

South Korea's Armed Forces to Remain Fully under US Military Command

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The South Korean government announced last week the intention to [put off](#) once again the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) from the United States, this time until "[the mid-2020s](#)." Until then South Korean troops will be under the command of an American four star general in the event of a military conflict. The postponement signifies the long term strategy of the ruling conservative party to ensure the fate of South Korean security is firmly fixed to an American occupation force on the Korean Peninsula.

This decision isn't shocking given the trend of successive conservative administrations. The transfer of South Korean military OPCON was [originally](#) scheduled for 2012 based on an agreement by the left-leaning Roh Moo-hyun government. But the deal was put off by the much-maligned conservative administration of the American [stooge](#) Lee Myung-bak. Park Geun-hye, current president and leader of the right wing [Saenuri \(New World\) Party](#) (a spin-off of Lee Myung-bak's Grand National Party with roots in South Korea's past American-backed dictatorships), [promised](#) during her election campaign to carry out the transfer [in 2015](#). Now she has punted the transfer to a time well beyond the reach of her presidency.

Whether South Korea actually goes through with the transfer of OPCON in the next decade will likely depend on whether Saenuri wins another [tamped election](#) given their intrinsic attachment to the United States. What is certain is that this is not a question of whether South Korea is capable of managing its own military in the event of war.

South Korean officials say the U.S. must have control of both American and S.K. military operations to most effectively deter North Korea and maintain coordinated military activities. They insist this would be impossible under a typical alliance system where both nations have independent control of military decisions. Vice Defense Minister Baek Seung-joo [told](#) the Wall Street Journal last week, "The most important thing is whether we can really deter North Korea from going to war, and I think we need more time to be able to do so."

Specifically, officials from the current administration have [argued](#) that before a transfer happens South Korea must be able to destroy North Korean missiles on their pads before they are launched (the so-called "kill chain" capability) and also develop their own missile defense program to intercept North Korean missiles. In other words, before they they have operational command, they want to be able to destroy North Korea's conventional and defensive [second strike ability](#) in the event South Korea were to launch a preemptive war. This is a goal that is almost entirely unrealistic and is more akin to total domination than actual deterrence.

Vice Minister Baek also said regarding the non-transfer, "Any possible reduction or pullout of

U.S. military troops in South Korea could give a wrong signal to North Korea or other countries in the region.... We should approach this issue very carefully.”

But there is nothing in this that requires American troops to pullout if South Korea took control of its own wartime military command. Indeed, nothing short of physically removing U.S. troops from their perch is likely to have that effect.

The U.S. has at least a handful of unofficial reasons for keeping troops in South Korea, including maintaining a foothold on the mainland of East Asia directed at both China and Russia and [padding the budgets](#) of contractors that do everything from supplying the weapons to peeling the potatoes for American troops. South Korean officials may or may not truly believe the delusion that the U.S. is constantly on the verge of sending its “[bravest and brightest](#)” home (a laughable concept for the critical-minded), but this notion comes up regularly here in discussions on national security.

In turn, South Korea doesn't want U.S. troops in-country just to protect against North Korea. This may even be a secondary factor in the overall picture considering North Korea is, bluff and bluster aside, a military power in perpetual decline. The South is far richer and has a much more modern and well-oiled military [compared](#) to the North's crumbling combat infrastructure. The only advantages North Korea has are its manpower—a factor virtually irrelevant in modern warfare—and its [still-undeliverable](#) nuclear weapons, which North Korea developed [in response](#) to the threatening posture of the United States.

While it is hard to know exactly how much S.K. officials actually believe of their own anti-North Korean rhetoric, Vice Minister Baek's allusion to “other countries in the region” is surely significant in that most Koreans still see the U.S. presence as a means to [buffer against](#) both China and Japan and view maintenance of OPCON as the way to ensure the U.S. doesn't leave the peninsula (which is probably why Vice Minister Baek seems to be directly linking OPCON with an American troop pullout).

The crucial issue facing South Korea in this era is how long they can have what the current administration seems to consider the best of both worlds—maintaining strong economic ties with China, the South's number one trading partner, while remaining, at best, a junior ally of the U.S. as it attempts to preserve [military hegemony](#) in the pacific, a policy that [antagonizes](#) Beijing. We see South Korea attempting to balance this role on a regular basis as it agrees to purchase the [terrible](#) F-35 and the [ineffective](#) Global Hawk drone, almost certainly based upon [pressure](#) from U.S. diplomats, while so far putting off implementing the THAAD missile defense system in South Korea, partly because this would represent a serious provocation for both [China and Russia](#) (but also because they want their own defense companies to [reap the profits](#) of the ongoing conflict with North Korea).

The assumption in South Korea seems to be that this is a tightrope the country has to walk, but it might be useful to consider once again whether or not this is really the case. With the [11th highest](#) military budget in the world, South Korea likely has more than sufficient deterrent capability against any country in the region and there is just too much economic interdependence between China, Japan and South Korea for conflict to ever be a viable option.

Despite this, people in South Korea generally think about national security based two great myths: that the North is still a strong military force, and that the South remains a weak state

incapable of taking care of itself against the rest of its regional neighbors. Far too many people in South Korea and abroad believe North Korea will flood over the Demilitarized Zone separating the Koreas or that the region would somehow erupt in chaos by default were the U.S. to lessen its footprint and were South Korea to pursue greater military independence.

This is the case for several reasons. It is a result of the complex of inferiority engendered by Japan's pre-WWII occupation and centuries of interference by China. It is also a manifestation of the trauma resulting from the horrors of the Korean War, though official South Korean memory has crucially whitewashed the [atrocities](#) committed [by the U.S.](#) and the South Korean government before and after this conflict. It is also the outcome of continual fear-mongering by the South Korean media. Finally, South Koreans are educated in school and during mandatory military service that South Korea shook off Japan and the North, achieved great economic development, and became a free and democratic state thanks to U.S. protection and friendship—a simplistic narrative that is full of exaggeration and outright [falsehood](#).

Ultimately OPCON transfer is a matter of sovereignty. There is no more critical issue for a nation than deciding whether and how to engage in military combat. Even the most apolitical of South Koreans instinctively know this and are often surprised when they hear their government doesn't even officially control its own military.

Conflict is only more likely if the South continues to insist on linking its defense with the American goal of perpetuating [hegemony](#) in the region. The U.S. could quite easily drag the South Koreans into a conflict in the Pacific if a conflagration erupted between China and Japan (and Taiwan), over the [Senkaku-Diaoyu island dispute](#), where the U.S. has agreed to assist Japan even if they provoke the conflagration. This is categorically outside the interests of South Korea, but such are the perils of [collective security](#), especially in a region where the U.S., through the San Francisco treaty of 1951, specifically decided to leave post-WWII island ownership in the Pacific unresolved in order to maintain "[strategic ambiguity](#)" and "[manageable instability](#)" to justify their ongoing military presence.

It doesn't have to be this way. The question is not whether South Korea is militarily prepared for independence; it is whether or not the South Korean people are *mentally* prepared to shake off the ruling elite in their country to become an independent nation and avoid going down with the [sinking](#) American ship.

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