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Time for command transfer is now

Pyongyang assumes ROK Forces will not make an independent military action.

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When North Korea bombarded Yeonpyeong Island on Nov. 23, 2010, ROK Air Force F-15K fighter jets were scrambled for emergency sorties and prepared for a retaliatory strike. But that was all. No attack order came from the command, and the F-15Ks returned to base.

That's the reality of our armed forces, which had always emphasized firm retribution for North Korea's provocations. Then-President Lee Myung-bak thought the upper command was at fault and replaced defense minister Kim Tae-young, pursuing a reform in the order of command. In fact, however, the actual cause was the lack of independent military operational control.

Operational command refers to the authority to make orders regarding all military actions including operation planning, execution of warfare, military deployment and retaliatory strikes. With the establishment of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command in November 1978, operational command of ROK forces was transferred to the Commander of the ROK-U.S. CFC, which is held by the Commander of United States Forces Korea. On Dec. 1, 1994, operational command during peacetime was returned to Korea. Still, wartime operational control during Defcon III or higher defense readiness state is exercised by the CFC commander.

Peacetime operational control is in practice quite limited. According to the Combined Delegated Authority, or CODA, the CFC commander still has control during six situations, including war deterrence and defense, combined emergency control for observance of the Armistice Agreement, and establishment of wartime operational plans. Since a strike on the North using air power requires U.S. Forces' control according to the Armistice Rules of Engagement, immediate retribution by the ROK Air Force was not possible. Without the cooperation of U.S. commanders, who do not want an elevated crisis in the Korean Peninsula, ROK Forces cannot take many actions independently during both wartime and peacetime.

That's why Pyongyang disparages the ROK Forces as America's "puppet" and constantly makes provocations. They assume that as long as U.S. commanders exercise operational control, ROK Forces would not make an independent military action. When a new combined forces defense system is established with the ROK Forces as the main entity able to exercise independent wartime operational control with U.S. forces playing a supplementary role, Pyongyang would have to be afraid of South Korea - not only the United States - and need to pursue a peace treaty with Seoul, not with Washington.

Wartime operational command is not an issue limited to military efficiency, but also a matter that determines the fate of the country. What are the justifications and interests involved in the postponement of wartime operational command to Korea for the second time? Aside from the trust between the allied nations and the dignity of the country, it is also a matter of whether South Korea has the will to retaliate against North Korea's provocations. Repeated postponements of the transfer of wartime operational control means giving up on retribution and remaining permanently dependent on the United States.

Concerns over the situation after the transfer of the wartime operational control are understandable. However, I personally feel very concerned about their “concerns.”

First of all, transfer of operational control does not mean automatic dissolution of the CFC. A new structure with the ROK Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff as the commander and the USFK commander as the deputy commander is possible.

The claims that ROK Forces are weak in intelligence gathering and the transfer should be delayed until a “kill chain” is established is not convincing, either. Since Seoul and Washington agreed on the transfer of wartime operational control in 2006, the United States has repeatedly promised to provide “bridging capability” on the vulnerable aspects of South Korea by stationing and supplementing intelligence assets, keeping Patriot Missiles in Korea, and assisting the command control system.

In addition, postponement of the transfer doesn’t help us respond to North Korea’s nuclear threats, as the U.S.’s immediate extended nuclear deterrence is separate from wartime operational command.

Those who support postponement of the wartime operational command transfer need to wake up from the illusion of “trip wire,” which guarantees immediate intervention by U.S. forces in the case North Korea were to make a sudden southward invasion, and large scale reinforcement of 690,000 troops, 160 vessels and 2,000 fighters according to Operations Plan 5027. If the U.S. government reduces the defense budget and strength at the current rate, augmentation of U.S. forces during an emergency on the Korean Peninsula is expected to be barely 50,000 to 100,000. Having experienced the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Americans are not likely to be in favor of automatic intervention by American forces.

The conclusion is clear. We are the ones who will have to fight war. South Korea has the eighth-largest military in the world, with 640,000 troops and an annual defense budget of 34 trillion won (\$30.53 billion). ROK Forces is no longer the fledgling military that had to entrust operational control with the United States. With the spirit to lead the situation on the peninsula and pioneer our own destiny, Korea can exercise wartime operational control independently. Unless those who advocate postponement of the transfer have political intentions or want to protect their vested interests with “security deals,” we should end the talks for postponement, which even Washington does not want. It’s time for us to take responsibility for peacetime and wartime operational control as scheduled starting from December, 2015.

Translated by the Korea JoongAng Daily staff.

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