

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM
Delay the Transfer of Troop Control

By Victor Cha

Everyone has a "to-do" list of important tasks they need to complete. When it comes to the U.S.-Korea alliance, one important item on this list for presidents Lee Myung-bak and Barack Obama is the transfer of full operational control of Korean troops to Seoul. The two leaders must decide whether to proceed as planned with the April 2012 timeline. After a week of meetings with high-level officials in Seoul, as well as meetings with policymakers in Washington, I am convinced the schedule needs to be revised. This is a difficult thing for me to recommend since I was part of the Bush administration that concluded the agreement. Nevertheless, the circumstances under which the agreement was made in 2007 were very different than those today.

The transfer is a matter of military readiness. The South Korean military over 50 years has become one of the best in the world and more than capable of defending itself. In the process leading up to April 2012 transfer, reports from the U.S. Forces Korea and from the Pentagon and Defense Ministry are that the training is proceeding ahead of schedule. The U.S. and Korean military deserve credit for this.

But the transfer is, and always was, more than a military matter. Indeed, the rationales for it when first raised by Roh Moo-hyun's government and Donald Rumsfeld's Defense Department were as much political as they were military. Roh framed the transfer as a return of "sovereignty" over its own military forces from a crypto-imperialist United States. This was evident in the domestic support for the plan, backed by a progressive camp motivated by latent anti-Americanism more than by an assertion of military readiness.

The progressive camp in Korea found an unlikely ally on the other side of the Pacific Ocean in Donald Rumsfeld, who framed the transfer less in terms of the Korean military's readiness and more in terms of the global needs of the U.S. military dictated by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. There was also no denying that Rumsfeld's past experience in the Pentagon as the Ford administration's defense secretary (1975-77) with a recalcitrant South Korean dictatorship covertly pursuing its own nuclear weapons program might have negatively colored his image of the country. These experiences may in turn have contributed to his impatience and frustration three decades later with a progressive Korean president who appeared "ungrateful" for the alliance.

Thus, the agreement was reached under less than ideal conditions. Moreover, since the agreement in 2007 much has changed. North Korea conducted a second nuclear test. It admitted to a covert effort at uranium enrichment. It conducted more successful ballistic missile tests. And of course, Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke. Finally, across the sea in Japan, the U.S. plans for restructuring and strengthening its military force posture have

been stymied by a new and indecisive Hatoyama government. The conditions surrounding the peninsula's security situation have changed substantially since 2007. This provides more than enough reason for Obama and Lee to re-evaluate the situation.

A re-evaluation of the timeline should not begin between the two sides with an explicit request from Korea. Politically, this is bad for both sides. It puts political pressure on the U.S. to take the blame for whichever decision it makes, and it puts Seoul in the position of supplicant and makes it look as though the Lee Myung-bak government is admitting weakness and lack of confidence in its military readiness. Instead, Obama and Lee should jointly decide to do three things: 1) express confidence and satisfaction in the progress to-date in the transfer and highlight Korea's military readiness and the interoperability of forces; 2) note that the security situation on the peninsula has changed since 2007; and 3) proclaim that the two governments will take the time to assess the new situation together.

The objective of such a re-evaluation should be to "re-boot" the political context in which the transfer has been framed between the allies. In other words, it should no longer be about "sovereignty" or about peeling U.S. forces off the peninsula for other military contingencies. It should be about a united vision and motivation for the transition to the strategic alliance both sides aspire to. In terms of a revised timeline, none needs to be stated publicly. Practically speaking, however, the logical timeframe should be around 2015 or 2016. This coincides with other elements of U.S. forces realignment including the move to new headquarters. Politically, these dates give both the future U.S. and Korean presidencies (starting in 2012-2013) a couple of years before the transfer takes place.

Progressives might chafe at a revision of the transfer, but it is hard to imagine the broader public opposing it, especially if the revision takes place against the backdrop of widespread suspicions about North Korea's involvement in the Cheonan sinking. In the U.S., there will not be strong opposition to a revision. While this is a big issue in Korea, it does not resonate as much in the U.S. and really remains a policy elite issue. Some conservative Republicans might chafe at Obama, but the majority will be indifferent.

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