighting organization. This transition and organizational structure has been specified in bilaterally signed documents and trained to many times. When this decision is made (usually referred to as DEFCON III) CFC usually becomes responsible for the defense of the ROK. Once the decision to transition is made, CFC then becomes the warfighting headquarters. In this situation, the U.S. four star is now in charge of the defense of the ROK and virtually all ROK and U.S. forces in Korea and those arriving from the United States. I say "usually" because there are OPLANs where CFC is not the overall commander as it is for an all-out NK attack. The ROK JCS transitions to a headquarters that receives strategic guidance from the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) and President and passes this guidance to CFC. This is much the same role as that of the U.S. CJCS. UNC transitions to a headquarters that receives and sometimes commands forces from other countries that are deployed to help defend Korea. So, the bottom line is that in the middle of a crisis (regardless of the type) the structure responsible for the defense of Korea changes, empowering CFC to be a warfighting command and to have Operational Control (OPCON) of the great majority of U.S. and ROK forces.

Current Plan for OPCON Transition on 1 Dec 2015

The currently agreed plan for OPCON Transition is as follows: First, CFC is dissolved. On the ROK side, ROK JCS becomes responsible for the defense of the ROK at all times (during armistice and war). ROK JCS becomes the "supported" command. On the U.S. side a new headquarters (Korea Command or KORCOM) forms with two roles. First, it replaces USFK in its Title 10 role. Second, it becomes the U.S. "supporting" warfighting headquarters. KORCOM becomes the "supporting" headquarters to the ROK "supported" headquarters (ROK JCS). The U.S. still sends the same number of troops in the case of a warfight and these troops still work for the U.S. four star general (the KORCOM commander) but that command ultimately falls under the command of the ROK CJCS. I do not see this as an issue since both nations will agree to the missions/roles of U.S. forces by signing a new OPLAN which spells this out. If the ROK JCS wants to deviate from this agreed to plan, the U.S. KORCOM commander must get approval from the U.S. Secretary of Defense (SecDef).

The roles and responsibility of UNC do not greatly change on 1 Dec 2015. UNC is looking at ways to strengthen enforcement of the Armistice and how they could better receive and command troops during a warfight.



Alternatives Being Examined

Based on open press there are several alternatives the ROK and U.S. are examining. First, keep the current CFC structure and do not transition wartime OPCON on 1 Dec 2015. The ROK MND has asked we “delay” this transition indefinitely. The U.S. has agreed to form a ROK and U.S. team to determine all the conditions that need to be in place for an effective transition (more about this later).

Second, continue as agreed to in 2010 and transition wartime OPCON to the ROK on 1 Dec 2015. The conditions for this transition are spelled out in the bilaterally agreed to Strategic Alliance 2015 Document (signed by the ROK MND and U.S. Secretary of Defense). Again, more about this later.

Third, open press reports that the U.S. and ROK are examining an alternative that maintains a form of CFC (let’s call it CFC-ROK). The main difference is that CFC-ROK will be commanded by a ROK four star and the U.S. four star general becomes his deputy. ROK officers will also take the lead in the staff sections with U.S. deputies. The advantage of this alternative is that we maintain a combined warfighting command which is clearly more effective than the supporting-supported relationship that is currently planned. It is unclear whether CFC-ROK will also be the command responsible during Armistice. I will argue later that the CFC-ROK should also take on this role. In this alternative USFK and its Title 10 role would probably remain about as it is today.

In all the alternatives currently being examined, the UNC remains as it is today with a U.S. four star general in command.

Pros and Cons of each Alternative from Many Views

Arguments for keeping the current structure and not transitioning wartime OPCON on 1 Dec 2015

- We know currently and have trained to the current structure for years. It has worked to deter war. Yes, it has not deterred DPRK provocations but there has not been a resumption of the Korean War for 60 years. One should not mess with success!
- A supporting – supported relationship will never be as effective as a combined command.
- Some argue, if we transition to a ROK commander the U.S. will reduce its commitment to the defense of the ROK. Clearly the ROK – U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty will remain in effect. In this treaty the U.S. has promised to fully help defend the ROK in case of attack. Changing wartime OPCON does not reduce or change this commitment but some argue the effect will be the same and the U.S. will not be “as committed.”
- The Transition should be condition based, not time based. The ROK-U.S. group recently formed is drafting this new set of “conditions.” I would like to point out that Strategic Alliance 2015 (SA), agreed to in 2010 by the Secretary of Defense and Minister of Defense (MinDef), has a complete set of command and control performance standards the ROK must demonstrate and the CFC commander must certify before OPCON Transition occurs. These standards cut across all elements of the ROK JCS staff and subordinate commands. They have been evaluated and results report to SecDef and MinDef following every theater level exercise since early 2010. Also, SA 2015 spells out capabilities the ROK must procure (or at least start to procure) before OPCON Transition. Again, progress in procuring these capabilities is reported at every meeting



between the SecDef and MinDef. I believe the recently formed group is looking primarily at conditions in NK and seeing how they should effect the decision to transition wartime OPCON. Some say that we should not transition until North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons. To me this means we should not transition until reunification happens because I believe North Korea will never give up their nuclear weapons under any circumstance short of changing the North Korea regime.

- Some argue that changing wartime OPCON will embolden North Korea as North Korea could read this as a lessening of U.S. commitment.
- Some point to the perceived U.S. disengagement around the world (Syria, reduced forces in Europe, etc.) in addition to our budget and manpower issues as evidence that if we are no longer in command it will be the “first step” that will allow the U.S. to move away from our treaty obligations.
- Some say the ROK leadership is not ready to take command of a warfight. I completely disagree with this argument as they are professional, modern, and trained. I am confident a ROK CJCS is able to command the defense of Korea during a warfight.

Arguments for transitioning wartime OPCON on 1 Dec 2015

- The number one responsibility of any nation is to protect its people. The ROK is the 12th largest economy in the world with a large, modern, trained military. It has been over 60 years since the Armistice of the Korean War was signed. The time has come for the ROK to take on the responsibility of defending its nation. This does not mean defend it by itself. Again, the U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty responsibilities would remain.
- Putting the ROK in charge of the warfight would further deter North Korea. The U.S. agreement for a ROK commander while at the same time maintaining our Mutual Defense Treaty obligations signals to North Korea that the ROK military is very strong and professional. Why else would the U.S. agree to put troops under ROK command?
- With a ROK commander in charge of the wartime defense of the ROK they will spend more on their own defense. Some argue that as long as the U.S. is in charge the ROK will not buy the systems required for their defense because they know that the U.S. will send these systems to support the U.S. commander. Key systems under discussion are ISR (Global Hawk), Missile Defense (PAC 3), critical munitions, and a next generation fighter. The ROK has been debating all of these this year. A key sign will be whether these systems are in the ROK 2014 Defense budget.
- The manpower, infrastructure and cost for OPCON Transition has been planned and resourced. USFK has already started to adjust manpower assignments to fill the KORCOM positions. The new KORCOM Headquarters at USAG Humphreys is well along in construction. This new headquarters is designed for KORCOM in size and computer infrastructure. A CFC headquarters has significantly different and larger requirements. If OPCON Transition were to be delayed, the cost of this delay would have to be paid. The U.S. will argue this cost should be paid by the ROK.
- ROK leadership has proven in many exercises and real world events that they are able and ready to command in a warfight just as they are doing today in Armistice and during many challenging North Korea provocations over the last several years.



Arguments for transitioning wartime OPCON but under a CFC-ROK (as described above) on 1 Dec 2015

- All of the reasons in the section above still apply.
- With a ROK leading CFC-ROK, the command structure does not have to change in the middle of a crisis. I recommend this new combined headquarters with a ROK commander should be the headquarters in charge during Armistice and Wartime and any other contingencies. The ROK JCS could then transition to a role much like our JCS. Yes, we have practiced transition in crisis but it is not perfect and must be retaught every year (as a result of the U.S. “one year at a time” deployment practice).
- A combined headquarters in Armistice allows the U.S. to better understand provocations and be bettered prepared to support the ROK during these provocations.

My recommendations:

- The number one responsibility of a country is to protect its own people. Korea has this capability being the 12th richest country in the world with an outstanding military. By 1 Dec 2015, over 62 years will have passed since the end of the Korean War. It is time for Korea to command the defense of its own country.
- We should maintain a combined senior command structure (CFC-ROK) but with a ROK general/admiral as the commander. This headquarters should be responsible for the defense of Korea in Armistice and wartime.
- We should transition wartime OPCON to the ROK on 1 Dec 2015 with the CFC-ROK structure of a combined theater command with the ROK in charge.
- The U.S. should reaffirm it will keep at least 28,500 personnel in Korea for the foreseeable future...well after OPCON Transition occurs. The U.S. should not reduce the number of service members and their families that are stationed in Korea for three years (about 4,000 of the 28,500 troops, the remainder of service members are in Korea on one year assignments). Service members stationed in Korea for three years bring much needed continuity and are a strong signal of long term commitment.
- The U.S. should reaffirm its commitment to the Mutual Defense Treaty under this new command structure and make it clear what forces the U.S. will send for each of the Combined OPLANS.

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