

OPCON transfer is next for South Korea's international evolution

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At the 81st UN General Assembly in September, ROK President Lee Jae Myung described his country as ready to do more than benefit from the international system. He said the Republic of Korea should help "restore the spirit of the United Nations and reconnect the world," while supporting peaceful coexistence and dialogue on the Korean Peninsula. That global vision highlights a structural question closer to home: can South Korea fully embrace the role of a global middle power while a US general retains wartime operational control over its combined forces?

The question is not new, but the context has changed. Wartime operational control, or OPCON, refers to command authority over South Korean and US forces operating under the Combined Forces Command (CFC) in a major conflict. The CFC is led by a US four-star general. Under the allies' planned structure, a South Korean four-star general would command a future Combined Forces Command, with a US four-star as his deputy.

For President Lee, regaining OPCON during his five-year term has become a central political goal. For the United States, the transfer remains tied to military readiness. This difference has sharpened the debate in 2026. The issue is no longer simply whether South Korea should recover wartime OPCON, but whether the alliance can carry out that commitment without creating new deterrence risks.

In April, Gen. Xavier Brunson, commander of US Forces Korea, United Nations Command, and the Combined Forces Command, testified before Congress. Brunson said the allies had accelerated their Conditions-based OPCON Transition Plan but maintained that the process could not be driven by domestic political deadlines.

"Accelerated COTP is not time-based," he said, emphasizing that the ROK military must demonstrate the agreed capabilities needed to lead the future combined command. Reporting after his testimony suggested that the allies were working toward meeting those conditions by early 2029, later than Seoul's preferred 2028 target.

This timetable gap reflects two different, but not necessarily incompatible, views of the transition. Seoul's push for progress reflects a valid sovereignty concern: a mature democracy with a highly capable military cannot indefinitely regard foreign wartime command as a permanent arrangement. At the same time, US military caution reflects a serious operational concern. A transfer is not merely a ceremonial change in rank. It requires the future ROK-led command to demonstrate reliable intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, command-and-control, logistics, missile defense, combined planning, and crisis-management capacity.

Washington's strategy makes this question more urgent. The 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy says South Korea can take "primary responsibility" for deterring North Korea, with the United States providing "critical but more limited capabilities." This does not mean that the US plans to withdraw from the peninsula. Washington would still provide extended deterrence, including its nuclear umbrella, alongside intelligence, reinforcement forces, strategic assets, and other advanced support. Still, the strategy leaves an important question for the alliance: how should a US-led wartime command structure fit an approach that places greater conventional responsibility on South Korea? The answer will shape not only the OPCON timetable, but also how the allies define their respective roles in a future conflict.

Recent changes in the alliance show that both countries are preparing for a different structure. In January, South Korea and the United States made the Combined Ground Component Command a standing peacetime organization. The command is led by the commander of South Korea's Ground Operations Command and staffed by both South Korean and US personnel. The *Korea Herald* reported that four of the six planned component commands for the future structure—ground, air, naval, and marine—have now been established, while special operations and military-intelligence commands still need to be completed. These steps do not settle the OPCON question, but they show that the allies are developing parts of the institutional structure required for a South Korean-led Future Combined Forces Command.

South Korea is also more capable than it was during previous OPCON debates. Its 2026 defense budget is about 65.9 trillion won, a 7.5% increase from the previous year. Funding for the Korean Three-Axis System increased by more than 21%. The system includes Kill Chain for detecting and striking missile threats, Korea Air and Missile Defense for missile interception, and Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation for responding to major North Korean attacks. Seoul is also investing in AI-enabled systems, autonomous drones, surveillance, and precision-strike capabilities.

A larger defense budget and more advanced weapons do not automatically establish readiness to lead the full wartime command structure. Brunson's emphasis on a "conditions-based, not time-based" transfer reflects that concern: South Korea must demonstrate the capabilities needed to lead a future combined command. This also raises a broader question about transparency. Without disclosing sensitive military plans, Seoul and Washington could identify the major benchmarks that remain and explain how they

will assess progress. Greater clarity would help distinguish a conditions-based pathway from an open-ended delay.

South Korean public opinion suggests there is room for a debate that does not treat greater military authority and continued alliance cooperation as opposites. According to the Asan Institute's 2026 annual survey, 97.1% of respondents supported the US-ROK alliance, while 82.3% supported the continued US military presence in Korea. Those figures suggest that most South Koreans do not see alliance cooperation and greater national authority as mutually exclusive. They continue to value US forces and extended deterrence while also questioning whether South Korea should exercise greater authority over its own defense.

President Lee's UNGA address helps explain why OPCON has returned to the center of South Korea's security debate. His broader message was that South Korea should contribute to international stability, not simply receive protection from others. Regaining wartime operational control fits within that larger vision, even if the timing and conditions remain contested. The OPCON debate is therefore unlikely to be resolved by a single deadline or public declaration. It will depend on whether Seoul can demonstrate the capabilities required for a ROK-led command, whether Washington can clearly define its continuing role, and whether both sides can show that a revised command structure strengthens rather than disrupts deterrence.

An alliance designed for the conditions of 1953 cannot remain static in 2026. For South Koreans, the question is not whether the alliance should endure, but how it must adapt and who should hold the reins when it matters most.