INTERVIEW

'The old America is gone': OPCON transfer is Korea's answer to changing US, Moon Chung-in says

By **Kim Bo-kyoung**

Published Nov 12, 2026 7:00 am KST | Updated Nov 12, 2026 1:37 pm KST

Former presidential adviser calls for new alliance mindset



Moon Chung-in, professor emeritus of Yonsei University, speaks during an interview with The Korea Times in Seoul, Nov. 10. Korea Times Photo by Choi Won-suk

Korea's push to regain wartime operational control (OPCON) of its military is not just an attempt to reclaim military sovereignty, but a necessary response to a fundamental shift in the United States' foreign and security policy, according to Moon Chung-in, a former presidential special adviser.

In an interview with The Korea Times on Tuesday, Moon, currently a professor emeritus at Yonsei University, argued that President Lee Jae Myung's pursuit of OPCON transfer comes in line with Washington's growing expectation that Seoul

assume primary responsibility for its own defense, rather than the self-reliant defense agenda set by former President Roh Moo-hyun.

"The U.S. is changing, but we are still clinging to the old America. The old America is gone," Moon said.

He pointed to U.S. President Donald Trump's repeated demands that Korea shoulder a greater share of its defense burden. Under such an arrangement, Korean forces would take the lead in conventional defense against North Korea, while U.S. forces would provide complementary capabilities in areas where Seoul remains relatively weak, including air and naval capabilities, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance — as well as extended nuclear deterrence.

"Discussions would be needed, but OPCON transfer could eventually lead to a parallel command structure, similar to Japan's arrangement with the U.S.," he said.



Soldiers from the South Korean Army move into position after landing from a CH-47 transport helicopter during an air assault exercise as part of the Hoguk military drills in Yangpyeong, Gyeonggi Province, Oct. 27. Yonhap

Rethinking Korea's alliance mindset

Moon acknowledged concerns among conservatives that such a transition could weaken the alliance, but argued that these fears reflect an outdated understanding of Washington's security commitments.

For decades, Korea has relied on the concept of U.S. troops serving as a "tripwire," ensuring American involvement in the event of a North Korean attack. Another lingering expectation comes from the Cold War-era Operational Plan 5027, which envisioned massive U.S. reinforcements, including 600,000 ground troops, 2,000 aircraft and five aircraft carrier battle groups.

He described such expectations as a "fantasy" increasingly disconnected from America's actual military capabilities and strategic priorities. The deeper problem, he argued, is that Korea has security assumptions based on an American commitment that no longer exists in its previous form.

To illustrate the shift, he cited former U.S. President John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural pledge that became the foundation of American liberal internationalism.

"Let me rephrase the statement reflecting today's America: 'We will not pay any price. We will outsource our burdens. We will avoid any hardship. We will selectively support friends. We will compromise with foes if necessary, in order to assure American national interests and make America great again,'" he said.

Moon noted the trend extends beyond Trump and his Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, pointing to growing skepticism toward costly overseas military commitments among elements within the Democratic Party.

"We need to note that both MAGA supporters and democratic socialists are young, and they represent the future of the U.S.," said Moon.

2 paths in US strategic thinking

Moon identified two competing directions in U.S. strategic thinking about Korea: one favoring a stronger concentration of American military resources in the Indo-Pacific to counter China and the other advocating a broader disengagement from Asia, as proposed by Jennifer Kavanagh from Defense Priorities.

Those who view Korea as a strategic outpost for countering China could be reluctant to implement OPCON transfer, which could expose Seoul to a risk of being trapped in case of a U.S.-China conflict. The alternative, however, could leave Korea facing a sudden security vacuum.

The outcome of the 2028 U.S. presidential election could accelerate either trajectory. Still, even if the U.S. continues to view Korea as a “an island or a fixed aircraft carrier between Japan and the Chinese mainland,” as Xavier Brunson, commander of U.S. Forces Korea said, the risk of entrapment would remain, further underscoring the need for OPCON transfer.

Looking beyond alliances

Moon called for Korea to prepare for possible U.S. retrenchment by pursuing a collective security framework in Northeast Asia alongside its existing alliances.

Drawing on Europe's Helsinki Final Act of 1975, which brought rival Cold War blocs into a common security dialogue, Moon proposed an inclusive regional arrangement involving the U.S., China, Russia, Japan, both Koreas and potentially Mongolia.

"A collective defense system based on alliances assumes the existence of a common enemy or threat, whereas a collective security system does not. Rather than organizing regional security around shared threats, values or ideologies, such a framework should emphasize common interests and cooperation," he said.

Addressing concerns that such a framework may sound idealistic, Moon argued that Korea remains deeply entrenched in an alliance-centered view of security. He stressed the need for preventive diplomacy, urging Seoul to prepare for potential U.S. military disengagement before a crisis forces it to rethink its security strategy.

"An alliance is not an end in itself, but a means," he said. "Ensuring security through the alliance should be our immediate objective, but transforming that security into peace must be our ultimate goal."