

## US Forces OK in ROK-for Now

EAST ASIA | SECURITY | SOUTH KOREA March 2, 2010 *By Ben Hancock*



**A US handover of wartime control of forces to its South Korean hosts has locals torn between sovereignty and security guarantees.**

Image credit:US Defense Department

Charles Reeder remembers the backlash after the ‘Highway 56 Incident’ in 2002, when a couple of US soldiers driving an armoured vehicle accidentally crushed two South Korean schoolgirls, yet were found not-guilty of negligent homicide by a US military court.

‘It rocked the whole USFK,’ says Reeder, 42, a recent retiree from the United States Forces Korea, who was stationed in downtown Seoul at the time. ‘It was painful...We were out there on the gates, and it was like a siege mentality.’ South Korean activists broke into a US facility in the northern part of the capital, he recalls, and firebombed a warehouse base near the port of Incheon.

Besides being a tragic loss of young life, the incident marked a low point for the half-century long US-South Korea alliance. It dragged down US military morale here and brought to the surface tensions about the presence of the 28,500 foreign troops.

Several new presidents and two North Korean nuclear tests later, there are signs that attitudes on both sides of the fence have changed significantly. But with the upcoming transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) back to South Korean hands and major shift in the US military stance, there are mixed and complicated feelings here about the future of the USFK’s role.

### ‘Meet the Common Danger’

In talking about the current state of the US-South Korea military alliance, Mark Monahan starts like any good history professor: from the beginning. Monahan teaches Asian studies and the Korean War to US soldiers here through the University of Maryland. But as a North Korean-born naturalized American and Korean War Veteran—who has served in both the South Korean and US armed forces—he recalls events in a way that is far from dry academia.

On Oct. 1st, 1953, months after the Korean War armistice was signed, the United States and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) sealed the Mutual Defense Treaty. The short, six-article pact gave the United States the right to base troops in South Korea and established that both will ‘meet the common danger’ if faced by the threat of war; North Korea is not expressly cited.

The drawdown of US troops stationed in Korea, from the nearly 600,000 that were on the peninsula at the end of the war, really began after the Nixon Doctrine in 1969, says Monahan. The US 7th Infantry Division was brought home and inactivated in 1971, not long after then South Korean President Park Chung-hee committed about 50,000 ROK combat troops to Vietnam. ‘This was a very difficult time in terms of US-ROK relations,’ he says. Perhaps more so, at the government level at least, than after the 2002 incident.

‘It’s almost like a temperature gauge,’ says John Feffer, co-director of the Washington-based Foreign Policy in Focus and editor of *The Future of US-Korean Relations*. ‘When the United States reduces the number of troops [in South Korea] it has historically been an indication of displeasure.’

Today, Feffer says, this is part of the unease surrounding the transfer of OPCON, which dictates who has command over the 650,000 ROK troops in wartime. He describes it as ‘the tension between being abandoned by the United States and being suffocated by the United States.’

Given to the United Nations Command at the outset of the Korean War, OPCON was transferred to the US Combined Forces Command (CFC) in 1978, and is to return to South Korea in April 2012. The ROK regained peacetime control of its troops in 1994.

Conservatives in South Korea, like current President Lee Myung-bak and many members of his Grand National Party, are the most concerned about the OPCON transfer and what it might mean for US-ROK interoperability in the event of a North Korean attack. The fact that the decision on the transfer was made in October 2006—the same month the North conducted its first known nuclear test—likely adds to their fears.

But Feffer is dismissive. ‘This is a normal evolution in the alliance — frankly, the conservatives should be celebrating,’ he says. ‘Traditionally, conservatives are concerned about sovereignty, and this should be seen as a sovereignty issue.’

Cheong Wook-Sik, representative of the Seoul-based Peace Network, says he agrees—in principle. But as the founder of an organization pushing for decreased militarism on the peninsula and more discussion about Korean reunification, he has other worries about what the OPCON transfer could mean for the future of the US military presence here.

The first is an increase in compensatory South Korean military spending, which Cheong says saw a large jump during the administration of Roh Moo-hyun, who was president when the OPCON transfer was agreed upon. South Korea is now the third-largest buyer of US arms on a foreign military sales basis, buying \$800 million worth in 2008.

‘Generally South Koreans think the US presence is needed,’ Cheong says, though he adds the 2000 summit between then South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il made people ‘rethink the necessity of US soldiers in Korea.’ He also says that feelings toward troops reflect overall sentiment towards the US government, and that attitudes have turned more positive since Barack Obama’s inauguration as US president.

And as with the controversy surrounding US military stationing in Japan’s Okinawa, Cheong acknowledges there’s still significant concern here about environmental degradation caused by bases and crimes committed by US soldiers.

What South Koreans really don’t want to see, he says, is their country becoming a platform for the US war on terror or military intervention against China.

‘The problem is, why does the US government want to transfer OPCON to South Korea? Because South Korea wants it? I don’t think so,’ Cheong says. ‘The main reason is the US wants strategic flexibility,’ unencumbered by the burden of having to command a foreign military.

David Oten, head of public relations for the USFK, says the two are unrelated. He says the transfer is essentially about the US military’s move from a ‘supported role to a supporting role,’ and that this is a natural progression as the ROK now has a ‘world class’ military with some three million reserve troops. Two years of military service is mandatory for all able-bodied South Korean men.

Asked how significant South Korea is to the US military’s wider presence in Asia, Oten says: ‘Korea is significant in itself.’

Addressing military spending, he talks about the difference between a 'bridging capability' and an 'enduring capability.' While South Korea is rolling out its own Aegis-equipped destroyers, for example, the United States will continue to provide aircraft carriers and intelligence satellites, he says.

While visiting South Korea in November last year, Obama told troops at Osan Air Force Base, located about 60 kilometres south of Seoul, that there was a possibility some of them would be redeployed to Afghanistan.

Obama and Defense Secretary Robert Gates have reaffirmed that US troop levels in Korea will stay close to where they are for the foreseeable future. But in a December forum hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, USFK Commander General Walter Sharp said: 'We really want to get the discussion to be more based on capabilities...rather than just a number.'

### **'I'm in Korea and I Hate It' to 'Station of Choice'**

Besides the OPCON transfer, the biggest change to the US presence in South Korea is the consolidation of US bases and the normalization of troop tours, meaning deployments of two or three years with family as opposed to one year unaccompanied. The goal is to improve continuity and make South Korea the 'station of choice'—a jump from its present reputation.

'The problem with stationing in Korea is basically a PR problem,' says Reeder. When troops get orders to come here 'people still picture MASH,' he explains, referring to the 1970s American TV show about Korean War doctors.

Reeder is now a duty manager at the United Services Organizations office at Osan, meant to be a 'home away from home' for troops. He has spent a total of 10 years in South Korea; he was also born here, but adopted at 18 months by a US Navy family and grew up mainly in Wisconsin.

Early in his military career he volunteered for Korea duty, but it took him seven years to get here after first being stationed in Germany. (Reeder calls this 'Army logic,' by which the 'poor guy' who wants to go to Germany ends up in Korea, and vice versa).

When he finally did arrive in 1998, Reeder says of his peers: 'Pretty much most of them were like, "I'm in Korea for a year and I hate it."' He explains that this kind of mentality was responsible for much of the USFK's disciplinary problems (although he adds that these are his personal views, not the official stance of the military or USO).

Reeder, who retired in 2009 at the rank of Sgt. First Class, reminds me that this was pre-9/11 and that before Iraq and Afghanistan, Korea was the primary forward-deployed post. This meant troops were in for a year of high-intensity training without their families.

Josh Stanton, a former Judge Advocate General defence attorney who served in Korea for four years and now lives in Washington, has similar memories. Though he volunteered for duty and extended twice, 'I was definitely a rarity,' he says. 'Most of the people were there on one-year tours and they were counting the days.'

Stanton, who still monitors Korean affairs closely and runs the blog One Free Korea, says he enjoyed his time in Korea overall. 'But I also tried really hard to learn Korean,' something that's not worth doing if you're only going to be in the country for a year, he adds. Stanton also says South Koreans treated the US soldiers 'at best like a public utility and at worst like a terrible occupier...that was terrible for our morale.'

Stanton left Korea in 2003, about the time Reeder says things really began to change. After the Highway 56 accident, the military put greater emphasis on training troops to be 'a soldier and a diplomat,' he recalls. In 2008, the first phase of tour normalization began.

Monahan has also witnessed a change in the last ten years, as Asia has become a more significant area of interest. He says his students are 'highly-motivated' and that many of them volunteered for duty in South Korea.

Air Force Maj. Teddy Su, a 33-year-old radiologist at Osan from California, volunteered for Korea duty and arrived here in July 2009. We meet at the USO lounge, where he and a dozen other service members are watching the Saints pound the Colts in the Superbowl. Su calls the opportunity to live and travel in Asia ‘an experience I didn’t want to pass up,’ but acknowledges that he’s not married and has no children.

By the time consolidation and troop normalization is completed toward the end of this decade, the USFK expects about 14,250 military families to be living in 5 enclaves around South Korea. The Yongsan Garrison in central Seoul will be closed and most of its troops moved to Pyeongtaek, about 80 kilometres south of the capital, into an expanded Camp Humphreys. (The city has plans to turn the 600-acre Yongsan lot, which is about the size of New York’s Central Park, into a giant green space.)

So far under the relocation, the USFK has returned over 12,800 acres of land to South Korean control, and has been granted 912 acres chosen by the Korean government for Humphreys. The end-goal is to increase both readiness and efficiency and to create a less intrusive presence.

Oten is confident the plan will achieve this, but concedes that the Humphreys expansion has met some opposition from area residents who were forced off the land. ‘Nobody wants to leave their home,’ he says.

Stanton for his part is concerned that the reforms will give a ‘permanence’ to US basing in South Korea that may not be positive. ‘The presence of tens of thousands of foreigners on your soil is always going to be an irritant,’ he says, particularly in South Korea because it has a ‘very xenophobic streak.’ And while he acknowledges that accompanied tours may improve troop morale and lead to other benefits, he also says that it puts thousands of US civilians within North Korean missile range.

South Korean Choi Jong-ho served with US soldiers in the Korean Augmentation to the United States Army (KATUSA)—a unit that acts as a sort of cultural bridge—from 2004-06. Though he is confident in the ROK military’s ability to fight North Korea and win, he says it cannot ‘contain’ the North the way the US military can.

‘I think [US troops] have to be here, absolutely,’ he says. ‘Though maybe not in 20 or 30 years.’

---

<http://thediplomat.com/2010/03/02/us-forces-ok-in-rok-for-now/>

---

For inquiries, please contact The Diplomat at [info@the-diplomat.com](mailto:info@the-diplomat.com)