

THE TRANSFER OF WARTIME OPERATIONAL CONTROL: CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

Chung Tae-Ik

Former South Korean Ambassador to Russia

The transfer of wartime military operational control in South Korea has become a pressing security issue that remains to be resolved. The issue has evolved and shifted according to the security situation on the Korean peninsula and changes in South Korean society's perception of the United States.

At the outbreak of the Korean War, President and Commander in Chief Syngman Rhee relinquished operational command to General Douglas MacArthur, head of the United Nations forces. This measure was accepted as an unavoidable action undertaken by the president to preserve the nation in a time of crisis. After the armistice, in a 1954 agreement supplementing the Mutual Defense Treaty between South Korea (ROK) and the United States, it was agreed that the United Nations Command would retain operational control as long as it remained responsible for South Korea's defense. After the height of the cold war, in the process of debating President Jimmy Carter's plans in 1977 to withdraw American ground combat forces, operational control of Korean military forces was transferred from the UN Command to the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) in 1978.

The issue of transferring operational control arose after South Korean troops attached to the CFC were mobilized for the December 12, 1979 coup d'état without informing American officials, thereby severely damaging the chain of command. Furthermore, anti-American sentiment was spurred by controversy over the American military's responsibility in the Kwangju uprising on May 18, 1980. Domestic public opinion

induced presidential candidate Roh Tae-Woo to make the transfer of military operational control a campaign promise in August 1987. This, coupled with the passage of the Nunn-Warner Amendment in 1989 and the directional change in American defense policy in 1990, became the backdrop for the transfer of peacetime operational control.

A subject of debate throughout the 1990s, the transfer of wartime operational control has been a policy goal of the current administration from the beginning of its term. During a ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in 2005, the two sides agreed to accelerate the process, and it is anticipated that a roadmap for the transfer will be presented at the 38th meeting of the SCM in October.

The issue of transferring wartime operational control should not be superficially handled from a polarized point of view, but rather a balanced approach should be sought through discussion. The issue is a matter of guaranteeing sovereignty as well as the security of a new generation. As such it is necessary to emphasize the opportunity and reduce the sense of crisis presented by the transfer.

First, operational control was relinquished at a time of national emergency, outside the bounds of the constitution, and thus it is only natural that this issue should be normalized through a transfer of operational control. Historically, Korea ceded military command to Ming Dynasty forces during the *Imjin waeran* (Japanese invasion in the 16th century) and to American troops during the Korean War in order to survive. Entrusting the nation's fate to a foreign country's military due to lack of defense capability is a part of Korean history that should not be repeated.

Second, as history teaches us, the fate of any nation that cannot react to a changing international order caused by the emergence of a dominant state is uncertain at best and doomed at worst. Therefore it is necessary to examine the position of the United

States, a leader of the current Northeast Asian order, regarding its wartime operational control. In the aftermath of 9.11, America has had to call upon its troops stationed overseas in order to combat security threats posed by terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In accordance with its reformulated policy to confront the new security threats of the 21st century, America has taken a positive stance on the issue of transferring wartime operational control. Furthermore, the progress in inter-Korean relations, the rise of South Korea's economic strength as the world's eleventh largest economy, and American reliance on the South's improved military capabilities form the background for receptiveness to the transfer of control. It will be difficult to reverse the trend towards transfer, in light of the ROK and U.S. governments' respective policies.

Third, North Korea is developing nuclear weapons and missiles in order to resolve its unstable security situation, brought about by its self-incurred isolation and the drastic drop and weakening of its power. A response must be formulated to thoroughly address the perception of crisis that has arisen because the transfer issue is being pursued in the face of a nuclear threat. The roadmap for transferring wartime control, which is to be agreed upon through the SCM, must be formed through a rational and delicate process of linking South Korea's Defense Reform 2020 and the future of the ROK-U.S. alliance. The Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia face a variety of security challenges: the constant and asymmetric threat posed by North Korea, emergence of a dominant state, terrorism and internet security, assurance of secure sea routes, etc. A comprehensive ROK-U.S. joint defense policy, with a complex command structure to combat these and other types of threats, must be studied in depth. In particular, a NATO-like organization that would prevent against the appearance of a dominant power, as well as a joint defense system that provided a fixed security structure, would contribute to a sense of security for South Korea.

Fourth, since the transfer of wartime operational command is essentially a restoration of supreme command of the military, a measure transferring control back to the president would be sufficient. However, such a measure would have important implications for South Korea's security, such as the additional expenditure needed for defense and the resulting burden placed on citizens. The National Assembly should examine the suitability of the transfer policy and the appropriateness of the financial burden by conducting a budget review and an inspection of the administration. As such a national referendum on this issue is not necessary.

Fifth, several issues must be practically addressed: the lack of South Korea's in-house operational command ability; maintenance of "hardware," such as a deterrent military force and cutting-edge information facilities; and acquisition of "software," such as deterrent strategy, wartime planning, and intelligence gathering and analysis. Maintaining a rational and dependable defense force will strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance. The two sides should consider opening a new forum for negotiations where the foreign affairs and defense ministers from both countries can discuss outstanding security issues related to the alliance.

Sixth, the transfer of control will not only reinforce the principle of resolving issues affecting the Korean peninsula without outside interference, but also serve as an opportunity to reopen talks between the two Koreas and further the construction of a peaceful system on the peninsula. The transfer would decrease the likelihood of military conflict between North Korea and the United States. Although a solution has been sought through the multilateral structure of the Six-Party Talks, the nuclear issue remains at an impasse, and the United States should use this as a chance to directly approach North Korea and resolve the issue through negotiations. Furthermore, South Korea should concentrate its efforts on translating improved inter-Korean relations into caps on defense expenditure and armament reductions, thereby easing the immense

financial burden on both sides. More importantly, the transfer of operational control offers the advantage that South Korean troops will be able to be rapidly deployed in order to prevent chaos in the event of sudden change in North Korea. More emphasis must be placed on creating a diplomatic strategy that will take advantage of the opportunities for peace offered by the transfer.

In conclusion, the transfer of wartime operational control, which has been made possible by the end of the Cold War, the South-North Summit Meeting in 2000, and changes in both domestic and foreign trends, has become an inevitable process. The Korean peninsula faces many challenges above and beyond security concerns, including the rise of China, Japan's shift to the right, North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons, and America's change in strategy. Both a diplomatic strategy that manages relations with these four countries and a military capable of combating any security threat must be cultivated in order to prevent a repetition of the tragedy that befell the nation one hundred years ago. Rather than adhere to a division that has existed for over half a century, now is the time to accept the trend of global changes and craft an integrated policy for a peaceful Korean peninsula. The future of the peninsula hangs on today's strategic vision and its resolute execution.