



# The Future of the UN Command

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The role of the United Nations Command (UNC) in deterring North Korean aggression and maintaining peace on the Korean peninsula could assume greater importance over the next few years as a result of three factors: a nuclear armed North Korea, the conclusion of a peace treaty ending the Korean War, and the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) of combined US/ROK forces from US Forces Korea (USFK) to the ROK. The UNC is the best organization to meet these and other challenges and changes on the Korean peninsula, but it will need to be revitalized and modernized. The Korean government must work to harness the UNC to provide greater international guarantees for a future Korean peace treaty.

## The United Nations Command (UNC)

The UNC, created in 1950, is the unified command for multinational military forces arrayed to repel North Korean aggression and defend the Republic of Korea. The UNC supported the ROK during the Korean War and for several decades after the signing of the



armistice it was responsible for the defense of South Korea. With operational control over a majority of the units in the ROK Armed Forces, the command was the primary peacetime planning organization for allied response to a North Korean invasion of South Korea and the principal wartime command organization for all ROK and US forces involved in defending South Korea.

 (Photo: Sgt. Russell Youmans)

Even after the establishment of the ROK-US Combined Forces Command (CFC) in 1978, the UNC continued to play an important role in armistice maintenance and in concentrating the defense and military support of other nations in the defense of the ROK. The UNC would be a force provider of additional UN forces dispatched to the Korean peninsula. Among its most important tasks is to ensure that UNC rear forces are ready to support combat operations on the peninsula, primarily through logistical support and the facilitation of force flow and reinforcements. The predominant nature of USFK and CFC has overshadowed the critical and important role of the UNC.

## **Changes to the Security Environment**

Over the next several years, three developments are likely to affect and be affected by the UNC. The first are the challenges posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea in the event of a large-scale conventional war with North Korea, regime change in North Korea, or reunification of the Korean peninsula. Second is the possibility of concluding a comprehensive peace treaty ending the Korean War. The third centers on the matter of command and control—specifically, the ROK military's retention of wartime operational control.

### ***A Nuclear Armed North Korea***

A nuclear armed North Korea threatens the peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and in the Asia-Pacific region, and poses a growing global threat.

With the possibility of WMD proliferation from North Korea, especially in the event of regime change or instability in the North, and considerable nuclear safety concerns, greater demands may be placed on an international organization like the United Nations (and the International Atomic Energy Agency) in the future. Whether the UNC is the right organization to deal with these potential problems is a legitimate question that merits further study. Conferring additional missions on the UNC—for example, a role in arrangements for monitoring nuclear security and safety in a reunified or denuclearized Korea—would provide a basis for continued presence of the UNC to coordinate and de-conflict the activities of other entities that could be involved in implementing peace treaty arrangements.

The UNC also has a potential role to play in two very different nuclear futures for the Korean peninsula. First, it could be utilized to provide international support, monitoring, supervision and oversight of North-South denuclearization arrangements; alternatively, if the South Koreans were to pursue a nuclear deterrent, with the understanding of the United States, the UNC could also be used for the same purposes to provide confidence that the South's nuclear stewardship is responsible, safe and reliable. An expanded mission for UNC in either of these scenarios is worth consideration.

### ***A Peace Treaty on the Korean Peninsula***

The North Korean goal for a peace treaty seems to be to remove US forces from Korea. Once this occurs, the North's leadership feels it would be able to conquer the Korean peninsula, even by legal means, using the freedoms of an open society and by an insurgency similar to Vietnam. An internal civil war within Korea would make international intervention very difficult. The UNC, in this instance, could play the role of "peace guarantor," acting as a critical monitoring agency. If there is a reduction of US forces, the role of the UNC in maintaining peace would be more significant. It is also possible that a peace treaty could involve agreed principles for the transition—for example, joint

efforts for securing nuclear material and infrastructure and removal of nuclear weapons—that could involve the UNC.

Gaining consensus among the Korean and US public on the continued legitimacy of the UNC will be critical. The North Koreans have continuously alleged that the UNC is another mechanism for the United States to control South Korea. South Korean organizations sympathetic to the North have been carrying this message to schools and activist groups in South Korea for decades. The ROK-US alliance must take efforts to address these misconceptions, particularly those stemming from individuals and organizations with ulterior motives. Efforts to address misinformation about the UNC will further benefit from active efforts to not only clarify current roles and responsibilities, but to consider future mission areas such as WMD proliferation and nuclear safety and security.

### ***Transition of Wartime Operational Control***

Through the activation of its seven bases in Japan, the UNC would undertake a key role against North Korean aggression. In the case of a major conflict, it would exercise operational control of overall international forces assigned to the Korean area of operation, potentially delegating some aspects of operational or tactical control to CFC. In order to support reception, staging, onward movement and integration of the forces of contributing nations, the UNC would activate the multinational command supported by its rear headquarters in Japan. In these circumstances, the UNC would be the only legal military command to control non-US or ROK forces. Thus, the primary strength of the UNC is the enduring capabilities it provides to the ROK. These include flowing reinforcements under an existing unified command structure that also includes Intelligence/ Surveillance/Reconnaissance (ISR), precision strike, space operations, and combating weapons of mass destruction (WMD).[1]

The transfer of wartime control of the defense of South Korea to the South

Korean government has been delayed many times and could be delayed yet again given the continued potential for inter-Korean conflict. The CFC is expected to be dissolved once wartime OPCON is transferred, or at least restructured and renamed. These developments raise important questions about the UNC. But the role and importance of the UNC goes far beyond the transition of OPCON. It would therefore be in the best interests of South Korea to maintain and strengthen the UNC beyond OPCON transition. By elevating the importance of the UNC, the ROK and US militaries would have a mitigating organization, and South Korea would also be guaranteed an international support mechanism for future conflict as well as humanitarian assistance.

### **The UNC and the Future of the ROK-US Alliance**

Access to UNC command and control as well as the capability to flow reinforcements through Japan call for a continued UNC presence after the transfer of OPCON. Once these new arrangements are in place, the US will be in the new position of supporting the ROK-led command structure. This new relationship will put greater demands on more extensive and timely consultations between the US and ROK command structures, in addition to multilateral outreach with the forces of other nations. At the same time, however, time will be a more critical factor in a fast-moving crisis involving many nations. A US-led UNC, with an expanded mission, could help to mitigate this problem. More remains to be done considering important changes to the strategic environment and the untapped potential of the UNC to serve a vital role in bringing a more enduring peace to the peninsula. Recognizing this, the UNC's last two commanders launched and continued an UNC Revitalization Initiative.

What is in the best interests of all the actors? A UNC that is structured to maintain peace on the Korean peninsula will benefit not just the Koreans but Japan, China, the United States, Russia and the world. Having everyone understand this is easier said than done.

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- [1] Hyunkwon Joe, United Nations Command Armistice Roles on the Korean Peninsula: Is December 2015 the end?, US Army Command and General Staff College, June 14, 2013, [www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA589750](http://www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA589750).