

## **Force Restructuring in the ROK-US Military Alliance: Challenges and Implications**

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The foreign policy issue regarding the ROK-US alliance that dominated the news headlines in South Korea for much of the spring and summer of 2006 focused on Wartime Operational Control (OPCON) of ROK and US forces and how this command and control relationship would change in coming years. Unfortunately, this issue has received almost no attention in the United States, where security concerns relating to other regions in the world have consistently dominated the headlines. In the view of the author, this has the potential to be extremely dangerous, as South Korea is Washington's 7<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner, a staunch and loyal ally for six decades, and a country that has become culturally, economically, and politically linked to many aspects of society in the United States.

This article will analyze the issue of changing Wartime OPCON, and the potential impact that this issue will have on the security and stability of the Korean Peninsula. Thus, it will be important first to engage in a discussion of the vulnerabilities that the ROK military has and will have in the near future to the North Korean threat as command and control of ROK and US forces transitions to a new infrastructure. As such, it will be important to address the gaps in the capabilities of ROK military forces. It will also be important to discuss the realities of Combined Forces Command (CFC) and how changes to this structure are likely to impact the capabilities of South Korea and the United States to fight a conflict with North Korea. Once this has been determined, I will turn to an analysis of the North Korean threat, how it has evolved in reaction to economic realities, and how that has impacted the capabilities of ROK and US forces to fight a successful war if such a crisis were to occur.

### **Defending a Dangerous Neighborhood: ROK Military Reforms and Vulnerabilities**

While a change in Wartime OPCON has been an issue that

dominated South Korea's national security agenda during much of 2006, this is directly tied to the issue of military reform for the armed forces that will (for the most part) be affected by OPCON. Military reforms in South Korea began in earnest during 2005, and are continuing as of the writing of this article. Indeed, defending a nation-state against aggression is a vital issue at any time during its history, and South Korea is no exception. Thus, this article will first address the implications and challenges that confront the South Korean military as it continues down the road of significant (and costly) reform.

The announced reform plan for the South Korean military is to be completed by 2020, and will reduce the active duty military from 680,000 to 500,000. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the cuts will be the drastic reduction in the number of Army divisions – from 47 to about 20.<sup>2</sup> While air and naval forces are also to be reduced (though not as drastically), their capability will be increased (with upgraded technology), and the whole plan is to cost at least 623 trillion won (approximately \$640 billion at 2006 monetary rates) by the time all reforms have been completed in 2020.<sup>3</sup> The Army plans to expand the operational boundaries of a combat unit from 30 to 100 kilometers. The long-range plan also includes acquisition of spy aircraft, advanced attack helicopters, armored vehicles, and self-propelled artillery. The Navy will receive new, “next-generation” submarines, while the Air Force will reduce the number of fighter jets from 500 to 420 – but upgrade overall capabilities by acquiring F-15K's, airborne early warning systems, and airborne tankers.<sup>4</sup> To go along with this plan Defense Minister Yoon Kwang-ung has announced that the Ministry of Defense will increase the number of civilians who work for the military from 23,000 to 30,000. While these reforms seem to be important and necessary, there are reportedly many military officers in South Korea who are worried that without securing the necessary funds to upgrade the ROK military (which will be discussed next), the rapid reduction in troop levels could jeopardize the security of a South Korean force facing a North Korean threat whose main capability is its mass. All funds for military spending need to be approved through the South Korean National Assembly.<sup>5</sup>

There are two very important challenges that the ROK military faces as it goes through its reforms – finance and transformation. In fact, many in South Korea – particularly those on the right – have argued that actually achieving the budget to accomplish all of the lofty goals discussed above will be the biggest obstacle the government will encounter as it travels down its road to military reform.<sup>6</sup> The Roh Moo-hyun government has announced that its goal is to achieve a “self-reliant defense.” This is certainly a lofty and expensive goal when one notes that the enemy has the fifth largest military in the world, a growing ballistic missile and nuclear weapons capability, and an ongoing foreign policy of belligerence with its neighbors. It is also an expensive goal when one realizes that the target date for the military being 3.0% of the national budget is 2015 (3.0% spending for the budget is what most experts assess will be necessary for the ROK military to meet the majority of its reform goals).<sup>7</sup> The date of 2015 is obviously a long way off, and this leads to the next concern: will the South Korean government actually be able to pay for all of this? Because of the way that South Korean law establishes spending for the government, there is quite simply no way to guarantee that there will be a stable spending line of budgets year after year that will be necessary for defense reforms to be completed with smooth cooperation between agencies by stipulating specific spending guaranteed for the long-term. The budget could (and in fact is likely to) change from year to year and President to President depending on what the foreign policy agenda of each administration is. This does not bode well for a steady budget for defense reforms between now and 2020.<sup>8</sup>

While simply having a steady budget to meet all of the needs for aggressive reforms is certainly a daunting challenge in itself, an even greater one facing the South Korean military as it seeks to become “self-reliant,” is the issue of transformation. This is particularly challenging if one considers the way the South Korean military has been structured quite literally since the end of the Korean War. Within the ROK-US military alliance, first under the umbrella of UN Command and, since 1978, under the umbrella of Combined Forces Command (CFC), the South Korean military has been set up and deployed to engage in

complimentary missions with the US military when it comes to fighting a war on the Korean Peninsula. In order to be truly transformed, the ROK military must now assume certain extremely important missions, but more importantly, they must adapt their capabilities in order to reach the capability currently held by the US forces that conduct these missions. Two of the very important capabilities that the US currently brings to the Peninsula are airpower and C4I (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, and Intelligence). Without drastic reforms and upgrades in the way the South Korean military currently conducts these missions, they will be a very large, military force with lots of power but no real ability to direct or support it.

The changes that the ROK military has initiated and has plans to implement are important, but they do not address, nor will they provide, an advanced “sensor to shooter” capability. Systems such as the “advanced digital network” recently deployed to the Fifth Army Corps and the launch of the ROK’s first civil-military satellite are excellent examples of this. The “advanced digital network” is not truly operational and, in fact, is not hooked into any national systems – which, in fact, do not exist yet. Indeed, the satellite capability which will eventually supplement ROK forces years down the road appears really to be about C3 (command and control communications), not C4I, which also integrates the important capability of intelligence sensors directly linked to commanders in the field.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note, that in contemporary terms, South Korea is almost entirely dependent on the United States for strategic level information, and there are currently no plans to upgrade significantly systems or sensors owned or scheduled to be acquired by the South Korean government that will meet or even come significantly close to the capability.<sup>10</sup> While not widely discussed in civilian circles, modern C4I is not simply about gaining greater communications capability across the frequency spectrum, but truly consists of a better “sensor to shooter” capability and perhaps just as importantly, “information dominance.” It is this information dominance that currently is one of the advantages CFC holds over the NKPA in any potential conflict, and is the key capability that has allowed the

United States to maintain an edge in any force-on-force conflict they have engaged in around the globe.<sup>11</sup> Thus, C4I remains a concern for the ROK military as they seek to achieve “self-reliant defense.”

The ROK military has addressed the issue of airpower for its forces. The ROKAF is purchasing 40 F-15K advanced fighter aircraft that will be capable of taking the fight to the North in any force-on-force conflict, and plans to purchase 20 more F-15K's in 2009.<sup>12</sup> While this seems like an important acquisition (and it is), it has been hurt by exactly the same concern articulated earlier. The ROKAF is only purchasing half the number of F-15K aircraft originally planned for, because of budget constraints that have haunted the military as it seeks to upgrade its capabilities.<sup>13</sup>

While advanced fighter jets are certainly the “sexiest” capability in which the ROKAF appears unable to meet its projected goals, there is another very important deficiency – the lift of South Korea's elite special forces and airborne brigades. This is yet another example of a capability that is vital but to date remains a void filled by US forces. North Korea has the largest number of special operations forces in the world with up to 100,000 men who can be airlifted, maritime lifted, or who are likely to infiltrate south through numerous tunnels in the DMZ. One of the key ways to counter these forces would be with South Korea's own elite units. The Army has seven special-forces brigades, plus five independent brigades (two infantry and three counter-infiltration), along with other airborne assets. All of these units would need to be airlifted to the fight in any conflict. Unfortunately, to carry this very large force that literally numbers in the tens of thousands, the ROKAF has only 25 aircraft – 10 C130Hs and 15 smaller, Spanish-designed, twin-engine CN-235Ms, an inventory completely incapable of accomplishing this mission.<sup>14</sup> What is the plan today to airlift these troops? Currently, in training, planning, and in exercises, the South Koreans have relied on US airlift capabilities to transport the majority of their airborne troops. If this capability is to be addressed, it will involve a huge investment in aircraft acquisition, maintenance, infrastructure upgrades, and training of personnel.

While C4I and airpower are certainly gaps in South Korea's military capabilities that had received a great deal of attention, there are other gaps that rate discussion. One is the support for South Korea's amphibious landing forces – the ROK Marine Corps. For anyone who has conducted an analysis of military forces in East Asia, there can be no doubt that the best trained, best led, and best equipped Marine Corps is in South Korea.<sup>15</sup> But any Marine Corps is only as effective as its amphibious lift (specially equipped ships that carry the troops to the fight and provide command and control for these forces as they phase across the beach during combat). The ROK Navy is currently lacking in its capability to provide its own Marine Corps the lift to conduct large-scale amphibious operations. As with ROK airborne troops, the primary means of lifting ROK Marines to the fight in planning, training and exercises, comes from the United States. The US Navy has been factored in as the force that will be the primary means of amphibious lift for the ROK Marine Corps throughout the history of the alliance. To date, South Korea has built and fielded one “LPX” class amphibious assault ship that is capable of lifting 700 troops and their associated equipment to the fight. Construction continues on more ships, with three scheduled to be completed by 2013.<sup>16</sup> But this and the other smaller craft that the ROK Navy currently has are still lacking in the capability to lift all of the troops and their associated equipment (and providing the associated command and control) should a conflict requiring the large-scale participation (any war where a large-scale amphibious landing would be necessary) of the ROK Marine Corps occur.

Yet another critical example of a capability that the ROK military would need to have in order to be truly “self-reliant” is an anti-missile defense capable of shooting down the more than 600 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) that North Korea currently has deployed and pointed at targets throughout South Korea.<sup>17</sup> Certainly the missile test-launches that Pyongyang conducted on 4/5 July of 2006 illustrate this point. While the Taepo-Dong 2 that was test launched (unsuccessfully) and the No Dong's also test-launched can reasonably be considered systems that are not primarily built and deployed with the targeting of South Korea in mind, certainly the SCUD missiles

that were also tested do not fall into this category. They are deployed specifically for the purpose of targeting key nodes in the South. To exacerbate this threat, at least one of the SCUD systems tested during July of 2006 now appears to have been an extended range SCUD – capable of potentially hitting targets anywhere in the South.<sup>18</sup>

The South Korean government does not currently have its own capability to shoot down a North Korean ballistic missile. Reportedly, Seoul has plans for possible purchase of older versions of the Patriot Air Defense Anti-Missile system known as the “PAC-2” from Germany, but these systems are nearly ineffective against the SCUD systems that North Korea has pointed at targets in South Korea.<sup>19</sup> The only capability that currently exists on the Korean Peninsula that can effectively provide anti-missile defense against a North Korean attack is the one provided by United States military forces. The US Army mans, maintains, and operates the PAC-3 systems that conduct this mission. USFK deploys a total of 64 advanced PAC-3 Patriot systems in Korea, located at several bases in the South.<sup>20</sup>

Other significant gaps exist in the capabilities of ROK military forces that are too numerous to mention here. Suffice to say, even when taking into account the issues already discussed, it is clear that there are many areas in national defense where ROK forces are vulnerable in any war with North Korea. The military reforms that the South Korean government has planned over the next several years will be very important for the security and stability of the Korean Peninsula. While in my view it is correct to take on these reforms, to date the government has not addressed many of the shortfalls that would leave their military vulnerable during a full-scale war. Especially critical are the two most important (arguably) and probably most costly issues: C4I and airpower. Hopefully, these issues will eventually be addressed in a realistic manner that will bring about change and true modernization to the South Korean military.

### **The Realities of CFC: Pragmatic Concerns for National Defense**

The issue of Wartime OPCON is certainly one that the Roh administration has said is important to address in order achieve a

goal of what the South Korean President has termed an issue of “National Sovereignty.”<sup>21</sup> In order to understand the facts associated with this issue, it is first important to address how command and control works within the current ROK-US alliance, and how that relates directly to the issue of Wartime OPCON as it relates to the structure of CFC.

The current South Korean constitution states that the President can send his military to war, but he must first get approval from the National Assembly before sending troops overseas.<sup>22</sup> As a change in Wartime OPCON occurs, this will mean that the South Korean President will become the sole National Command Authority (NCA) for ROK forces in a war with North Korea. The United States and South Korea signed an agreement in 1994 that gives South Korea complete peacetime control over all its armed forces. Only during wartime do designated ROK forces get assigned to the Commander of CFC. As it stands in late 2006 when agreed upon DEFCON conditions have been met, CFC assumes operational control of all US forces and all South Korean forces that have been assigned to CFC.<sup>23</sup> What are the geo-political realities of this arrangement? It means that the ROK President, presumably based on the advice of his Defense Minister and Chairman of the JCS, instructs his Ministry of National Defense to assign whatever forces are necessary (or have been agreed upon) to CFC. It is very important to note here that these forces do not get assigned to CFC unless the ROK President decides to do so. The nature of the crisis and agreed upon steps that have been organized in combined planning cells would be likely determinants of what ROK units would chop to CFC and when. The same is true for the US side, though the technical aspects would be different and would also involve PACOM. In a war (the most likely crises where this would occur), combined planning has already laid the groundwork for how this would occur.

During Wartime OPCON, the Commander of CFC works for two NCA's: the Presidents of South Korea and the United States. The Commander of CFC is currently a US General, but he answers to a “ROK-US Military Committee,” co-chaired by the Chairmen of the JCS of both nations and which exists under a “dual-command system” that takes strategic guidance from the

Presidents and senior defense officials (in the case of the ROK, the Minister of National Defense, in the case of the US, the Secretary of Defense) of both nations.<sup>24</sup> The Commander of CFC carries out operational decisions based on the strategic guidance he receives from the two NCA's and passed through the Military Committee down to his level; then, he uses these decisions to issue orders to the combined force. I have specifically laid out this command and control arrangement because once one examines the details of the infrastructure and command relationships that comprise CFC, it becomes obvious that although ROK forces come under the command of CFC during wartime, they do not come under that command of the United States national command authority. Rather, both ROK and US troops are strategically directed to fight under a combined command that takes its guidance from the leaders of both nations.

#### **Fighting a War Without CFC: Challenges and Implications**

As changes to command and control in the ROK-US alliance occur, there are many issues that will be affected by it. But one thing is for sure, it will change, and as it does, CFC will eventually go away. This was confirmed in South Korea during August of 2006 when Defense Minister Yoon Kwang-ung confirmed to the South Korean National Assembly that the ROK military had in fact submitted a road map (which would be revised as talks with Donald Rumsfeld approached in October) that called for all concrete plans for dissolving of CFC to be completed by 2011 as CFC would dissolve in 2012.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, as everyone who follows Korean security issues knows, Rumsfeld countered with a formal letter to the South Korean Defense Ministry, indicating Washington's intention to turn over Wartime OPCON (which of course also means the dissolving of CFC), by 2009.<sup>26</sup>

The move by the US Secretary of Defense was rather confusing to many analysts, as it appeared to be a complete reversal of a policy that was based on dissolving CFC as the ROK military's capabilities evolved, to a simple timeline-based-end to CFC. The Secretary, in fact, made statements during March of 2006 that strongly suggested his feeling was that the

change of Wartime OPCON should occur only as the ROK military was able to raise its capabilities to levels that would make it able to independently conduct a defense of the Korean Peninsula and deter an attack from North Korea.<sup>27</sup> Deputy under Secretary of Defense for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Richard Lawless reaffirmed the Pentagon's goal to dissolve CFC by 2009 in Congressional testimony on September 26, 2006, when he stated in part, "While 2009 may appear ambitious, it is readily achievable. The Commander of CFC, working with the ROK Chairman of the JCS, will establish an Implementation Working Group that will report directly to the two of them and manage the implementation process."<sup>28</sup> When the senior defense leaders from both nations met at the 38<sup>th</sup> Security Consultative Meeting on October 20-21 of 2006, they agreed to complete changes to Wartime OPCON after October 15, 2009, and no later than March 15 2012.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the summer and fall of 2006 has shown that both governments now agree that CFC is an infrastructure that will eventually be one for the history books.

As CFC is dissolved, there are many issues that will arise. I believe it is useful to discuss these issues and to look at how they will impact the security and stability of the Korean Peninsula. Hopefully, the reader agrees that the first issue, returning of sovereignty to South Korea, is really not an issue at all. The ROK military does not ever come under the direct command of the United States government and, in fact, the American Commander of CFC answers to a dual NCA. To call CFC an infrastructure that infringes on the sovereignty of South Korea would be the same as saying that NATO infringes on the sovereignty of countries like the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy. But, in fact, these countries have never called for a "return of their sovereignty." To be sure, according to Park Geun-hye, the Chairwoman of the Grand National Party (GNP) and the leader of Roh's main opposition, many NATO officials regard the Korea-US CFC as an effective model and question the move of independent operations in a war by armies commanded by two countries once CFC is dissolved.<sup>30</sup> Thus, while it is now obvious that CFC is going away – largely because of how hard the present government in the Blue House has pushed for it – it should be very clear that this is in reality a move to play to

domestic politics in Korea where the current President is largely supported by a base on the left that has long favored radical change in the structure of the ROK-US Alliance, whether it met the practical needs of self-defense or not.

Another issue that is important to examine is the list of capabilities that will disappear as CFC is dissolved. There can be no doubt that the likelihood is high that flowing forces under Operational War plans (commonly referred to as OPLANs) will become an exceptionally more difficult undertaking. Current war plans will quite literally need to be torn up and a whole new structure and plan written to involve separate warfighting commands and an entirely different flow and integration of forces from the United States to the Korean Peninsula. This will cause difficulties that will probably come to light more clearly over the next three to five years. As it stands right now, CFC guarantees victory. There is no doubt of this – including in the minds of those who wield power in North Korea. A future, separate command arrangement is likely to have many more problems with flexibility, transparency, planning, integration of war fighting capabilities, and fratricide issues. Brookings Institution scholar Michael O’Hanlon recently addressed some of the problems faced in having two separate chains of command for the unique geography of the Korean Peninsula when he wrote, “When all is said and done, the new proposed policy strikes me as a mistake. I would argue against dividing commands sharing a common, constrained, small battlespace.”<sup>31</sup>

Earlier in this article I discussed some significant gaps in capabilities that exist in the ROK military today. Most of these gaps will still exist in 2009. Thus, I believe it is important to ask how will these gaps be accounted for when there is no longer a combined warfighting command? For example, will South Korean airborne forces still be transported on US Air Force aircraft? Will ROK Marines still be lifted to the fight on US Naval shipping? Will the US still fill the many gaps in C4I by continuing to provide this capability to the ROK military after CFC is dissolved? It should be noted, that in order to provide these capabilities in an efficient and timely manner – a key capability in the “fog of war” that nations encounter in combat – these forces will need to be fully integrated into an efficient

seamless command structure. This structure will no longer exist when CFC is dissolved.

President Roh has stated that the US will continue to provide C4I capabilities to the ROK military even after CFC is dissolved, but one has to wonder. If there are no longer combined intelligence centers and fully integrated command centers, how can this important intelligence and “sensor to shooter” capability possibly be provided at the same levels that it would during a war that was fought under the infrastructure of CFC?<sup>32</sup> Further, it should be noted that the Roh administration wants all of the capabilities that the US brings to the fight to continue in the absence of the command structure that has deterred North Korea for more than 50 years. What this means in practical terms is that South Korean troops will still have to be airlifted by the US Air Force, ROK Marines will still have to be maritime lifted by the US Navy, the ROK military will still be highly dependent on US C4I capabilities, and the ROKAF will have to rely on 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force for much of the air strike mission – yet these forces will not be integrated? This, of course, presents the US and South Korea with the problem of having to combine capabilities in order to conduct effective combat operations – but without the force multiplier of combined command and control.

This leads to the next issue, how capable do ROK military forces need to be in order to deter North Korea from an attack? Perhaps even more importantly, if an actual force-on-force conflict does occur, how effective does the self-reliant capability of ROK military forces need to be? At a spring 2006 conference, numerous left-leaning scholars from some elite universities in South Korea opined that worrying about capabilities that the ROK military is shooting for is sheer folly since it will never be as capable as US forces, and in fact does not need to be in order to defeat North Korea. The question that none of these scholars could answer was how effective does the South Korean military need to be in order to deter and/or fight North Korea on its own?<sup>33</sup>

In order to answer the above question, one needs to ask; does South Korea need an airborne capability to fight an effective war with North Korea? Does the ROK Marine Corps need to make large-scale amphibious landings in a war with North Korea?

Does the ROKAF need to possess an effective attack and fighter capability in order to counter North Korea's Air Force and to take out large numbers of North Korean armor, self-propelled artillery, and long-range artillery? What kind of C4I does the South Korean government believe its military needs if it is not to be totally reliant on the US? Finally, does anyone believe that North Korea will not use any of its 600 SRBM's (South Korea has no capability to counter such an attack and, in fact, is completely reliant on the United States for ballistic missile defense) to attack key nodes all over the South?

### **The North Korean Military Threat: Diminished or Evolved?**

In order to answer the above questions, one must first consider the North Korean threat. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the definition widely accepted by analysts in the US; threat = capabilities + intent. While there have been some arguments from those who wish to dispel assessments that North Korea continues to constitute a threat to the existence of South Korea as a nation-state, no one disagrees that North Korea continues to maintain one of the largest militaries in the world.<sup>34</sup> In fact, if one compares the population of the country with the active duty strength of the military, North Korea has the highest proportion of armed forces to population in the world. This is a factor that according to many analysts and retired generals (both in the US and South Korea) must always be considered as planning for a large-scale force-on-force conflict occurs.

In a major war in which South Korean forces would have to take on the brunt of a North Korean attack with their own capabilities, the sheer numbers of Pyongyang's forces would require the South to use the strategy of "trading space for time," holding off the North until sufficient force levels have been built up that would hopefully push the North back. But the problem with this theory is the inconvenient geography of the Korean Peninsula. Seoul is the most important strategic, economic, and political area in South Korea, and the Seoul metro-area sits only 30 miles south of the DMZ. If Seoul were to be destroyed or over-run, the very epicenter of all things Korean would collapse and South Korea would literally be turned into a third world nation overnight. Because of this, forces capable of quickly and

efficiently countering the sheer mass of North Korea's conventional forces are vital.<sup>35</sup>

While the large size of North Korea's conventional military forces is certainly daunting, especially considering the unique geography of the Korean Peninsula, in my view it is the asymmetric threat posed by Pyongyang's forces that now is the most serious threat. This is because Kim Song-il has been forced to adjust the threat that he is able to pose to the south because of the lack of subsidies from the Soviet Union since 1990. In order to maintain a high state of readiness for armor and mechanized forces of the size that exist in the North, it takes huge amounts of fuel and food to keep training and maintenance levels at their peak. Fuel and food are, of course, commodities that North Korea has been desperately short of since the early 1990s.<sup>36</sup> In fact, there continue to be anecdotal reports of food shortages in certain units.<sup>37</sup> According to a recent paper that Dr. David Von Hippel presented to the "DPRK Energy Expert Study Group Meeting," at Stanford University in June 2006, North Korean ground forces' activity from 2000-2005 was 13-20% lower than estimated 1990 levels because of shortages of fuel and parts. According to Von Hippel's paper, military aircraft flight hours per year were at an estimated 50-60% of estimated 1990 levels by 2000-2005. The North Korean government has obviously continued its practice of placing the military as its highest priority for resources, because the data articulated in Von Hippel's paper shows that as of 2000, the military accounted for 37% of North Korea's oil products demand, and even more strikingly, more than 50% of gasoline and diesel use in the country.<sup>38</sup>

Does this mean that the North Korean military threat has subsided as many would have us believe? I believe the answer is no. In fact, during the mid-1990s, North Korean military forces made radical adjustments that were unavoidable due to economic realities, yet necessary in order to threaten the South. They have done this with a triad of military capabilities: long-range artillery, SRBM's, and special operations forces. In the view of the author, the long-range artillery capability is one that has not only risen as a result of dire economic conditions, but is the biggest threat to Seoul. During the early 1990s, and continuing

until the end of that decade, North Korea deployed more than 500 long-range artillery systems along the DMZ.<sup>39</sup> As many as 300 of North Korea's long-range artillery systems along the DMZ are capable of targeting areas in and around Seoul – potentially causing casualties as high as in the hundreds of thousands (many of them civilians).<sup>40</sup> According to a report issued by the ROK Ministry of National Defense in 2004, North Korea had increased the number of artillery pieces in its arsenal by 1,000 since 2000 – a significant improvement.<sup>41</sup> This shows that it is not only the long-range artillery that is capable of rendering high casualties in the South.<sup>42</sup> Seoul, in fact most of Kyonggi Province, is, in essence, under constant threat of attack by these systems.

The ballistic missile threat to South Korea is one that has gained some attention since the missile test-launches of July 4/5 2006.<sup>43</sup> This is another threat that has evolved and become much more formidable since the 1990s. While No Dong and Taepo Dong missiles are certainly of concern for the region and for the United States, it is the more than 600 North Korean SCUDs that are the chief threat to South Korea. The range and capability of these missiles means that they literally can target no one else except South Korea – so there is no doubt about the reasons behind their deployment.<sup>44</sup> North Korea has also successfully tested its own version of the Soviet-designed SS-21 missile (called the KN-02), which has a range of 120 kilometers and can hit targets deep in the South.<sup>45</sup> Of note, SRBM's are considered a part of North Korea's artillery doctrine and would be fired along with the long-range artillery in any attack against the South.<sup>46</sup>

The third highly capable aspect within North Korea's triad of asymmetric forces remains the more than 100,000 special operations forces. North Korean special operations forces continue to be highly trained, well equipped, and doctrinally sound. They have not been limited by a lack of aircraft training time as they primarily train by using jump towers, and they have a fleet of more than 300 AN-2 aircraft that can insert them into targets all over the South. While there are certainly far more aircraft than there are special operations forces, they are also trained to infiltrate the south through tunnels along the DMZ,

maritime infiltration craft, and possibly even corridors in the DMZ where road and rail construction has occurred. In wartime, these forces have the potential, in large numbers, to attack key command and control nodes, air bases, or any other high-value targets in South Korea. Because of their training and doctrine, they also have the capability of conducting "unconventional operations," or even terrorist acts, that would severely disrupt morale, and alter public opinion in both South Korea and the United States.<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusions

An examination of the evidence shows that the South Korean military is a well-trained force that has focused on working in a complementary arrangement within the umbrella of a combined fighting command with the United States since 1953. It is precisely because of the way that the South Korean military has been built, organized, and equipped for more than 50 years that significant gaps in self-reliance as a military force exist. The evidence shows that these gaps are unlikely to be filled by 2009 – or even 2012. A nation-state – any nation-state – simply cannot change the entire scope and focus of a large military force numbering more than 650,000 personnel overnight. Until a complete transition occurs, it will thus hurt the readiness of South Korea to defend itself in a large-scale conventional military conflict with the North – unless the US military continues to provide "bridging capabilities" on-Peninsula for many years. As discussed above, these "bridging capabilities" will be more difficult to provide once the transparent, seamless infrastructure of CFC is dissolved.<sup>48</sup>

It would not be necessary to be concerned with South Korea's readiness to defend itself against an attack by North Korea, if Pyongyang did not continue to pose a significant and deadly military threat. But this is not the case. North Korea's military has evolved to the point where, despite significant resource constraints, it can still threaten the very stability and security of South Korean with little or no warning. To downplay this threat is both a poor conduct of military analysis and dangerous to the national security of the Republic of Korea. Continuing C4I concerns would be dangerous in any attack by



North Korean artillery and special-forces. A lack of missile defense (except for a complete reliance on US forces) makes South Korea extremely vulnerable to an attack by the North's SRBM's. And the confusion that these forces would cause in the initial days of combat would make it necessary to have a seamless, integrated, effective command and control arrangement for ROK and US forces that CFC currently provides.

While the flexibility and professionalism of both ROK and US military forces is beyond question, evolving from a combined fighting force as they are now in wartime under CFC, to two separate military commands, will create problems and challenges that must be addressed in coming years as the command relationship evolves. This is not to say it cannot be done. The US needs to maintain a strong commitment to the security of South Korea and provide support whenever and wherever needed.

As noted earlier, "threat" is defined as capability + intent. Clearly, North Korea has shown that it is highly motivated to maintain a capability to mount a large-scale attack on the South, and, because of this, military planners and policy makers at the highest levels have no choice but to assume that the intent to attack if there were a weakness in the South remains. In fact, the North Korean nuclear test conducted during October of 2006 further illustrates that Pyongyang presents asymmetric challenges that must be planned for.<sup>49</sup> Thus, as this alliance, called by many the most successful military alliance since World War II evolves, care must be taken to ensure forces are refined and upgraded to meet the threat, support systems and infrastructures remain, and that the United States continues its resolve to maintain the security of one of its most important allies and deter the aggression of North Korea.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily constitute the policy or position of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, the Marine Corps University, or the United States Government.

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<sup>11</sup> For detailed information regarding the “information dominance” capability that United States forces have brought to the Korean Peninsula, See: John DiGenio, “Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence Challenges in the Korean Theater,” *Army Communicator*, Fall 2001, URL: <http://www.gordon.army.mil/AC/Fall/Fall%2001/koreac4i.htm>

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