



South Korea: Responding to the North Korean Threat

By Bruce E. Bechtol Jr.

South Korea is in a unique position. It is an economic powerhouse and a thriving democracy that faces the most ominous and imminent threat on its borders of any democracy in the world. Moreover, this is a threat that continues to evolve, with increasing missile, cyber, special operations, and nuclear capabilities and a new leader who shows no signs that he will be any less ruthless or belligerent than his father. To meet this threat, Seoul has undertaken a number of efforts to better deter and defend against North Korean capabilities and provocations, including increasing the defense budget, upping training with US forces, creating new command elements, and establishing plans for preemptive strikes against imminent North Korean missile launches. However, in part because of administration changes in Seoul, the South Korean effort has been uneven. And decisions remain to be made in the areas of missile defense, tactical fighter aircraft, and command-and-control arrangements that will be significant for not only South Korea but all states that have an interest in Northeast Asia's peace and stability.

This is the seventh National Security Outlook in a series about the defense capabilities of America's allies and security partners.¹

When analyzing the readiness, capabilities, and future initiatives of the Republic of Korea's (ROK's) military, one must take into account the unique geopolitical position that the ROK government finds itself in. There is no ambiguous set of threats for South Korea. Rather, the largest and most dangerous threat to the stability and security of the Korean Peninsula is obvious: the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK).

It is for this threat that policymakers in Seoul must ensure their military is ready. Providing an adequate defense against this threat is the cornerstone of the ROK-US alliance and the most important foreign policy issue between these two allies. As survival of the nation-state is the number-one priority for any national leader, all

other issues for Seoul will be ancillary as long as there is a DPRK.

Recognizing that the threatening behavior of its belligerent neighbor to the north is the key

Key points in this Outlook:

- South Korea faces a clear, present, and evolving threat from North Korea, with Kim Jong-un showing no indication of moving away from his father's violent and corrupt policies.
- South Korea's response to the North Korean threat has been uneven, with increased capabilities in some areas but less than what is needed in others.
- A key issue facing the ROK-US alliance is command and control of allied forces during wartime on the Korean Peninsula. A combined operating force must continue to exist to ensure full readiness and capability.

Bruce E. Bechtol Jr. (bruce.bechtol@angelo.edu) is an associate professor of political science at Angelo State University.

military issue for the ROK, it is important to analyze that threat to determine what the priorities of the South Korean military will be and how the threat will influence planning for the ROK–US alliance. Since 2010, North Korea has conducted two violent military provocations: one with a submarine that sank a ROK naval ship and one that involved an artillery barrage against a South Korean island that killed both military and civilian personnel.² North Korea also conducted yet another nuclear test this past February.³

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In addition, the DPRK has shown with a test launch conducted in mid-December last year that it is now capable (or close to it) of building a missile that can hit Alaska, Hawaii, or perhaps even the west coast of the United States.⁴ Pyongyang also has the capability of targeting all of South Korea and most of Japan with its ballistic missiles.⁵

North Korea has also continued to advance the capabilities and numbers of its armored forces, long-range artillery forces, and special operations forces.⁶ And, finally, Kim Jong-un has shown no indication that he has any intentions except to carry on the violent and corrupt policies of his father Kim Jong-il. This means, of course, that South Korea and the ROK–US alliance must continue to prepare for the multifaceted North Korean threat for the foreseeable future.

Initiatives against the North Korean Threat

Despite calls by the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003–08) for a “balancer policy”—a policy that moved South Korea away from its traditional security ties with the United States to a more neutral or balancing role between the United States, Japan, and the old communist bloc of China, Russia, and North Korea—the fact remains that the primary issue for which Seoul must build its military capabilities and plan its contingencies is North Korea.⁷ This process has been exacerbated by the fact that the threat the DPRK presents has evolved and become even more complicated in recent years.

Following the two violent provocations in 2010 already described, it became obvious that the South

Korean government and military needed to take steps to counter future provocations from North Korea. As noted North Korean specialist Robert M. Collins has stated, “Since the end of the Korean Conflict in 1953, the ROK–US alliance has done a very good job of deterring against a war initiated by North Korea. The alliance has not done a good job of deterring North Korean provocations.”⁸ Thus, the planning, policies, and procedures South Koreans initiated (and coordinated with their key ally in Washington) are very timely and needed now more than ever.

During April 2013, it was reported that the United States and South Korea had finalized a plan to respond more forcefully and appropriately to North Korean provocations.⁹ This new “counterprovocation” plan will ensure that there is a speedy “response in kind” that still prevents escalation to all-out war. The existence of the plan was also made public in part, it seems, because Seoul and Washington wanted to both warn the North Koreans and reassure the South Korean populace.

In an earlier and equally important move, the South Korean military established a separate Northwest Islands Command. The establishment of the new command and the appointment of a commander with the autonomy to respond with necessary force in a timely manner under more liberal rules of engagement empower the South Korean military to respond more effectively to violent provocations the North initiates in the Northern Limit Line (NLL) area.¹⁰

Formally established in June 2011, the command was first headed by Lt. Gen. Yoo Nak-jun, the commandant of the ROK Marine Corps, with a Marine major general as deputy commander and a staff that includes colonels from each of the ROK military services. Built around a division-sized joint unit, with the key contingents being the ROK Marine Sixth Brigade and the Yeonpyeong Defense battalion, the new command now has the ability to respond to North Korean attacks more effectively and rapidly. As such, ROK forces are now better positioned to deter and defend against North Korean provocations.¹¹

The attacks in 2010 and the rhetoric from North Korea since have had the opposite effect of what Pyongyang likely wanted. If anything, DPRK behavior has strengthened South Korea’s resolve to strike back against North Korean aggression.¹² The South Korean Navy is now on a heightened state of readiness in the NLL area—the demarcation line in the West (Yellow) Sea between the DPRK and ROK—and has been equipped with the best maritime equipment that the government can provide.¹³

As part of its support for these new initiatives, the United States has also stepped up exercises and training with ROK forces in the West Sea, close to the NLL area.¹⁴ Although much of the effort for counterprovocation deterrence has focused on the NLL, this is not the only area where readiness is being upgraded. For example, in June 2013, additional self-propelled air-defense missiles were assigned to front-line units near the demilitarized zone (DMZ).¹⁵

The North Koreans reportedly have 3,000 to 4,000 personnel engaged in cyberwarfare.

South Korea also faces a threat from the DPRK's advances in cyber and electronic warfare. In recent years, North Korea has engaged in a series of cyber and electronic warfare attacks against the South Korean military, government, businesses, and nonprofit entities.¹⁶ In response, the Defense Ministry established a Cyber Policy Department in early 2013, and the National Intelligence Service announced that its Third Department would give greater attention to "monitoring of cyberspace and telecommunications."¹⁷ The North Koreans reportedly have 3,000 to 4,000 personnel engaged in cyberwarfare. To enhance the ROK's capability to counter this rather large and well-trained force, the Defense Ministry announced that it will be working with the United States to deter and defend against this emerging threat.¹⁸

Meanwhile, because North Korea has used GPS jamming on hundreds of commercial flights and maritime navigational units in South Korea during 2012 and 2013, Seoul is beefing up its surveillance of North Korean electronic jammers. The Ministry of Science and Future Planning has announced plans to set up a system that can track down the "attack point and impact of jamming attempts."¹⁹

The DPRK's missile program has grown in both numbers and capabilities. It poses a serious problem to both South Korea and Japan. In response to that threat, Tokyo acquired from the United States the land-based PATRIOT Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3), deployed the Standard Missile (SM-3) on its Aegis-equipped Japanese destroyers, joined the US-led ballistic missile defense (BMD) system, and established the Bilateral Joint Operating Command Center at Yokota Air Base with the United States to provide a common operating picture of any missile threat.²⁰

In contrast, South Korea has as yet done none of these things—though Seoul has begun to develop a less expen-

sive and less capable BMD system of its own. And despite the considerable threat the DPRK's arsenal of missiles aimed at South Korea poses, as recently as May of this year, the South Korean Defense Ministry reiterated the government's intention not to participate in a joint US-ROK missile defense effort, let alone the trilateral (Japan, US, ROK) ballistic missile defense architecture suggested by the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, during a visit to South Korea in late April.²¹

While keeping its distance from the kind of cooperation on missile defenses undertaken by Japan and the United States, South Korea is moving forward with its own missile defense upgrades; in its most recent budget, the defense ministry indicated it intends to spend nearly 14 percent of its entire budget on improving its missile defense capabilities.²² Last year, for example, South Korea purchased two Green Pine land-based missile defense radars and, under new budget plans, recently announced it will acquire PAC-3s.²³ In addition, South Korea announced in June 2013 that it will equip its Aegis destroyers with the Standard Missile 6 (SM-6) for low-altitude defense against cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and aircraft. The SM-6 is an upgrade to the SM-2s that are currently deployed on South Korean Aegis destroyers.

More ambitiously, Seoul plans to establish a Missile Destruction System by 2020. According to reports, the system will be designed to detect imminent North Korean missile launches and enable South Korea to strike missile sites before an attack can be carried out. According to South Korean sources, the system will involve "spy satellites, surveillance drones for monitoring and attack systems, including missiles, fighter jets and warships."²⁴

And, indeed, it appears that a key reason the United States and South Korea negotiated new, more lenient guidelines to the Missile Technology Control Regime (MCTR) last year was to give the ROK the option of deploying longer-range missiles and more sophisticated drones to cover all of North Korea. Under the previous MCTR 2001 agreement, South Korean missiles were limited in range to no more than 186 miles. With the new accord, South Korean missiles will have a maximum range of 500 miles, which is sufficient to give them the capability of reaching any area of North Korea from launch points well south of Seoul and the DMZ.²⁵ Although the new agreement regarding missile range adds to Seoul's ability to target key nodes in the North, actually doing so would be both an expensive undertaking and a capability the US already provides. In addition, it will do nothing to

enhance badly needed improvements in ROK ballistic missile defense capabilities.

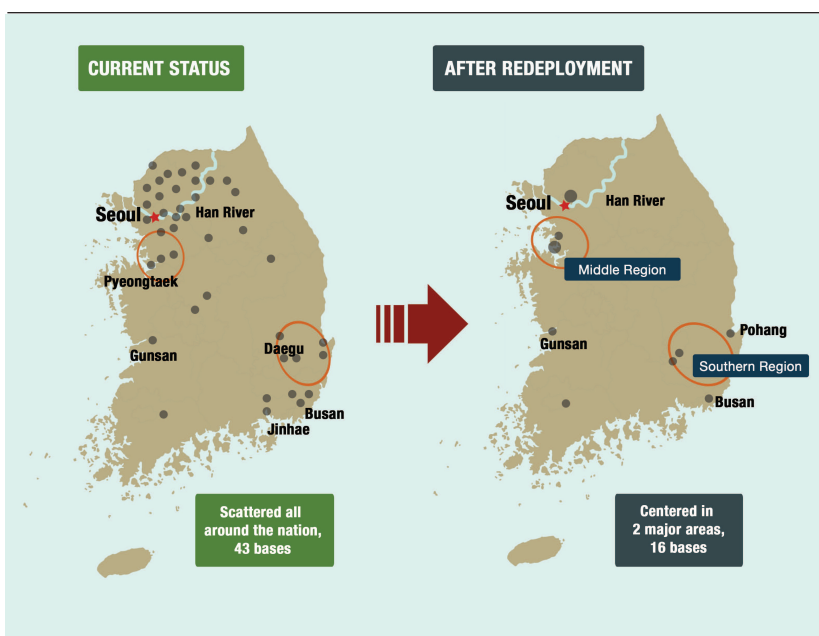
The fact remains that the missile defense systems currently deployed by the South Koreans are inferior to those currently deployed by the United States and Japan. If the ROK had simply purchased the systems American experts recommended, such as the PAC-3 and SM-3, South Korea would be better prepared for a ballistic missile attack from North Korea. In addition, by joining a US-led BMD system, the South Koreans would have access to the US Navy's X-Band radar and the US Army's land-based radar associated with the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense. The US-led system links together the capabilities of detection and destruction systems around the globe and matches them up with mobile BMD platforms such as Aegis-equipped ships.²⁶ By going its own way when it comes to missile defense, the South Korean government is limiting its ability to defend itself and its citizens.

Cost Sharing and Repositioning US Bases

The cost for stationing US forces in South Korea has been, and remains, an important issue in both South Korea and the United States. The perception of some in the United States, particularly members of Congress, has been that Seoul needs to do more to cover its "fair share" given the level of security the United States provides its ally from North Korean aggression. Americans see a South Korea that is now a thriving democracy and an economic powerhouse and expect the South Koreans to pay more of the cost for stationing US troops there.²⁷ Conversely, many on the left in South Korea believe that their government is paying more than its fair share, arguing that American estimates that South Korea has been paying 40–45 percent of the basing costs are on the low side and that South Korea is already paying more than the 50 percent of the costs Washington is calling for.²⁸

The accord governing South Korean payments is known as the "Special Measures Agreement" (SMA) and covers nonpersonnel stationing costs (NPSC), such as labor costs for South Korean employees working with US forces, the purchase of logistics and supplies, and the construction of military facilities. The first SMA took effect

FIGURE 1
PROJECTED RELOCATION OF US BASES IN SOUTH KOREA



Source: Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea, "Defense White Paper," 2006.

in 1991, and South Korea's contribution levels have increased steadily as the costs associated with NPSC have grown predictably.²⁹ The last SMA was signed in December 2009, with Seoul and Washington agreeing that South Korea would pay 760 billion won (roughly \$570 million at the time) for NPSC costs and Seoul also agreeing to cost hikes not to exceed 4 percent a year.³⁰ With the SMA set to expire in December 2013, Washington and Seoul had set the end of October as a deadline for reaching a new agreement. Talks in October did not result in an agreement but will continue as the Americans keep pushing for an SMA in which the South Koreans pay 50 percent of the cost.³¹

Another important initiative is the Land Partnership Program, based largely on a 2006 agreement between Washington and Seoul to consolidate significantly the US military footprint in South Korea (figure 1). The deadline initially set for completing the consolidation was 2012, but, given the scale of the endeavor, it is no surprise that the deadline has not been exactly met and a large portion of forces north of Seoul are yet to be repositioned.

Nevertheless, according to Gen. James D. Thurman, commander of US forces in Korea, "transitioning from 107 bases to less than 50" will ultimately result in "enhanced force protection, survivability, and lower cost maintenance in Korea."³² The effect of this plan is already saving money for both the United States and South Korea.

Budgets and Acquisitions: Paying for the Future

The Roh government in 2005 unleashed the most substantial reform agenda in recent years for the South Korean military, “Defense Reform 2020.” This was the Roh government’s vision for a ROK military that would be smaller, more modern, and capable of global missions—not just one focused on dealing with the North Korean threat. By 2020, the total military manpower would be cut by some 25 percent, with the ROK army seeing its numbers drop from 548,000 to 371,000—a loss of 4 corps and 23 divisions. These cuts were combined with reductions in the time conscripts would have to serve in the nation’s army and navy by six months and in the air force by eight months, with a deadline of 2014 for putting these new service requirements in place. In theory, these reductions in manpower would be made up with acquisition of new, advanced military hardware and systems.³³

The plan, however, suffered from a number of problems. First, it required more resources than were budgeted. Second, many experts assessed the original schedule for systems acquisition and troop cuts to be inadequate to account for North Korea’s own growing asymmetric capabilities in nuclear and ballistic missile weapons—a problem no doubt exacerbated by President Roh’s overly sanguine view of North Korea’s own strategic intentions. And third, the plan did not anticipate the command-and-control requirements that would flow from South Korea’s decision to transition by 2015 to a more self-reliant force.³⁴

Shortly after Lee Myung-bak was elected president in 2008, his government moved to modify both the substance and the timelines of Defense Reform Plan (DRP) 2020. Taking the threat from North Korea more seriously, the ROK military, beginning in 2009, reinforced plans to defend against the North Korean nuclear threat and to initiate troop cuts only after weapons systems have been brought online that would make up for the decrease in manpower.

Specifically, the revised plan, made public in 2009, included delaying the DRP 2020 reform endpoint to 2025, slowing defense budget increases as a result of slow-down in the Korean economy, and raising the planned 2020 troop level to 517,000 from the original goal of 500,000. The Lee government also modified the plan’s reduction in service time for conscripts, with draftees in the army and the marines serving 21 months, navy conscripts 23 months, and air force draftees 24 months. Even

so, the country’s navy and air force are still likely to face manpower shortages in the coming years.³⁵

The defense budget under President Roh began at 2.28 percent of GDP his first year in office. This percentage gradually went up and continued to go up after Lee Myung-bak assumed the presidency. Under Lee, it peaked at 2.72 percent of GDP in 2009 and was 2.60 percent in his last year in office.³⁶

The ministry submitted a request to South Korea’s legislature for a 2014–18 defense budget of \$192.6 billion—an average annual expenditure of \$38.52 billion.

Before assuming office earlier this past February, current South Korean President Park Geun-hye stated that she intended to increase spending in light of Pyongyang’s third nuclear test and its provocative behavior. In fact, her announced plan is to increase the defense budget at a higher rate than the overall state budget.³⁷

In accord with those plans, the Defense Ministry announced in April that it intended to spend an extra \$200 million during 2013—raising the 2013 budget from \$30.5 billion to \$30.7 billion. And, more recently, the ministry submitted a request to South Korea’s legislature for a 2014–18 defense budget of \$192.6 billion—an average annual expenditure of \$38.52 billion. About half of 2013’s increase was earmarked for strengthening defense capabilities along the ROK western maritime border with North Korea, and a bit less than half will be spent on upgrading existing conventional weaponry, such as South Korea’s self-propelled 155 mm howitzers (K9 Thunder) and procuring additional unmanned reconnaissance aircraft.³⁸

But challenges remain—as the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* in March 2010 by a DPRK submarine showed. Increasing the ROK Navy’s antisubmarine warfare capabilities should be a priority. Moreover, some key mainline battle systems need replacing, but replacements have been slow to come. One example is the K-2 Black Panther, an indigenously produced main battle tank intended to replace the American-made M-48 Patton tanks that the ROK Army still has in its inventory. (M-48s date from the 1950s and were the principal tank the US Army used during the Vietnam War.) Mass production of the tank was originally set to begin in 2011, but the project has been set

back by numerous delays, including a failed engine durability test just this year.³⁹

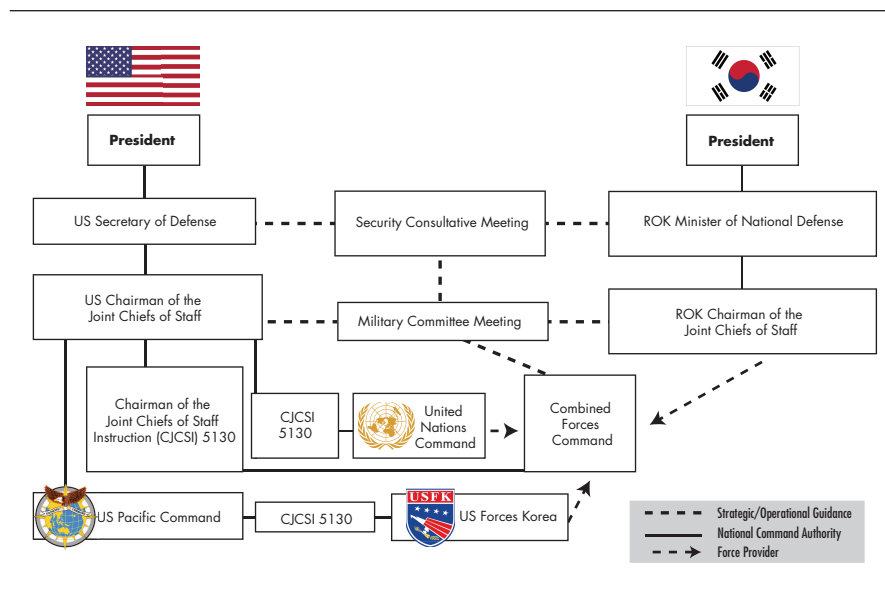
Also worrisome is the fact that South Korea’s plan to buy 60 new fighter jets has been delayed. Only recently has the competition been reopened after all three of the entries—Boeing’s F-15, Lockheed Martin’s F-35, and European Aerospace Defense and Space Company’s Eurofighter Typhoon—failed to fall below the price level set by the ROK’s acquisition agency.⁴⁰ The country needs to replace its very old fleet of F-4 Phantoms and F-5 Tigers, and the F-35 would be most advanced aircraft of the three—but also the most expensive. Whether South Korea’s defense budget can accommodate such a purchase, whether offset proposals to reduce overall costs for the proposed acquisition can be arranged, or whether the government will simply be forced to buy fewer planes remain open questions.

Wartime Operational Control: A Key Defense Issue

Since 1994, the Combined Forces Command (CFC) has had a planning staff of hundreds of ROK and US personnel. The staff is commanded by a US four-star general. During peacetime, ROK forces report to their relevant commands, which then answer to South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff. During wartime, designated ROK forces fall under the operational control (OPCON) of the commander of CFC, who in turn reports to the national command authorities in both Washington and Seoul. However, this long-standing agreement has recently been subject to intense negotiation and a number of proposed changes.

In 2007, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Defense Minister Kim Jang-soo reached an agreement that CFC would be disestablished and the two militaries stationed in Korea would continue to function as allies but with two separate wartime operational commands. The new command architecture was to become operational in April 2012.⁴¹

FIGURE 2
CURRENT WARTIME COMMAND RELATIONSHIPS: ROK–US FORCES



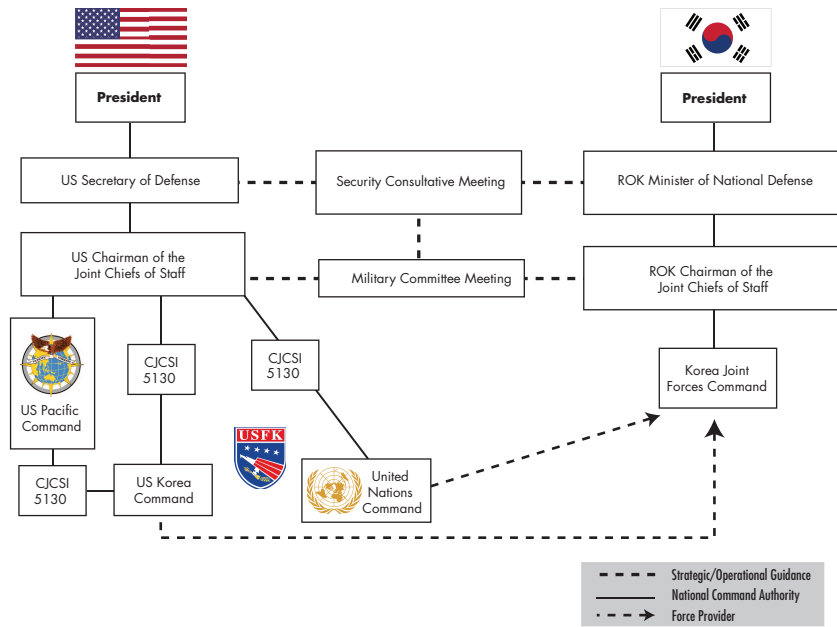
Source: Lt. Gen. Stephen G. Wood, USAF, and Maj. Christopher A. Johnson, DM, USAF, “The Transformation of Air Forces on the Korean Peninsula,” *Air and Space Power Journal* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 6, www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj08/fal08/wood.html.

The issue of American and South Korean forces fighting a conflict with North Korea under two separate military commands became an immediate source of contention in this new agreement. Senior politicians on the right and many retired military officers were highly critical of the change because they believed it was both premature and dangerous to the security of South Korea.⁴²

Under the current CFC structure, the military chain of command is transparent and seamless while falling under two separate national command authorities (NCA) in Washington and Seoul (figure 2). Although planning is conducted using a combined staff and exercises are held every year that utilize that planning, the ROK military does not “come under” the US military even when CFC is activated because the American CFC commander answers to both NCAs.

As originally conceived in 2008 and agreed to by Gates and Kim, the new command arrangement would no longer have ROK forces being put under the command of the CFC and its US four-star commander. The CFC would no longer exist and, in its place, there would be two separate war-fighting commands—one American and one South Korean (figure 3). Unity of command, so important in war, would vanish, and US and South Korean forces would be fighting in the challenging and restricted terrain of the Korean Peninsula while answering to two separate NCAs. And much of the combined operations and planning today

FIGURE 3
PROJECTED WARTIME COMMAND RELATIONSHIPS
ORIGINALLY SLATED FOR POST-2012



Source: Lt. Gen. Stephen G. Wood, USAF, and Maj. Christopher A. Johnson, DM, USAF, “The Transformation of Air Forces on the Korean Peninsula,” *Air and Space Power Journal* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 7, www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj08/fal08/wood.html.

was slated to become cooperative through newly created boards, bureaus, coordination centers, and cells—a bureaucratic and complicated endeavor, to be sure.

In June 2010, Presidents Lee and Obama agreed that the command changes would be delayed until December 2015.⁴³ This would give the ROK military more time to prepare for the types of planning and operations that separate war-fighting commands would warrant; equally important, it would give the American and South Korean militaries time to modify and ameliorate some of the problems tied to the originally proposed command architecture.

Following Kim Jong-il's death and the accession of his son, Kim Jong-un, to the leadership of the DPRK in December 2011, events on the ground caused many in South Korea to again bring up the issue of the disestablishment of CFC.⁴⁴ North Korea conducted two long-range missile tests; staged another nuclear test; and, during the early spring of 2013, upped its level of threatening rhetoric.

As an editorial in a widely read South Korean newspaper put it, “The South Korean government has proposed to the United States that the two allies reassess North Korean threats and the South Korean military’s readiness posture ahead of the planned [change] . . . scheduled for December

2015. The proposal indicates that Seoul’s security situation and its military’s actual capabilities are more important than implementing the OPCON transfer on schedule.” “What is important,” the paper writes, is “that whether or not the OPCON transfer is implemented on schedule, the combined operational capabilities of the two allies’ militaries for coping with threats from the North should not be weakened.”⁴⁵

But South Koreans were not the only ones to suggest the command reforms should be put on hold. In April 2013, former US Forces Korea (and CFC) Commander Gen. B. B. Bell, argued that, in light of the DPRK’s nuclear and missile capability, the changeover should be delayed to sometime past 2015—this from a general, who when CFC commander, had been a strong proponent of the change in command arrangements.⁴⁶

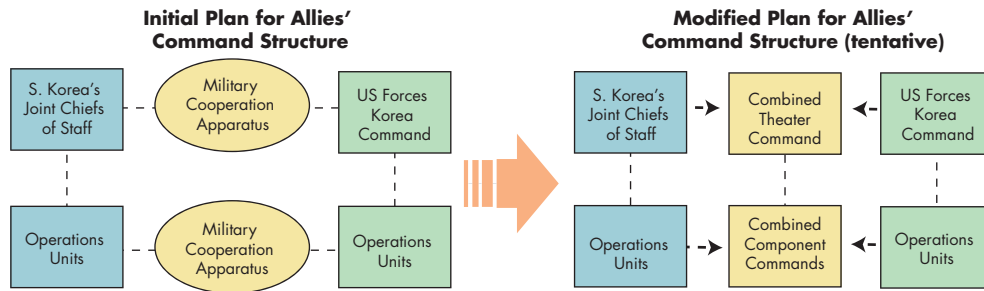
Nevertheless, in April, the ROK defense ministry reiterated its intention to move forward with a new command structure and have it operational by the December 2015 deadline.⁴⁷ By early of April 2013, reports had begun to circulate that following the disestablishment of CFC in 2015, a new combined command would be stood up to take its place—essentially keeping the extremely important combined aspect of the ROK–US alliance’s fighting forces intact during wartime—though details were sketchy at the time (figure 4).⁴⁸

Although many details still needed to be worked out, in June 2013 it was reported that the new combined command would be headed by a ROK four-star, with an American general serving as deputy commander of the combined forces and an American air force general heading up the combined air component. By some accounts, ROK officers would command the other components.⁴⁹

In July 2013, the South Korean government reportedly proposed to the United States that the originally agreed date for disestablishing CFC be once again delayed in light of the ongoing threat from North Korea. It is thus now unclear if “wartime OPCON” and the end of CFC will once again be pushed back to a date beyond 2015 or

FIGURE 4

PROJECTED ROK-US COMBINED COMMAND STRUCTURE POST-CFC, APRIL 2013



Source: Song Sang-ho, "Allies Agree on New Combined Command," Korea Herald, June 2, 2013, www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20130602000282.

if the new combined command structure will in fact be implemented on that date.

According to press reports, in October 2013, US Defense Secretary Hagel and South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin agreed to delay the final decision until 2014.⁵⁰ What is most important for the future is maintaining a combined command that gives these two long-standing allies the optimum capability for combat readiness and deterrence of the North Korean threat.

The US-ROK Nuclear Pact

The United States and South Korea first signed a nuclear cooperation agreement in 1956, and it was last amended in 1974. With the accord set to expire in March 2014, Washington and Seoul have been in negotiations for over the past two years to extend and update the agreement. The main sticking point has been South Korea's desire to reprocess spent nuclear fuel of US origin used in South Korean reactors—a practice effectively prohibited under the previous accord.

Unable to reprocess spent fuel, South Korea expects to run out of storage space for its spent fuel rods by 2016.⁵¹ While Seoul has stated it wants to use "proliferation-resistant" technology for enriching uranium and reprocessing spent nuclear fuel, Washington has been hesitant to agree.

In light of North Korea's nuclear violation of the Nonproliferation Treaty and continuing nuclear program shenanigans, most states with an interest in the region are highly sensitive to any programs that might possibly increase the chances of weapons proliferation. Also, a

likely issue for the United States is the past history of South Korea's own nuclear weapons program. Although Seoul had denied that it intends to engage in any effort that might lead it to acquiring nuclear weapons, recent polls show that a majority of the South Korean populace would support such an initiative.⁵²

By March 2013, the United States and South Korea had failed to agree on how Seoul should (or should not) enrich uranium and process spent nuclear fuel rods. In talks held during June 2013, Ambassador Park Ro-byug from South Korea and Thomas Countryman from the United States continued to discuss the issues surrounding what Seoul would do with its "nuclear waste." As a temporary solution, the two countries have agreed to extend the existing accord by two more years, to March of 2016. The two-year extension of the present agreement must be approved by the US Congress.⁵³

Both countries hope by then to reach a satisfactory compromise.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, as long as the North Korean threat exists—and the perceptions about nuclear weapons that come with it—prospects for a South Korean reprocessing program will continue to be an issue.

Conclusion

Since becoming an independent nation following the end of WWII, South Korea has never been more powerful on the world stage—militarily or economically. But the continuing unpredictable threat from North Korea means that South Korea must make significant investments in its national security.

South Korea needs to make important decisions regarding ballistic missile defense; the future of its air

force; numerous conventional systems that are vital to any conflict it would have with the DPRK; and, perhaps most important, the ROK–US alliance and the command-and-control issues associated with the projected disestablishment of CFC in December 2015. These decisions are important, often quite expensive fiscally, and often very controversial politically. But this is nothing new.

South Korea is in a unique position. It is a thriving, transparent democracy, with perhaps the most ominous and imminent threat on its borders of any democracy. Decisions regarding the ROK military in coming years will be important to not only South Korea but also all nation-states that have an interest in the region.

Notes

1. To read the other six *Outlooks* in this series, see Patrick Keller, “German Hard Power: Is There a There There?” *AEI National Security Outlook* (October 2013), www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/defense/nato/german-hard-power-is-there-a-there-there/; Bryan McGrath, “NATO at Sea: Trends in Allied Naval Power,” *AEI National Security Outlook* (September 2013), www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/defense/nato/nato-at-sea-trends-in-allied-naval-power/; Andrew Shearer, “Australian Defense in the Era of Austerity: Mind the Expectation Gap,” *AEI National Security Outlook* (August 2013), www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/defense/australian-defense-in-the-era-of-austerity-mind-the-expectation-gap/; Marcial Hernandez, “Dutch Hard Power: Choosing Decline,” *AEI National Security Outlook* (April 2013), www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/europe/dutch-hard-power-choosing-decline/; Gary J. Schmitt, “Italian Hard Power: Ambitions and Fiscal Realities,” *AEI National Security Outlook* (October 2012), www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/europe/italian-hard-power-ambitions-and-fiscal-realities/; and Patrick Keller, “Challenges for European Defense Budgets after the Economic Crisis,” *AEI National Security Outlook* (July 2011), www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/europe/challenges-for-european-defense-budgets-after-the-economic-crisis-outlook/.
2. For more analysis on the two violent provocations North Korea conducted against the South during 2010, see Alexander Zhebin, “The Korean Peninsula: Approaching the Danger Line,” *Far Eastern Affairs*, no. 1 (2011), www.eastviewpress.com/Files/FEA_FROM%20THE%20CURRENT%20ISSUE_No.%201_2011_small.pdf.
3. For details on North Korea’s most recent nuclear test, see Kelsey Davenport, “North Korean Conducts Nuclear Test,” *Arms Control Today*, March 2013, www.armscontrol.org/act/2013_03/North-Korea-Conducts-Nuclear-Test.
4. “North Korea’s Missile Programme,” BBC News, April 12, 2013, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17399847.
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