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AUTONOMY OR MILITARY
READINESS?: THE TRADE-OFFS
OF WARTIME OPCON TRANSFER

BY LAMI KIM



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자율성과 군사대비태세 사이에서: 전시작전통제권 전환의 딜레마

Lami Kim

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Washington and Seoul have agreed to transfer wartime operational control, or OPCON — the [authority](#) to make strategic decisions on the battlefield — back to South Korea. In November 2025, Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-back and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced that they had agreed to develop a roadmap to [“expedite”](#) OPCON transfer. According to National Security Adviser Wi Sung-lac, a roadmap for the transfer is expected to be completed in [the second half of this year](#). For the transfer to take place, several conditions need to be met: South Korea has the capacity to lead combined forces, counter North Korean threats, and the strategic environment is conducive to a stable transition. These conditions are to be verified in three phases. The first phase, Initial Operational Capability (IOC) certification, was completed in 2019, while Full Operational Capability (FOC) and Full Mission Capability (FMC) certification remain pending. Once that verification is completed, the two sides will determine the exact timing.

Because this was one of [President Lee Jae-myung’s campaign promises](#), his administration is aiming to complete the transfer before his term ends in 2030, with 2028 — before President Donald J. Trump’s term ends — as a target date. Yet recent remarks by U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) Commander Gen. Xavier T. Brunson suggest the timeline could extend beyond the current political window. Brunson testified that USFK had submitted a roadmap targeting the second quarter of fiscal year 2029 for transition, while [cautioning](#) that “political expediency does not outpace the conditions.” The timing is significant. Presidents Roh Moo-hyun and George W. Bush set 2012 as the target date for OPCON transfer. However,

after both leaders had left office, the transfer was postponed indefinitely. A similar dynamic could emerge again if implementation slips beyond the tenure of the current leadership in Seoul and Washington.

Given the unusual nature of delegating partial OPCON to a foreign country, taking it back is unfinished business that South Korea must complete at some point. With its strong conventional military

capabilities, the time may be ripe. At the same time, the move could undermine military readiness and interoperability, at least in the short term, posing a security challenge for a country facing serious threats from North Korea.

이는 결국 위험이 전혀 없는 정답이 존재하지 않는 전략적·정치적 판단의 문제이다. 그러나 서울과 워싱턴이 그 장단점을 모두 이해하는 것은 필수적이다

외국에 작전통제권의 일부를 위임해 온 이례적인 성격을 고려할 때, 이를 되찾는 것은 한국이 언젠가는 반드시 완수해야 할 미완의 과제이다

This is ultimately a strategic and political judgment with no risk-free answer. But it is imperative for Seoul and Washington to understand both the pros and cons. Any decision should be based on a careful calculation of the trade-offs.

The Tug of War

OPCON of the South Korean military was first [transferred](#) to U.S. General Douglas MacArthur in 1950 in his capacity as U.N. commander. In 1978, with the establishment of the Combined Forces Command — the two countries' joint military command — that authority was transferred to the four-star U.S. general commanding the CFC. In 1994, after the end of the Cold War, peacetime OPCON was transferred back to South Korea as part of the United States' post-Cold War shift in its global defense posture. But under the current arrangement, a U.S. general would assume wartime OPCON in the event of war, while a South Korean general serves as deputy commander.

The movement to regain full OPCON was pursued in earnest under progressive President Roh Moo-hyun. Since then, there has been a constant tug of war between progressives, who have sought to regain OPCON in the name of autonomous self-defense and sovereignty, and conservatives, who have sought to delay or halt the transfer out of concern for military readiness and deterrence. In 2007, Presidents Roh and Bush [agreed](#) to transfer wartime OPCON back to South Korea by April 2012. In 2010, conservative President Lee Myung-bak [postponed](#) the transfer date to 2015. The transfer was further [delayed](#) indefinitely in 2014 under President Park Geun-hye, until “critical ROK and Alliance military capabilities are secured and the security environment on the Korean Peninsula and in the region is conducive to a stable OPCON transition.”

자주국방과 주권의 이름으로 전시작전통제권 환수를 추진해 온 진보 진영과, 군사대비태세와 억제력에 대한 우려로 전환을 지연하거나 중단하려 해 온 보수 진영 사이에는 지속적인 줄다리기가 이어져 왔다

Instead of a fixed target date, OPCON transfer now requires verification that South Korea has met the necessary conditions. Progressive President Moon Jae-in [sought](#) to regain OPCON during his tenure, increasing defense spending by an average of 7 [percent annually](#) and [pursuing](#) enhanced intelligence, surveillance, missile defense, and other capabilities toward that goal, albeit without success. His conservative successor, Yoon Suk-yeol, showed no interest. With progressive President Lee now in power, the pendulum has swung back toward pursuing OPCON transfer.

Convergence of Interests

With Trump in the White House, this is an opportune moment for those who favor OPCON transfer. For President Trump, who has long [advocated](#) that U.S. allies take primary responsibility for their own defense, which is also emphasized in the [2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy](#), President Lee's request for OPCON transfer must be music to his ears. U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth confirmed the Trump administration's

support for OPCON transfer at the May 2026 Shangri-La Dialogue, where he welcomed South Korea's pursuit of the transfer, [stating](#): "It's a breath of fresh air for an ally to want to take more control more quickly."

트럼프가 백악관에 있는 상황은 전시작전통제권 전환을 지지하는 이들에게 유리한 기회가 될 수 있다

Now there is a rare convergence of interests between a South Korean leader who seeks autonomous self-defense and a U.S. leader who favors burden shifting. For many South Korean progressives, this represents a rare alignment of political conditions unlikely to recur soon.

이제 자주국방을 추구하는 한국 지도자와 부담 이전을 선호하는 미국 지도자 사이에 보기 드문 이해관계의 수렴이 나타나고 있다

That is why the Lee administration is aiming to complete OPCON transfer as early as possible — and certainly before President Trump's term ends. Although there is no clear partisan divide in the United States on this issue comparable to that in South Korea, not everyone in Washington is enthusiastic about OPCON transfer. Most notably, USFK Commander General Brunson, who would assume OPCON if war breaks out under the current arrangement, has [warned](#) against a premature OPCON transfer. Therefore, there is no guarantee that

the next U.S. president — especially one who is more traditionally pro-alliance and/or more deferential to the advice of military professionals — would be as receptive to transferring OPCON to South Korea.

다음 미국 대통령, 특히 전통적으로 동맹을 더 중시하거나 군사 전문가들의 조언을 더 존중하는 인물이 집권할 경우, 한국으로의 전시작전통제권 전환에 지금처럼 우호적일 것이라는 보장은 없다

Has the Time Come?

In many ways, there are strong reasons to transfer full OPCON to South Korea. One of the main reasons the United States retained OPCON after the Korean War was to [rein in](#) potential South Korean aggression against the North — a concern that no longer applies. In addition, South Korea has a strong military and is increasing its role in defending itself, relying on its superior conventional capabilities— [ranked the fifth](#) most powerful in the world by Global Firepower—, while continuing to depend on the United States’ nuclear extended deterrence.

Although it remains debatable whether South Korea has met or will have met the conditions laid out for OPCON transfer, those conditions are somewhat subjective, and the final decision will ultimately be political in nature. The conditions-based approach is also not set in stone, either; it is a product of agreement between the two sides and can be revised if they choose.

More fundamentally, it is rare for a country not to have full control over its own military. Such arrangements usually occur only temporarily during wartime or post-war transitional periods. For example, during Washington’s rebuilding of Japan’s security forces (1950–1954) after Japan’s unconditional surrender in 1945, the United States [held](#) full operational control over what would become the Japanese military. Following its 2003 invasion of Iraq, the United States [held](#) operational control over the Iraqi military until 2006. These, however, were temporary arrangements under extraordinary circumstances. Permanently delegating OPCON over a country’s military to a foreign power is highly unusual. For this reason, President Lee recently used the word “[restore](#),” rather than “transition” or “transfer,” when referring to OPCON — a choice that carries the implication that South Korea is reclaiming what naturally belongs to it.

Most South Koreans agree that their country should eventually take back full OPCON, even if there is no consensus on when. In a 2021 [public opinion poll](#) conducted by the Asan Institute, only 7.9 percent of respondents said the plan for OPCON transfer should be eliminated. By contrast, 69.7 percent supported the transfer, although they differed on the preferred approach: 42.5 percent favored a conditions-based transfer, while 27.2 percent supported a transfer without conditions. There was also a clear partisan divide over these two approaches. A conditions-based transfer was supported by 54.1 percent of conservatives, compared with 36.7 percent of progressives. This is consistent with the broader tendency for progressives to place greater emphasis on sovereignty and autonomous defense, while conservatives tend to prioritize deterrence, operational readiness, and the credibility of the U.S. security commitment.

Inevitable Costs

However, it is hard to deny that some military costs would be incurred if OPCON were transferred back to South Korea. Having lacked full wartime control over its military for more than seven decades, South Korea would likely have a weaker capability to exercise OPCON than the United States. To acquire comparable capabilities, South Korea would have to significantly enhance its own command, control, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, missile defense, and operational planning capacities — an effort that would take time and money. [Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-back— while still a nominee for the post — estimated that](#)

[OPCON transfer would cost approximately 21 trillion won](#), or about US\$14 billion, with some estimates [far exceeding](#) that amount. Even then, it is questionable whether South Korea could become as capable as the United States in this regard.

Moreover, there is a real possibility that military interoperability and readiness between the two forces would weaken, at least in the short term. As the United States has traditionally resisted placing American forces under foreign command—a principle often referred to as the “[Pershing Rule](#)”—OPCON transfer could lead to the dissolution of the Combined Forces Command. In that case, South Korea and the United States could still fight together as parallel forces, rather than as a combined force. This, by itself, is not necessarily alarming, as this is the arrangement the United States has with other allies, such as Japan. Nonetheless, it would likely weaken interoperability. This is not an insurmountable challenge. Over time, South Korea could strengthen its capacity, and the two forces could find ways to enhance interoperability under a new command structure. But there would still be short-term risks.

In addition, OPCON transfer could lead to a [downgrading](#) of U.S. Forces Korea, with a three-star commander replacing today’s four-star commander. Particularly if combined with the [upgrading](#) of U.S. Forces Japan to a four-star command, the United States’ alliance structure in the Indo-Pacific could become increasingly centered around U.S. Forces Japan, while U.S. Forces Korea’s strategic importance and influence decline. This reorientation may happen regardless, but OPCON transfer could accelerate or consolidate the trend.

The Trade-off

As such, there are clear pros and cons to OPCON transfer. In practical terms, the decision is ultimately not based solely on whether South Korea meets the necessary military conditions, which may be almost impossible to satisfy fully, particularly the requirement for a stable strategic environment conducive to OPCON transfer. Rather, the decision comes down to which side of the trade-off the alliance values more: autonomy/burden sharing or military readiness. That judgment, in turn, depends on threat perceptions, political values, and broader views of the alliance. Whatever decision South Korea and the United States ultimately make, it is imperative that they do so with a clear understanding of what is at stake.

그 결정은 결국 동맹이 상충관계의 어느 쪽에 더 큰 가치를 두느냐의 문제로 귀결된다. 즉, 자율성·부담 분담을 더 중시할 것인가, 아니면 군사대비태세를 더 중시할 것인가의 문제이다. 그리고 이러한 판단은 위협 인식, 정치적 가치, 그리고 동맹에 대한 보다 넓은 관점에 따라 달라진다

What is also important is not only whether OPCON transfer happens, but how it happens, and how the allies manage the process before and after it occurs. The OPCON transfer issue is part of the broader modernization and evolution of the alliance. Adjustments are necessary for an alliance that is more than 70 years old, especially as it adapts to changes in the strategic environment and to the dramatic increase in South Korea’s capabilities. But those changes should be made in a way that strengthens the alliance rather than weakens it, particularly given that the threats facing the alliance have not subsided but have only intensified. Messages from Washington and Seoul that focus primarily on burden sharing or autonomous defense respectively could suggest that

Washington's willingness to defend South Korea is decreasing, or that South Korea is retreating to a narrow focus on security on the Korean Peninsula.

As the allies prepare for and implement a new alliance structure, they should consistently demonstrate unwavering support for each other. It is important that the alliance maintain its strong capabilities, but it is

**동맹의 힘에서 진정으로 중요한 것은
전시작전통제권을 누가 보유하느냐가 아니라,
동맹의 구호가 말하듯 양국이 함께 나아갈
의지, 즉 "같이 갑시다"의 의지를 갖고
있느냐이다**

equally important that it send a clear signal that alliance cohesion remains unshaken by any change. Today's preparations for OPCON transfer seem to focus more on the former than on the latter. Ultimately, what truly matters for the strength of the alliance is not who holds wartime OPCON, but whether the allies have the will to "go together," as the alliance's catchphrase puts it.

The ROK-US Policy Brief is a joint publication between the Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) and The George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS) dedicated to exploring current Korea-related policy matters within regional and global contexts.

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