THE MISSING METRIC: WHY THE 12TH SPECIAL MEASURES AGREEMENT CANNOT CLOSE SOUTH KOREA'S OPCON READINESS GAP

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Republic of Korea (ROK) President Lee Jae Myung has been pushing an aggressive acceleration of the wartime operational control (OPCON) transfer, targeting completion by 2028. However, on April 21, 2026, Gen. Xavier Brunson, primary overseer of the OPCON transfer process, stated, "political expediency should not precede the conditions," emphasizing specific military capability thresholds South Korea must possess prior to transfer.

The US-ROK alliance faces a growing gap between its political timeline and its military readiness conditions.

Both governments have recently made progress toward OPCON transfer conditions. The US has advanced its Make America Shipbuilding Great Again (MASGA) initiative, and the ROK has unveiled the strategic plan for its first nuclear-powered submarine program. Politically, OPCON transfer may be closer than ever. But OPCON transfer's conditions-based framework doesn't run on political deadlines, it runs on sustained capital investment in very specific military infrastructure. Critically, the mechanism responsible for that investment is not designed properly to support the alliance's long-term goals.

The conditions for OPCON transfer

Since the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, wartime authority over ROK military forces has been delegated to the US general in charge of the United Nations Command (UNC), Combined Forces Command (CFC), and United States Forces Korea (USFK). Wartime OPCON transfer refers to a military conditions-based transition to grant the ROK full authority over its military within the CFC, not a dissolution of the alliance.

There is a three-stage assessment process for the ROK: Initial Operational Capability (IOC), Full Operational Capability (FOC), and Full Mission Capability (FMC).

Where South Korea actually stands

As of 2026, the ROK has been cleared for the IOC, verifying foundational military capabilities. FOC, ROK's ability to lead integrated operations and possess Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capability, is under review and expected to be validated by the end of this year. To pass, the ROK must show successful field exercises with its own ISR infrastructure for real-time analysis. This means complete independence from US operational instruments like surveillance satellites, reconnaissance drones, counter-intelligence technology, early missile warning systems, and competent Command, Control, Communications, Computers, and Intelligence (C4I) systems.

FMC, the most demanding stage, requires the ROK to lead combined operations under full-scale wartime conditions, specifically designed against a Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) threat scenario. FMC will be tested through large-scale joint field exercises and command post simulations that replicate a possible DPRK attack. Because of this verification process, the ROK must create a logistics and communications system capable of sustaining a peninsula-wide operation and a deployable command structure of all military operations simultaneously. Like the FOC condition, the FMC condition will require considerable structural investments.

The FOC and FMC conditions are not just operational tests; they are hardware tests. And the financial mechanism to support that hardware is not designed to fund any of it. That is where the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) enters.

The SMA problem

The SMAs are multi-year defense cost-sharing contracts between the US and ROK that determine how much financial contribution is provided to offset the costs of US troops. The recent 12th SMA is the largest cost-sharing contract the ROK has agreed to, contributing $1.2 billion in 2026 and increasing annual adjustments tied to the ROK's Consumer Price Index and capped at 5%. This contribution would fund Korean labor on US military bases, USFK logistical support, and military construction.

This is a problem. None of those three directly fund ISR infrastructure and independent operational competencies that the FOC and FMC conditions require the ROK to demonstrate. These capability gaps preclude FOC and FMC validation. By failing to incentivize or track progress on these gaps, the SMA offers no institutional mechanism to prevent gaps from widening, nor does it establish accountability systems to ensure that alliance resources are pushing the ROK to meet OPCON transfer conditions.

This problem is compounded by South Korea's defense fiscal constraints. The 12th SMA obligates the ROK to contribute over $1.2 billion annually just to support US troops. While this is a modest share of the 2026 $47.1 billion defense budget, the remaining $45.9 billion doesn't fill the gaps. The defense budget is split between personnel costs for its large conscription-based military troops, missile defense procurement contracts, equipment maintenance for all military branches, and a nuclear-powered submarine program. Each directly competes with FOC and FMC condition investments like reconnaissance aircraft programs or ISR satellites. It is unclear how much of the remaining budget will directly support the validation of FOC and FMC conditions. The ROK has a substantial defense budget, but it fails to address the capability gaps those conditions create, and the SMA does little to close them.

NATO's 2026 defense investment pledges link specific defense investments to capability development targets: the 12th SMA has no equivalent measure. As a result, under the SMA the ROK is committing nearly 3% of its defense budget to sustain a US military presence it is simultaneously trying to outgrow. While the Trump administration's America First sentiments aim to drive that contribution higher, the ROK cannot effectively fund the alliance it depends on while starving its military of the capabilities that make it less dependent.

The size of the ROK's contribution is not the problem; its structure is. Even if Seoul increased SMA contributions by 50%, funds only support USFK logistics instead of platforms that reduce ROK dependency on US forces. A larger ROK check written into the current framework would simply maintain the alliance, not push the ROK into fulfilling capability infrastructure needs. NATO's pledges work because it ties spending amount to a capability requirement, while the SMA ties dollars to presence-maintenance costs.

Bottom line: The 12th SMA doesn't help the ROK meet the last two OPCON transfer conditions. Future SMAs could be more specific and utilized as a capability development tool to push the ROK toward OPCON transfer conditions.

Policy recommendations

Fortunately, both governments share a fundamental interest in seeing the OPCON transfer completed. A transfer would align with the Trump administration's burden-sharing agenda and would allow the US to reallocate resources for Indo-Pacific priorities. Transfer would allow help the ROK meet the long-desired goal of commanding its own military forces and establish an unprecedented level of strategic sovereignty.

With bipartisan congressional support behind OPCON transfer conditions and FY 2027 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) markups and floor votes occurring this summer, Congress could align the bill to converge both countries' interests. It could mandate future SMAs to include OPCON transfer condition benchmarks by linking the ROK's financial contributions to measurable progress on ISR systems or FMC infrastructure needs. There are precedents for Congress intervening with US-ROK troop logistics, such as Section 1264 of the 2019 NDAA or Section 1259 of the 2021 NDAA .

Future SMAs must be transformed from cost-sharing contracts into capability development instruments in order to serve both countries. The Trump administration aims to raise the ROK's SMA contribution to get the ROK to bear more costs and to reduce the US military footprint in Korea. These goals point in the same direction only when SMA funds build the capability needed for OCPON transfer conditions. Once the ROK can independently demonstrate that it meets the remaining conditions and OPCON transfer occurs, US forces can decrease their role in joint operations and reduce the costs demanded by the present military partnership. If the Trump administration wants to cut its long-term commitment, funding OPCON transfer conditions through the SMA is optimal.

Critics may object that OPCON transfer conditions are a ROK responsibility, fundable through its own defense budget directly. This misinterprets the nature of the conditions. These conditions are jointly certified, and the US designed the defense benchmarks. The US cannot set conditions, certify whether they are met, and then simply refuse any financial responsibility for supporting them. As the main alliance cost-sharing agreement, the SMA is the logical way to ensure that funds serve the alliance. By redirecting SMA contributions toward OPCON transfer conditions, the ROK would have greater incentive in cost-sharing obligations while developing the infrastructure for the transfer conditions.

A conditions-dependent SMA for specific infrastructure gives the ROK a fiscal roadmap to meet the final two OPCON transfer conditions and gives the US a way to hold the ROK accountable for burden sharing. The conditions-based framework was designed to give an honest military answer to whether the ROK is ready to command its own forces. The financial architecture of the alliance must now be built to make it happen.