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A Philosophical Case for **OPCON Transition on the Korean Peninsula**

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The problem of North Korea confounds America today as much as it did 60 years ago. A rogue regime holds sway over a population of 23 million that is poised for war and intensely skeptical of the “Yankee” puppet government to the south. Negotiations, ongoing for decades, have come to seem hopelessly fruitless. The world has watched helplessly as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) has perpetuated diplomatic misdirection, disingenuous bargaining,

and nuclear brinkmanship. Meanwhile, the Republic of Korea (ROK) has continued to reap the full financial and military benefits of the *Miracle on the Han River*—a phrase used to describe the astonishing export-fueled economic progress throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In recognition of the South’s progress, the United States and South Korea are poised to deliver a debilitating strategic communications message to North Korea. On April 17, 2012, wartime command of ROK military forces is set to be transferred from the U.S.

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Kim Jong-un, left, heir apparent to his father Kim Jong-il as leader of North Korea, marks 65th anniversary of Workers' Party of Korea

military to the South Korean government, ending 60 years of American control.

Yet recent statements have put this project in serious jeopardy. Since last year, a number of influential retired ROK generals have questioned the wisdom of such a move. These objections have been followed by recent statements coming from senior ROK government officials, claiming that the transfer is occurring at the “worst possible time.”¹ Various American academics

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and policy advisors have recently joined the chorus of protestations.² The strongest arguments against operational control (OPCON) transition revolve around the lack of readiness within the ROK military command structure. Critics suggest that the most logical and prudent move is to delay. However, the reason for this recommendation is based almost entirely on subjective judgments about the ability to defend against North Korean attack. Who better to make that assessment than the current Allied Force Commander, General Walter Sharp? Recent statements by General Sharp have directly refuted these critics. He has stated that OPCON transition “will not lead to a reduction of [U.S.] forces or weaken the U.S. commitment to provide reinforcement to the Korean Peninsula.”³ In his expert opinion, OPCON transition can occur as planned

without any degradation in American military capabilities.

Rather than entering the debate over military readiness, this article seeks to highlight the deeper ideological rationale behind the transfer. Wartime control presents itself as an important symbol of ROK sovereignty and directly counters the North’s accusations of American puppeteering. Such accusations are never merely gratuitous. They in fact provide the basis for the two messages that underlie the regime’s grip over its people: first, the claim that the Americans, rather than the South Koreans, are really calling the shots; and second, the claim, playing on popular fears, that an unprovoked, imperialistically motivated American attack could happen at any moment. These claims form the explicit justification behind North Korea’s “Military First” policy, which has been in effect since 1994. Convinced that the South is under American imperial control and an existential threat is imminent, it is no wonder the North Korean people have been able to endure famine and oppression for so long. They have become victims of a confused survival reflex based on a belief that their future as an unblemished, autonomous Korean nation is at stake and that the fragile liberty they possess is but a dream for their brothers to the south. To the contrary, the OPCON transition concretizes the handing over of responsibility for its own defense to a sovereign South Korea. This transfer has the potential to alter the entire calculus of North Korean regime control.

Legacy of Occupation

The ideology that both grips the North Korean people and is so carefully protected

by the regime finds its origins in the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945. Japan had previously spent 50 years assimilating Western ideas, including a period of unprecedented openness that reached its peak during the Meiji era. During that time, Europe found itself caught in a philosophical whirlwind, with popular thinking becoming radicalized to justify communism on the extreme left to ultranationalism on the extreme right. Japanese intellectuals, educated in Europe, took many of those ideas home and thrust them into the mainstream.

As Japan evolved into an ultranationalist, imperialist state, it found that such ideas provided convenient grounds for its far-reaching design for state control. These ideas directly influenced Japanese occupation policies following its annexation of Korea in 1910. In a clever attempt to pacify the Korean people, Japanese authorities went to great lengths to woo them into thinking that they too were chosen members of a greater Japanese state. Those who refused to cooperate were subjected to harsh measures deemed justified as a pragmatic necessity. While the oppression experienced by Koreans cannot be taken lightly, they did not entirely reject the Japanese project. By the 1920s, the upper and middle classes in Seoul were speaking Japanese voluntarily in their own homes.⁴ Evidence suggests that in the waning days of imperial rule, Koreans found themselves to some degree accustomed to the Japanese style of governance.

The occupiers were finally expelled by the Allies in 1945, leaving the Koreans to deal with other forms of foreign influence. When Kim Il-sung came to power as the handpicked revolutionary of the Soviets, communism and North Korea were paired in a partnership of convenience. Reaping the ancillary benefits of the communist name, the DPRK received substantial military and economic resources from China and the Soviet Union throughout the 1950s and 1960s, assistance that helped it rise to a pride of place over its poorer brothers to the south. During the same period, the term *Juche* was born, the seemingly Marxist-communist, uniquely Korean ideology that has since both captivated and mystified the West. Often described as self-reliance, *Juche* was billed as the impressive pseudo-Marxist ideological creation of the elder Kim Il-sung.

But the connection between *Juche* and communism is weak at best. From North Korea’s inception, virtually none of its



UN Command Security Battalion—Joint Security Area commander and deputy discuss joint evacuation exercise near demilitarized zone

U.S. Army (Christophe Pau)

intellectual elite received formal training in Marxism.⁵ The philosophy was adjusted in 1970 at the behest of the Great Leader, who commissioned his close advisor Hwang Chang-up to devise an expanded *Juche* philosophy that would further baffle the outside world. Brian Myers, a professor in South Korea who has carefully researched primary source North Korean domestic propaganda, calls Hwang's creation an "ideological smokescreen." Hwang's *Juche* gave the impression that North Korea continued as a firmly entrenched, ideologically Marxist-communist state, assuaging outside observers while the regime worked toward its real goal, the continued loyalty and dependency of its citizens. Myers claims that Hwang, after defecting to the South in 1997, admitted that the main function of *Juche* was *externally* oriented.⁶ The showcased ideology, which was intended to impress the world while offering a philosophical glimpse into the elusive North, had in reality nothing to do with the regime's true domestic ideology. To prove once and for all that the link between *Juche* and Marxism was nonexistent, the word *communism* was recently dropped from the North Korean constitution.

A Philosophical Explanation

If the *Juche* philosophy is essentially meaningless and if the Marxism connection is absent, then what is the real ideology at work within North Korea today? It is in fact a carefully managed, sophisticated system of state control, following a logic that G.W.F. Hegel's political thought helps to unravel. Hegel, while credited with creating the philosophical framework for Marx, was also the principal architect of the German state-centric ideal that was later adopted by the far right. According to Hegel, no outside source, including international law, should hold weight over state self-interest and domestic autonomy because a government is a singular political actor that is inherently self-protective but not subject to the ethical constraints of individuals. The state, therefore, is permitted to undertake drastic means to curb dissent: "Those who attack the state itself indirectly ... are the worst offenders, and the state has no higher duty than to preserve itself and to destroy the power of such offenders in the surest way it can."⁷ When this idea is taken to its extreme, any means necessary are often applied to protect the state from subversion from within, regardless of the moral consid-

erations. This explains North Korea's secretive network of gulags that has been spread throughout the country and for decades has incarcerated countless political prisoners and their families.

History, however, has shown that political theories detached from a satisfactory domestic ethical construct are inherently inadequate. It is perhaps for this reason that the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century have been relatively short-lived. Among these, North Korea has nevertheless continued to survive and is notoriously long-lived compared to others in existence today. Theirs is a system hinged upon the centrality of the state, an adaptation of the form of governance first brought to Korea by the Japanese. The regime is well served by this brand of political philosophy, which lends itself to popular norms of patriotic duty and national cohesiveness.

The North Korean ideology only reaches its full maturation when the regime succeeds in provoking fear of the outside world and of America in particular. In this way the people, who view themselves as incessantly vulnerable, are drawn closer to their protective parent-figure, the state. Yet allegiance to the state has not been the only phenomenon



Secretary Gates and General Sharp en route to visit troops at Camp Casey, South Korea

DOD (Cherie Cullen)



South Korean defense minister and Secretary Gates sign agreements reached during Security Consultative Meeting, October 2010

DOD (R.D. Ward)

holding the DPRK together. The ideology also contains a distinctly moral component designed to nurture lasting popular support.

Moral Exceptionalism

At first glance, North Korea might appear to be a state in complete contradiction to any moral scheme. If there were an example today of diplomatic bad behavior, habitual renegeation of international agreements, gross violations of human rights, and a state

propaganda system founded on half-truths, one might suggest that North Korea fits the textbook definition. But a deeper investigation into North Korean ideology yields a different conclusion. In fact, the two primary moral messages conveyed by North Korea's propaganda apparatus provide a foundation for its entire ideological project.

The regime's first claim is that the Korean people are exclusively virtuous. North Koreans are continuously reminded of

uniquely Korean attributes such as their affinity toward chastity, selflessness, and austerity—virtues that in North Korean propaganda are regularly contrasted with anecdotal Western vices.⁸ Preserving the moral purity of Koreans from outside corruption is a serious affair, and one that calls for drastic means. On the one hand, it makes collective social and economic sacrifices seem reasonable under the DPRK's Military First policy. On the other, it implies a tone of moral exceptionalism that exempts North Koreans from moral obligations vis-à-vis the outside world as a matter of self-preservation. An example is the regime's contempt for international law, known most likely to only a close inner circle that in practice ranges from haphazard violations of intergovernmental agreements to a lucrative, government-sponsored counterfeiting operation. North Korea's capacity to engage in illicit activity is now enormous. Forty-five million dollars in counterfeit U.S. currency, the so-called \$100–North Korean Supernote, has been detected in circulation.⁹ Today, 40 percent of all North Korean trade either is comprised of arms sales or is illicit.¹⁰

The next claim made by the regime is that the character and magnanimity of the Dear Leader are beyond reproach. This moral message gives Kim Jong-il the legitimacy and popular support required to stay in power, in part because North Korean propaganda shows him as the “greatest man alive.”¹¹ Kim always appears as a gentle, caring leader who exudes the virtue and austerity of a vulnerable, suffering people. The average North Korean knows no other image of its leader than the one depicted in a modest tunic and often in a loving embrace with common citizens. Strict censorship makes this theme even more compelling and prevents the circulation of rival opinions. As with the Japanese political legacy, this technique may have been adopted from their former occupiers because Hirohito was associated with similar symbols of virtue and purity such as white clothing and white horses.¹²

North Korean propaganda displays Korean virtue in stark contrast to the social excesses of America, touted as the imminent threat lurking at their borders and preying on their Korean brothers to the south. Over the past 60 years, the regime has succeeded in constructing a fear-based worldview premised on an ever-present military and cultural threat from America. This outlook supports a neo-Hegelian brand of authoritarianism that warrants harsh, centralized means to preserve

the moral purity of its people. It also relies on popular appeal for this moral ideal, hinging on the “politico-ideological unity of society” that the elder Kim had set as his goal decades ago.¹³

Nationalism and Ameriphobia

The notion of an existential threat to uniquely Korean virtue does not find its sole audience north of the 38th parallel. Much can be said about contemporary South Korean feelings, generally implicit, that resemble explicit North Korean themes of suspicion for U.S. self-interest. For example, an American visitor to the National War Museum in Seoul is somewhat surprised by the tone surrounding the history of 1950. Rather than one of gratitude toward America as liberators, the museum emphasizes the fact that U.S. and Soviet diplomats placed the Korean people in their woeful predicament in the first place. In this narrative, the division of the Korean state was the fault of external meddling and the first step toward civil war. It is a perception that to this day is a source of distrust for America.

Perhaps the most surprising indicator of this distrust came to light 2 years ago when the *Korea Times* reported that more first-year South Korean Military Academy cadets viewed the United States as their country’s main enemy than saw North Korea in that light. The statistic was later attributed to “inappropriate” education.¹⁴ While it is not fair to say that the majority of South Koreans see America as no more than an imperialistic reincarnation of the Japanese, it is important to acknowledge the degree of cultural unity and solidarity that Koreans have with one another.

Much is said about North Korean nationalism, but a similar thesis could be made for trans-Korean nationalism. This thesis suggests that since 1948, there have essentially been two governments vying for one people. As one of 17 named agencies in the South Korean government, the ROK Ministry of Unification reflects this attitude from the South’s perspective. Furthermore, in military-to-military interactions with members of the U.S. Armed Forces, the territory to the north is always written in English as *north Korea*—the lack of capitalization emphasizing that the country is only *temporarily* divided. This basic sentiment is shared by the North Korean regime, which has also articulated its desire for a reunified peninsula, albeit under the government of the DPRK.

According to regime propaganda, America is standing in the way of reunifica-

tion. As preposterous as this accusation might sound, it appears that such repetitious rhetoric succeeds in subtly casting doubt on American intentions within the South. A recent North Korean press statement intoned this message: “It is the unchanging strategic design of the United States to cling more tightly to South Korea militarily, provoke another Korean war using it as a steppingstone, and going one step further, realize its wild ambition for achieving military domination over Asia.”¹⁵ In contrast, Kim Jong-il appears as the courageous leader holding the American military and cultural onslaught at bay and preserving all that is authentically Korean.

General Sharp has insisted that the difference between a U.S. and ROK commander is negligible and that OPCON transition can proceed as scheduled without incurring undue risk

Whether or not the regime has been successful in shaping popular attitudes in the South, it is clear that South Koreans have entertained reservations about American interests, especially as ROK economic and military capabilities have grown in recent years. A comment from defector and former regime official Hwang Chang-up is indicative of these feelings, warning that the United States is concerned more about North Korean nuclear weapons than unification.¹⁶ These types of statements almost certainly feed a current of mistrust, foreshadowing future competing American and South Korean priorities. The potential friction point is only exacerbated by the fact that America continues to retain its Cold War position of wartime command over South Korean troops, a command relationship that has endured since the Korean War.

Wartime Control

The current plan for the transfer of wartime control had its genesis in 2005, when the George W. Bush administration first proposed the idea to the South Korean government. It was then favorably received by South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, who saw the opportunity as a landmark event for ROK sovereignty. From the perspective of both sides, OPCON transition underscored the ever-increasing economic and military strength of South Korea, making the idea seem not only symbolic but also timely. Considering that the tables had been entirely

reversed from the situation 40 years prior, South Korea’s command over its own forces during wartime in many ways signals the final stage of its peacetime economic and military triumph over the North.

In the last three decades, the economic gap between North and South has been ever widening, with the North’s gross domestic product in 2009 estimated at \$40 billion compared to \$1.4 trillion for the South.¹⁷ Recent examples of ROK military capabilities have also been impressive, including its assuming command of the United Nations antipiracy mission off the coast of Somalia. In many ways, preparations for the OPCON transition

event in 2012 have caused the ROK military to come into its own, heralding a transformation that has been as much technological as psychological.

In the past year, however, the Lee Myung-bak administration has begun to show reluctance, with the repeated objections of retired ROK military officers now being echoed by members of the South Korean administration. Many point to an increasingly unstable North Korea. Indeed, the danger from the North is great: 800 ballistic missiles and 250 long-range artillery systems can target the Seoul National Capital Area, a metropolitan region of over 20 million people.¹⁸ Nuclear tests are evidence of the North’s tireless ambition to acquire weapons of mass destruction. An increasingly unstable food situation recalls the famine of the late 1990s, when between 3 and 5 percent of the population died of hunger.¹⁹ Finally, questions over Kim Jong-il’s health in 2008 provided cause for a rushed naming of his successor, the 26-year-old Kim Jong-un. Critics say that these factors, taken together, warrant keeping an American commander in charge.

The current American commander, however, feels differently. General Sharp has insisted that the difference between a U.S. and ROK commander is negligible and that OPCON transition can proceed as scheduled without incurring undue risk. Meanwhile, those South Koreans whom we might expect to support OPCON transition, such as pro-ROK sovereignty supporters, have fallen

conspicuously silent. Interestingly, the most recent politician to mention ROK sovereignty was Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who during a visit in 2009 remarked that the United States looked forward to the ROK armed forces taking on the “proper lead role in the defense of its national territory.”²⁰

Why, then, is there a difference in opinion? To speculate on the source of this disagreement is beyond the scope of this article. What is clear is that arguments made by both sides have centered around a direct comparison of the ROK military to the DPRK military. The essential question has been all but overlooked, namely: What effect will OPCON transition have on the North Korean regime itself and its ability to maintain its grip as a legitimate government? The answer, in this author’s opinion, is that OPCON transition holds real strategic promise because it imperils the North’s ideology of regime control.

In the forthcoming OPCON transition debate, attention should shift to the ideological-strategic thesis that Korean nationalism is reason enough for America to disengage from its overt lead role. For the South, wartime control is a demonstration of full ROK autonomy. For the North, OPCON transition is a direct challenge to the DPRK design for regime control. South Korean leadership provides the North Korean people with a compelling rival alternative to the regime, namely an autonomous South Korean government that has ideologically overcome the regime’s philosophy of externally directed, fear-based rule. In contrast, American leadership and the status quo play directly into the hands of North Korean propaganda and its political and moral influences.

The prevailing political philosophy advanced within North Korea today includes the Hegelian notion that the state is the citizen’s highest, most solemn duty. This idea is not unique to the DPRK, but rather has been the trademark of other 20th-century totalitarian ideologies, ranging from communism on the left to Japanese and German ultranationalism on the right. When the reunification of the Korean Peninsula finally occurs, whether peaceably or as a result of crisis, there will be a tremendous opportunity for South Korea to appeal to Korean nationalism, the same nationalism the Kims’ regime has carefully nurtured for decades. The best chance for unification lies here. The United States, on the other hand, is fundamentally ill suited to accomplish this task because the North

Korean people are convinced that America is their primordial enemy. Hence, the only true remedy for the North’s propaganda apparatus and its ideology of regime control is a ROK government firmly in the lead.

In the moral realm, South Korean leadership holds similar promise because many shared uniquely Korean virtues form the foundation of Korean nationalism. For this reason, the situation necessitates that the South Korean government, rather than an American military commander, be held up in contrast to a self-contradicting North Korean regime. Otherwise, American leadership will continue to veil the North Korean people from the moral discrepancies that exist—that the man purported to be the most virtuous Korean is in reality hardly genuine, and that the entire state system is corrupted by untruthfulness and injustice. These pathologies are not only in opposition to Korean moral virtues, but they are also inconsistent with the image by which Kim is conveyed to his people.

To fill the political and moral void that will be left when the regime finally fails, South Korea must be in command without any appearance of U.S. interference or leadership. Otherwise, the message of the North’s propaganda apparatus will continue to survive in the minds of the North Korean people. A perpetuation of American wartime control prevents a political and moral breakthrough and only serves to reinforce the regime’s lasting influence over its people, even after the regime ceases to exist. Therefore, in a collapse or just post bellum situation, the perception that South Korea is in charge will be vital to any reasonable prospect for success. Likewise, the element of U.S. leadership currently in place stands as perhaps the last ideological thread holding back the North’s capitulation. Hwang Chang-up has alluded to this point, declaring that “the most effective method South Korea can adopt is an ideological battle. . . . [O]nce we hold sway over North Korea ideologically, then we can defeat the regime.”²¹ If this is true, then let the battle be theirs. **JFQ**

NOTES

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⁴ Brian R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves—and Why It Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2010), 29.

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⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Political Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 81.

⁸ See Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 90, 115.

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¹¹ Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 115.

¹² *Ibid.*, 109.

¹³ Kim Il-sung, “Report to the 5th Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea on the Work of the Central Committee,” *For Correct Management of the Socialist Rural Economy in Our Country* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), 314.

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¹⁸ Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., “The North Korean Military Threat to the Security of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia: Paper Tiger or Ongoing Menace?” Institute for Corean-American Studies Winter Symposium, February 2010, 13, 46, available at <www.icasinc.org/2010/2010w/2010wweb.html>.

¹⁹ Haggard and Noland, 1.

²⁰ Robert M. Gates, “Remarks by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates from Yongsan Garrison, Seoul,” October 22, 2009, available at <www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4502>.

²¹ Mok.