

SOUTH KOREA WARTIME OPCON TRANSITION: A STEP FORWARD

Siva Priya Murugadoss, *Risk Intelligence Team*

INTRODUCTION

After almost two decades of processes and planning, South Korea has progressed in the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON). During the 53rd annual Security Consultative Meeting (SCM), the US Pentagon Chief Lloyd J. Austin and South Korea's Defence Minister Suh Wook decided to conduct the full operational capability (FOC) assessment in 2022, which is a pending process for the transfer of wartime OPCON to South Korea. The transition of wartime OPCON will transform South Korea as a nation with a revolutionized defence system in modern times. The OPCON transition can certainly bolster the Republic of Korea's (ROK) military, help it achieve stability to deter North Korea and can even attain a special status as a Northeast Asian Security hub.

Combatant Command (CCMD) or Command Authority

- According to the Department of Defense (DOD), "Combatant Command constitutes the authority to issue orders covering every aspect of military operations and administrations".

Operational Control (OPCON)

- "Operational Control is the subset of command authority that entails the ability to assign tasks to armed forces".

Combined Forces Command (CFC)

- Created in addition to United Nations Command (UNC) in 1978, they help to defend South Korea and enhance ROK's operational capability. The CFC command structure consists of an equal number of U.S. and ROK officers.

BACKGROUND

1948-1978

- ❖ After the independence of South Korea on 15 Aug 1948, the Chief of the US Army military government in Korea (USAMGIK) and then Republic of Korea's (ROK) President Rhee Syngman signed an agreement to gradually attain the command (OPCON) of its military forces. After the U.S started withdrawing its forces from ROK in Jun 1949, the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 made the U.S forces return to the Korean peninsula.
- ❖ In Jul 1950, the South Korean President signed the Taejon Agreement, under which command authority of all ROK military forces was handed over to United Nations Command's (UNC) General Douglas MacArthur. Followed by the armistice in 1953, President Rhee signed the U.S-ROK Mutual Defence Treaty in Nov 1974. According to the treaty, the UNC was responsible for the command of defence of the ROK. However, the situation changed in the mid-1970s, after the non-US members removed their combat troops from UNC.

1978-1994

- ❖ Due to the tenuous condition of UNC, the U.S - ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC) was established in Nov 1978, a separate entity different from UNC to defend South Korea. Under the establishment of CFC, the OPCON process was jointly guided by the U.S and South Korea, whereas under the UNC, the U.S unilaterally held the OPCON over the ROK forces. Both countries annually discuss the status of CFC OPCON.
- ❖ However, the U.S and South Korea's discussion over the OPCON transition has been delayed due to North Korea's continuous intrusive events. Due to the North Korea's nuclear issue in 1991, the discussion of OPCON was postponed to 1996. Amidst that, in 1994, South Korea attained the armistice operational command of its forces, also known as peacetime OPCON.

2007-2018

- ❖ The South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun had a discussion with the US for the return of wartime OPCON command in 2007. But, in 2013, increased missile tests during Kim Jong Un's administration delayed the OPCON transition discussions. Finally, in 2017, both parties agreed for early preparation of effective OPCON transfer. Both countries during the 50th U.S.-Republic of Korea Security Consultative Meeting in 2018, signed the guiding principles for wartime OPCON transition called Conditions-based OPCON Transition Plan (COTP), under which a four-star South Korean general would lead the OPCON with a deputy commander from the US to assist.

2019

- ❖ At the 51st Security Consultative Meeting in 2019, the allies reviewed the results of Initial Operational Capability (IOC) and agreed to execute the Full Operational Capability (FOC) and Full Mission Capability (FMC) before the end of Moon Jae-In's administration, which would require three-stage assessments to transfer the wartime OPCON to South Korea.

DEFENSE CAPABILITIES OF SOUTH KOREA

The idea of transition of wartime OPCON to South Korea along with American confidence to hand over the responsibilities to South Korea was started after the constant developments of the South Korean military in terms of its personnel, ammunition, and modernization. Upon the remaining assessment- planned for execution in 2022, the defence budget captures the spotlight. South Korea has allocated a budget of nearly KRW54.61 trillion (USD46.32 billion) for defense in 2022, wherein KRW37.91 trillion for military operations and KRW16.69 trillion for force modernization. In addition to this, South Korea's progress on five critical capabilities for the OPCON transition plan explains the promptness in transition.

✚ Intelligence, Surveillance, And Reconnaissance (ISR)

South Korea has recently improved the ISR system in its military, especially in the air force. South Korea plans for new ISR platforms in Korean aircrafts specifically to attain the capability for OPCON transition. Additionally, Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) has secured a contract for the development of a Baekdu intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft system for the Republic of Korea Air Force (RoKAF), its second development project.

✚ Command, Control, Communication, Computers, And Intelligence (C4I)

In 2020, South Korea completed a comprehensive project for upgrade and integration of all of its command, control, communications, computers and intelligence (C4I) under one command, worth \$124 million.

✚ Ballistic Missile Defense (Modernized Missile Defense)

The defense budget of 2022, which has a separate allocation for force modernization, includes the LIG Nex1's Long-range Surface-to-Air Missile and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) system. Moreover, the country will be involved in the testing of a newly acquired submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).

✚ Countering WMD (Warning, Protection, Decontamination Capabilities) and Critical Munitions (Increased Munition Stockpiles)

Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) of North Korea has been one of the concerns of South Korea. Along with the U.S forces, South Korea has been attempting to negotiate with its counterpart to neutralize arms development and confrontations in the Korean Peninsula. South Korea has also been involved in the manufacturing and sales of munitions, which shows the steady development of South Korean capabilities.

CHANGE IN STATUS-QUO

Initially, the post-transition of wartime OPCON would provide military sovereignty to South Korea. Upgradation to wartime OPCON can raise South Korea's position at the Inter-Korean and regional levels. After the transition, a South Korean four-star Army General will be appointed as the Commanding General of Combined Forces Command (CGCFC), and a US officer will be appointed as Deputy Commander. However, the changes in CGCFC does not change the structure of the alliance since any executions during wartime requires approval from Presidents of South Korea and the US. Moreover, increased military capabilities, which makes the country militarily equal to North Korea will pave the way for South Korea to conduct future talks on bilateral arms reduction and peace establishment as well as reunion of the Korean peninsula.

LIMITATIONS ON ACHIEVING WARTIME OPCON TRANSITION

- The progress of transition in the future is sceptical because of the change of administration in 2022. The current South Korean President Moon Jae In has expressed his interest and planned to achieve the transition before the end of his term. Due to numerous postponements and the pandemic, the planned transition processes fall under the next administration. Though more than 50% of the public and politicians are favourable for transition, post-Presidential election of 2022, can change the support value.
- As per the Inter-Korean Military Agreement, any defence developments require prior discussions between South Korea and North Korea. Though North Korea has not adhered to the agreement, South Korea's drastic change from peacetime to wartime OPCON will receive condemnation from North Korea. Moreover, possible attacks or defence development can be expected from North Korea. Also, South Korea's recent defence modernisation can encourage North Korea to balance its military capabilities as a counterattack (much like the present missile tests).
- Upon transition, defence responsibility of South Korea will increase, also requiring an additional defence budget. Since the budget comprises of tax revenues from the public, the possibility of an increase of tax will affect the people with low income. As an alternative, redirecting funds on defence might affect other sectors.
- The transition plan does not explain the status of the United Nations Command (UNC). Transition can only change the CGCFC but not the Commanding General of United Nations Command (CGUNC), which is mentioned in Resolution 84. Since UNC acts as a headquarters to international forces, it can help South Korea during wartime. But the transition plan must take separate measures for continuous participation of UNC.
- Though the chances of China and Russia's involvement remain low, their possible engagements with North Korea similar to the 1950 Korean War could present as a threat for the US and South Korea.



CONCLUSION

The wartime OPCON transition to South Korea is a contentious issue. Different opinions of politicians, scholars, defence analysts and the public, have already caused a delay in the implementation process. As the transition has less impact on the current command chain or the strategies followed by CFC, the alliance between the United States and South Korea is likely to remain the same. Other factors like internal politics division and public opinions can be appeased by providing complete details of transition and ways to handle post-transition implications. Moreover, the successful wartime OPCON transition to South Korea provides long-term leverage over North Korea.

Therefore, South Korea has a high probability of conducting the second assessment in 2022 if all the significant attributes are managed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Siva Priya Murugadoss is a part of the Risk Intelligence Team. She has completed Master's in International Studies from Women's Christian College. She is interested in risk analysis and intelligence. Her interests cater to the geopolitics of regions - Asia Pacific, Africa, as well as resource geopolitics.



www.worisgo.com



risk.services@worisgo.com



1800-572-8600

Prepared at the Risk Assessment and Analysis Centre, Bangalore

©COPYRIGHT-WoRisGo

Terms of Use - The business continuity, compliance and security risk advisory contained above is based on analysis of information in public domain and our expertise in the domains. For certain verifications, we have also depended on due diligence with officials wherever necessary or feasible. The analysis and information are provided on as-is basis with no liability. Various organizations may arrive at different outcomes, business continuity plans and other decisions based off on these inputs. Our analysis is just one of the several data points towards enabling such decisions. This analysis should be consumed in the context of your organization's risk appetite, business practices, governance policies and bearing other situational and relevant factors in mind.



**Your GRC Partner:
our assurance during
uncertainties**