

South Korea's Wartime Operational Control Transfer Debate: From an Organizational Perspective

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President Roh Moo-hyun's suggestion to have the Wartime Operational Control transfer from the U.S. to Korea caused a heated debate from 2005. The senior military elites gathered to systematically oppose the decision. Eventually, the decision was delayed twice from 2012 to 2015, and to 2020s. Why were the senior military elites so against the transfer? This research introduces a theoretical perspective that combines existing theories in organization studies, decision-making studies, psychology and security studies, and includes in-depth interviews as part of answering the question. Military change is not easy for a large organization, a bureaucratic organization, and a unique organization that has a special mission to win in wars.

Keywords: *Wartime Operational Control, Decision-making, Military Elites, South Korea, Organization*

1. INTRODUCTION

Wartime Operational Control (hereafter “wartime OPCON”) transfer debate in South Korea was officially raised in 2005 by President Roh Moo-hyun.¹ A heated debate occurred as the conservative and progressive clashed with the agendas from security vs. sovereignty, pro-America vs. anti-America, to emotionally attacking each other. The debate was becoming more and more fierce when President Lee Myung-bak postponed the transfer agreement made by both countries. President Roh set it as April 15, 2012. But President Lee Myung-bak postponed it to December 1, 2015. The debate reached its climax when President Park Geun-hye delayed the transfer again from December 1, 2015 to sometime in the 2020s when Korea equips the required conditions such as Kill Chain and Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD). When a nation-to-nation agreement is made for a set time, usually, it is not expected to be delayed. What is more unusual is that this delay has happened not only once but twice. What has made such delay happen? Was it a systematic opposition from the senior military elite group that hindered such delay?

With such question in mind, this article is organized as follows. After laying out a brief definition of the OPCON and its history, the current wartime OPCON transfer debate will be discussed. Then in the following sections, a theoretical frame to view the wartime OPCON transfer debate will be examined, and conclusion will follow. The goal of this paper is not to find out whether the wartime OPCON transfer decision is right or wrong or whether it should be done or not. This article aims to add literature to the scarce academic research on OPCON

¹ Though officially raised in 2005, President Roh's thoughts and interviews from 2003 show President Roh's desire to execute wartime OPCON transfer. The heated debate started in 2005 when the issue was officially raised, and proposed to the U.S. on the 37th SCM October 21, 2005. On March 8, 2005, the Inauguration day of Air Force Academy and more specifically on October 1, 2005, Armed Forces day.

by introducing a different approach to the existing literatures and draw lessons from the debate. Above all, the significance of this article lies in the interviews with policy advisors and senior military elites who are conservative to disclose opinions.

2. WHAT IS OPCON?

OPCON “includes authoritative direction over all aspects of military operations and joint training necessary to accomplish missions assigned to the command.” But it “does not, in and of itself, include authoritative direction for logistics, or matters of administration, discipline, internal organization, or unit training.” In other words, OPCON gives the command authority to the commander of a certain unit different from the existing organization to accomplish certain mission under a certain situation. Thus OPCON is not a command authority over all composed units but ‘limited’ command authority over a certain set unit (Ahn, 2002: 36).

A former major general and director of the National Risk Management Office of the Office of the President and who have worked at Combined Forces Command (CFC) for many years, has put wartime OPCON in simple terms. Wartime OPCON is that letting the U.S. generals to have the commandship to build war strategies and assign who will be taking or attacking which object, for instance, mountain A or mountain B during wartime. The CFC is best understood in terms of unity of command, the general says.² The most common quotation for unity of command is that of Napoleon. *“Nothing in war is more important than unity of command. Thus when war is waged against a single power there*

Table 1. Definition of OPCON in detail

Personnel	Information	Operations		Logistics	Budget	
	information	combat operations	requirement control, resources acquisition			
		organizing, employing commands and forces	education, discipline			
	Operational Control: Level below combatant control. Authority to perform those functions of command over subordinate forces in involving organizing and employing commands and forces, assigning tasks, designating objectives, and giving authoritative directions necessary to accomplish the mission.					
	Operational Command Command					

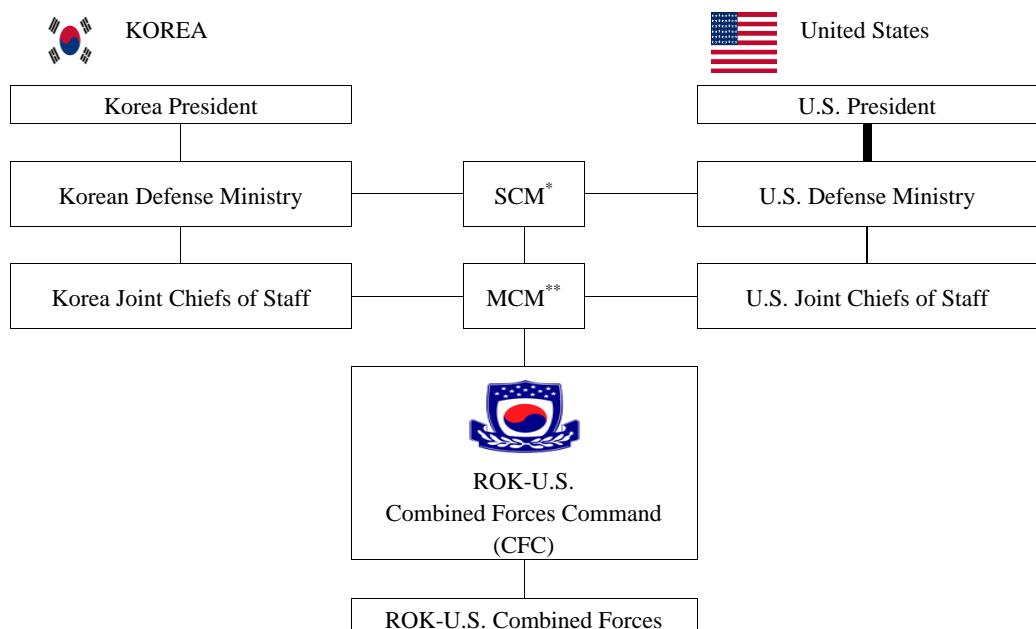
Source: Ahn, 2002; ROK Joint Reference Publication.

² Interview held on August 27, 2015.

must be but one army, acting on one line and led by one chief...Better one bad general than two good ones."

Korea's OPCON issue traces back to 1950 when President Rhee Syng-man delegated the command authority to the commander of the United Nations Command (UNC), General MacArthur. President Rhee's letter on July 14, 1950 assigns "the command authority over all land, sea, and air forces of the Republic of Korea (ROK)" to the commander "during the period of the continuation of the present state of hostilities"(Ahn, 2002: 67). With this letter, all the forces on the Korean Peninsula became control under one commander, General MacArthur. General MacArthur responded to President Rhee's letter that he will have the "operational command authority" meaning that he will have authority regarding operations. The ROK-U.S. alliance agreement in 1953 did not include the terms on the command authority, thus in July 1954, President Rhee added the part. That is why the U.S. and ROK included the stipulation regarding command authority in the "Agreed Minutes and Amendments between the Government of the Republic of Korea and United State of America." Article 2 notes that "Retain Republic of Korea forces under the operational control of the United Nations command while that Command has responsibilities for the defense of the Republic of Korea, unless after consultation it is agreed that our mutual and individual interest would best be served by a change." In short, the term limited its range from command authority to operational command authority to operational control. In Appendix A, Article 1 notes that it is the intention and policy of the United States to help "strengthen the Republic of Korea politically, economically, and militarily, with

Diagram 1. ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command Structure



* SCM: Security Consultative Meeting ** Military Committee Meeting
Source: MOPAS's Policy Research Report 2008, p.27.

programmed economic aid and direct military.”³ And with the establishment of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) in 1978, the operational control authority switches from UN Commander to the U.S. commander (Ahn, 2002: 118). The decision mechanism of the operation control is exercised in a parallel structure after CFC’s establishment. Diagram 1 describes how the command order changed after CFC’s establishment. And at the CFC, manning is binational. It is composed of half Korean army, and half U.S. army in positions. For instance, if the Korea takes the chief of staff, then U.S. takes the deputy position. Such manning applies to all positions in the CFC. Each position has their Korean or U.S. counterpart. Diagram 1 has the command structure in details.

3. THE WARTIME OPERATIONAL CONTROL TRANSFER DEBATE

On October 1, 2005 at the Armed Forces Day ceremony, President Roh Moo-Hyun’s strong will for self-reliant defense was officially expressed. “I have been emphasizing on self-reliant defense. It is so natural and fundamental for a sovereign nation to have such” ... “through the exercise of the wartime control, we will be born again as a ‘self-reliant army’ worthy of its name and be responsible of the Korean Peninsula’s security.”⁴

The debate was so heated that the debate between those who are pro-transfer and those who are against-transfer extended to a confrontation between the progressives and conservatives. Most significantly, the senior military elite group was across the board against the transfer making every effort to stop the transfer, by voicing their concerns through the media. Former defense ministers and generals together expressed their official opposition and concerns over President Roh’s decision.⁵ Other conservative organizations participated in the opposition. However, despite the massive protests against the transfer decision, President Roh strongly pushed to go through with the transfer by April 17, 2012.⁶ Korean Retired Generals and Admirals Association and Korea Veterans Association started to collect 10 million signatures that show people’s opposition to the wartime OPCON transfer decision. From September 29, 2006 to May 28, 2010 they have collected 10,070,000 signatures achieving their aim.⁷ Park notes that from 2009 with a new defense minister, wartime OPCON issue had a balanced perspective. He argued that the previous administration leaned overly so towards pro-transfer because of the anti-American “386” generation political leaders that held big influence during President Roh Moo-hyun’s tenure. The new defense minister worried that 2012 is a year of “strong and prosperous nation” for North Korea. He listened to those who were against the transfer. As a result, the defense minister recommended to President Lee Myung-bak that the wartime OPCON transfer should be

³ Agreed Minutes and Amendment Thereto Between the Governments of The Republic of Korea and the United States of America Related to Continued Cooperation in Economic and Military Matters and Amendment to the Agreed Minute of November 17, 1954 (Amended entered into force August 12, 1955) (Accessed June 30, 2015) http://mofaweb.mofat.go.kr/inter_treaty_real.nsf/alldoclist/23700D367B6ECE7549256701002C5659?opendocument.

⁴ President Roh’s Speech at the 57th Armed Forces Day’s ceremony. Translation is from the author, and is not an official translation from the Office of the President.

⁵ SBS News, August 10, 2006; Chosun Ilbo, August 11, 2006.

⁶ YTN News, June 27, 2010

⁷ KONAS.NET, January 1, 2011

Table 2. Wartime OPCON Transfer Timeline

July 14, 1950	South Korean President Rhee Syng-man assigns the command authority to United Nations Command (Commander Douglas MacArthur).
November 17, 1954	Term changes from command authority to command control noted in the Korea-U.S. military alliance treaty.
November 7, 1978	Command authority moves from UNC to CFC (Establishment of CFC).
	President Roh Tae-Woo shared thoughts of raising issue of peacetime OPCON transfer as inaugurated in 1987.
December 1, 1994	During President Kim Young-sam administration, peacetime OPCON transferred to Korea. Korean Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff is in charge of peacetime wartime OPCON. Discussed to transfer wartime OPCON after 1996.
	President Roh Moo-hyun shared thoughts of raising issue of wartime OPCON transfer as inaugurated in 2003.
September 16, 2006	President Roh Moo-hyun of Korea and President George Bush of U.S. agree to have wartime OPCON transferred to Korea.
February 23, 2007	Korea and U.S. defense ministers agree to have wartime OPCON transferred by April 17, 2012.
June 26, 2010	President Lee Myung-bak of Korea and President Barack Obama of U.S. agree to delay wartime OPCON transfer to December 2015.
April 25, 2014	President Park Geun-hye of Korea and President Barack Obama of U.S. agree to reschedule due date of wartime OPCON transfer.
October 24, 2014	Korea and U.S. defense ministers agree to have wartime OPCON to mid 2020s based on conditions that Korea becomes capable.

Source: Information collected from Defense Ministry and White Paper.

delayed (Park, 2010: 341). Former diplomacy and security committee member of the Lee Myung-bak administration's presidential transition team has also said during his interview for this research that when he interviewed different organizations to gather opinions in the transition office, members of Korean Retired Generals and Admirals Association and Korea Veterans Association, came to him and strongly appealed for the need to delay the wartime OPCON transfer.⁸ North Korea's *Cheonan* warship sinking attack killing 46 South Korean soldiers occurred on March 26, 2010 also added reasons for wartime OPCON transfer delay.⁹ President Lee Myung-bak delayed the transfer agreement to December 1, 2015. Then again when the next President Park Geun-hye came in, the transfer was delayed to the 2020s.¹⁰

⁸ Interview held on July 3, 2015.

⁹ *Korea Herald*, June 30, 2010.

¹⁰ "Press Brief by Secretary Hagel and ROK Minister of National Defense Han Min Koo in the Pentagon Briefing Room." October 23, 2014. (Accessed August 10, 2015) <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606950/press-brigadier-refusing-by-secretary-hagel-and-rok-minister-of-national-defense-han-min>; *Yonhap News*, October 24, 2014.

This time the agreement was a “condition-based” instead of “time-based.” The conditions refer to Korea having “critical” military capabilities. The critical capabilities included Kill-Chain preemptive strike, Korean Air and Missile Defense systems.¹¹

In very politically sweeping terms, there were opinions that the two conservative party presidents, President Lee and President Park, did not want to continue on what President Roh Moo-hyun did.¹² Those who were against the transfer, especially the senior military elites strongly argue that the progressive and the supporter of President Roh, who are non-experts of the military reality, and ignorant of the current security situations, are using the general public’s emotion (Park, 2010: 329-330). There is no more effective deterrence than the U.S.¹³ Senior military elites requested the politicians to think rationally and practically in recognizing what is needed for Korea (Han and Jung, 2015).

While those who are pro-transfer cannot understand the senior military elite’s refusal of the transfer. They question, why the senior military elites cannot let go of the U.S. Korea is the 12th largest economy in the world and is currently spending 30 times more money than North Korea for military build-up. Pro-transfer people criticize the senior military elites that they are too pro-America, afraid to stand alone, and lazy to make changes.¹⁴ Former presidential transition committee member for President Roh Moo-hyun and progressive security commentator says that the senior military generals are still ridden with the Korean War trauma. He also criticized the generals that they have not done their job correctly of building a strong military with sufficient capability. In addition to that, the generals have been too protective to maintain the status quo. While the army is the strongest force in Korea in comparison with the navy and the air force, those in the army are being protective to keep their power and organization.¹⁵ Former foreign minister during Roh administration said, while it is the Korean soldiers who will be shedding blood and actually get involved when war occurs, why would the generals not want to take the wartime OPCON back. He also added that worrying about ROK-U.S. alliance is being overly sensitive and wartime OPCON transfer will not cause harm to the ROK-U.S. alliance.¹⁶ Pro-transfer opinions include how wartime OPCON transfer will improve relations with North Korea. Those who are pro-transfer consider wartime OPCON transfer will bring a step closer to make peace with North Korea and closer to unification.¹⁷

Those who are against the transfer, senior military elite group say, mainly President Roh Moo-hyun and the team members are those who grew up with the anti-American sentiment, who eventually want the U.S. army to withdraw from Korea, and are pro-North Korea. According to a former lieutenant general, “the transfer of wartime OPCON is what North Korea strongly desires. Kim Il-sung saw that the U.S. lost in the Vietnam War mainly due to

¹¹ *Korea Herald*, October 24, 2014.

¹² *Weekly Chosun*, July 5, 2010; and many other articles related to this but mostly are non-major news agencies. *Pressian*. July 22, 2013.

¹³ Park a former senior military elite turned scholar notes that the risks were not fully mentioned in the initial debate. “The possible ramifications, risks and complementary measures of the transfer were not fully discussed due to the strong anti-US campaign by the so-called “386 generation” progressive political and opinion leaders in the Roh Moo-hyun administration from 2003.”

¹⁴ *Oh My News*, June 10, 2015.

¹⁵ Interview held on July 22, 2015.

¹⁶ Interview held on June 30, 2015.

¹⁷ *Yonhap News*. November 27, 2013; *Yonhap News English*, October 21, 2015.

failure of unity of command, and since then he had a plan to make U.S. leave Korea.”¹⁸ Many of those who argue the transfer should happen say that North Korea looks down on South Korea because the South does not even have their own wartime OPCON. To such arguments, conservatives say, what is the point of doing something your enemy wants you to do.¹⁹ Former South Korea’s representative for South-North general-level military talks, former brigadier general shared that dealing with the North for many years, he has noticed the importance of understanding North Korea’s intention. Politicians should be cautious and not naive in understanding their talks that they want peace.²⁰

Table 3. Pros and Cons on the Wartime OPCON Transfer Debate

Pro-transfer	Against-transfer
[Military]	[Military]
- Korea has enough military capability to deter North Korea	- Effective deterrence on North Korea
- Remove fear of U.S. abandonment	- Guarantee U.S. intervention and support in case of war.
- Balanced development of army, navy, and air force (currently more focused on the army)	- Complete areas of Korea’s military capability that need improvement. Such as strategic information and war strategy building (U.S. is the country who have experiences of war until recently)
- Wartime OPCON transfer does not mean dropping ROK-U.S. alliance as those who are against the transfer worry.	- Keep effectiveness on the combined forces operation
- Military will be more motivated and be desperate to build a stronger army	
[Economics]	[Economics]
- U.S. will raise defense share	- Save defense budget in purchase weapons systems
[Diplomacy and Politics]	[Diplomacy and Politics]
- Restore Military Sovereignty/ Boost National Pride	- Korean Peninsula stability
- Not be swayed by U.S.’s Asian foreign policy change.	- Should not do what the enemy (North Korea) wants South Korea to do.
- Balanced diplomacy with China and mitigates concerns over U.S. THAAD or other pressures	
- Improve relations with North Korea by doing what the North asks for and become the main negotiation party for peace treaty.	
[Unification and U.S. Intervention]	
- Both sides insist that if transfer or if not transfer, will make Korea be the main actor in unification process and check U.S. involvement.	

Source: Major opinions on the matter collected by author.

¹⁸ Interview held on June 19, 2015.

¹⁹ *SBS News*, September 20, 2014; *Korea Herald*, October 29, 2014.

²⁰ Interview held on August 4, 2015.

A common factor discovered during this research is that decision makers or opinion advisors of both sides make conclusions based on their best rational and logical analysis. People make rational choice in their given boundary, bounded rationality, and this increases the possibility of making emotional or heuristic decisions.²¹

4. NEW FRAME IN ANALYZING THE DEBATE

This article examines the decision making of the senior military elites. There are literatures on why President Roh and his team have made such decision. However, as of now, no studies can be found on the decision making of the senior military elites. The previous studies on the Roh administration's wartime OPCON transfer decision making discuss the possibility of groupthink or focuses on President Roh's personal background and upbringing (Park, 2013; Kim, 2011). Other wartime OPCON transfer related literatures include legal, historical matters of wartime OPCON transfer (Ahn, 2002; KODEF, 2006), but most are about technical matters (Kim, 2006, 2010, 2013; Song, 2007; Lee, 2007). While media reports and opinion columns have dealt the issue to a great extent, academic research on wartime OPCON transfer has not been actively produced.

Unlike the previous literatures, this paper takes a theoretical and organizational approach in analyzing wartime OPCON transfer and the senior military elites' behavior. This paper will introduce a frame that combines existing theories in defense studies, foreign policy studies, organization studies, decision-making studies, economics, and psychology. This paper has academic contribution that it adds to the literature of decision-making and senior military elites. It is written by extensive research on documentations, official reports and in-depth interviews with military elites, policy advisors, and the people involved with the issue. Due to the conservative nature of the military and their elites, full names of the interviewees will not be disclosed but the date of the interview will be noted to verify the authenticity of the interviews. It should be noted that the interviews were conducted in Korean, the contents were translated to English for the purpose of this paper. Senior military elites mainly refer to the generals. Age ranges from late 50s to early 80s. This paper assumes that a cohesive organization like the military, homogenous leadership characteristics will prevail due to repetition of leadership isomorphism. Thus, this study will not explain the generational gap (Jeon, 2001).

4.1. In the Context of Military Organization

A perspective on military organizations as an institution and a perspective on the senior military elites as leaders of military organizations are needed.

As military organization, decisions related to the organization are read in international and domestic context. That is, the international circumstances such as the moves of North Korea, the U.S., China, and Japan will matter. Military decision making especially for issues

²¹ What Herbert Simon call 'bounded rationality' refers to the limitations of rational thinking. It is impossible for human beings to calculate and do all the mathematics to make a rational choice. Even though people try to be rational, individuals cannot have perfect information, calculate values on future outcomes, and consider all possible alternatives for the selection. 1955. A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 69(1): 99-118.

such as wartime OPCON transfer, the international environment is critical. For instance, the main reason for President Lee Myung-bak's transfer delay decision was due to an international environment factor, namely, the North Korean provocations and attacks. President Roh Moo-hyun and his team made such policy suggestion because of the strategic flexibility and changing international environment. Domestically, political and social context is considered. Political moves from politicians, opinion leaders, and media matter with the assumption that politician reflect the citizen's desires. Also, because the military has to deal with the National Assembly as part of the government organization and follow the will of the Commander-in-Chief, the President of Republic of Korea, political relations with the National Assembly and government is critical. For Korea, the social context is an essential part to consider as well. Korea has had three former presidents who were from the military. Among them, two had taken the presidential position through using military force, in an illegitimate way, and have managed the administration in a less democratic way, which resulted in Korean people's hurt and distrust toward the military. The political context refers to the public and politicians, as what the politicians say and do will reflect the citizens' opinions. The social context refers to the norms or thoughts of the people in the time period. Everyone constructs their thoughts in a social context and this cannot be neglected.

4.2. Factors Causing Difficult Military Change

Suzanne C. Nielsen, in her Ph.D. Dissertation on *Preparing War During Peacetime And The Dynamics Of Military Reform*, notes that 'Military Change Is Difficult.' She uses the classical organization and military related theories in explaining why it is difficult to institute change. Three factors are noted: the vast size of the organization, federal bureaucracy, and military culture (Nielsen, 2003). This paper modifies the three categories Nielsen used by adding organizational morale and Korean perspective in examining the South Korean wartime OPCON transfer debate.

A Large Organization

Looking into the military as an organization, as Nielsen said "Military change is difficult." In such sense, from a military perspective, it could be an obvious answer that the generals oppose the wartime OPCON transfer. Nielsen refers to classical theories and models in decision-making such as Allison and Zelikow to analyze the military organization. According to the organizational process model, it is rational for the organization to develop standard operating procedures (SOPs), and these parts of SOPs make the organization to function (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 169). To coordinate and make rearrangements from what have become standards will cause difficulties for the organization to function well and thus resistance for change will happen within the organization. This will lead the organization leaders to favor the status quo.

The Status Quo Bias

Other scholars in various fields have mentioned the possibility of status quo decision. Samuelson and Zeckhauser, in their 1988 study, noted that decision makers have a tendency to remain to the status quo (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988). From the decision maker's perspective, rationally thinking, if the transition cost of switching exceeds the efficiency gain of the alternative, it is better to keep the status quo. Also, as there is uncertainty, decision makers keep with the status quo.

Explaining the sunk cost, Conlon and Parks find personal responsibility as one of the factors affecting sunk cost effect. According to Conlon and Parks, the person who is responsible for the failure has a tendency to select information that justifies the outcomes of previously made decisions than select information that focuses on future gains. Those who are responsible for the failure, therefore, have a tendency to show the sunken cost effect (Conlon and Parks, 1987: 344).

Former major general shared in his interview that the progressive views are in some way correct. “Yes, it makes sense to say that my seniors, who have experienced the wartime and served the military which could not have had properly operated without the support of U.S. right after war in the 1950s, can view the Korean army from their perspectives. However, still, practically, it is strategically better to delay the wartime OPCON transfer.”²² A critical expert on the wartime OPCON transfer delay says that the older generations would want to keep the current situation because discarding the system would mean what they had done is wrong.²³

Status quo inertia is also caused by cognitive misperceptions so called loss aversion. Decision makers will have the status quo as their reference point in viewing the decision on selecting the alternative, and this may cause the loss to be evaluated larger than the gain (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988: 34). Another cognitive misperception is termed anchoring. Anchoring effect refers to sticking to the initial suggested selection or the status quo. Individuals will not accept new information or only use partial information especially when it is an overwhelming task to analyze the pros and cons of suggested plans (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988: 36). Third category of Samuelson and Zeckhauser’s status quo bias is psychological commitment. Individuals’ choices are influenced by what is called sunk costs, and would be motivated to make decisions that justify their previous commitments. Another is regret avoidance. People have a tendency to avoid regretting over their decisions, which may fail. Thus, individuals rather remain in inaction to adhere to conform to the social norms than make a new decision and regret later. “Individuals often find that the path of least resistance is to conform to the institutional status quo- be it company policy, standard operating procedure, or the social norm- whether or not this constitutes an optimal decision in the circumstances (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988: 38).” The self-perception theory also explains psychological commitment. Individuals will examine their previous behaviors in making a decision, and will interpret given information in favor of status quo (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988: 40). Finally, individuals prefer the status quo because they desire to feel in control (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988: 41). One prefers when one feels in control. Samuelson and Zeckhauser argue that status quo bias is pervasive and people have a strong tendency for status quo inertia.

Status quo bias is a phenomenon that happens for decision makers. Though the decision makers in their thoughts think rationally, a bias tendency occurs frequently. Sunk cost, loss aversion, regret aversion, and self-perception theory all are in consistent with the bias. When the generals analyze the reference point to be the U.S. having the wartime OPCON, switch from the U.S. to Korea commandership would come across as a loss. Rather say sorry to the change than regret in the future. Sunk cost, loss aversion, regret avoidance all go together for status quo inertia here.

²² Interview held on August 27, 2015.

²³ Interview held on July 22, 2015.

A Bureaucratic Organization

As a bureaucracy, it is hard to make changes. Halperin notes, “One of the truisms about bureaucracy is that it resists change” (Halperin, Morton, and Clapp, 2006: 357). Also he mentions how organizations with large budgets face difficulties in making changes. Halperin notes “organizations with expensive capabilities are particularly concerned about budget decisions and about budgeting implications of policy decision.” … “The armed service, for example, is responsible for creating and maintaining very expensive military forces” (Halperin, Morton, and Clapp, 2006: 26).

Interview with former brigadier general who was in charge of weapons purchases and supplies for many years has cautiously noted how costly it will be for Korea to take the wartime OPCON at this moment. “I also believe”, brigadier general says “that wartime OPCON has to be transferred, however, for now, it is better to delay it.” As our weapons systems have been built with the U.S., radical change will be costly and change should be incremental. In addition to that he also argued that the national sovereignty debate raised by the progressive is incorrect.²⁴

Military is a bureaucratic organization. The members of the organization will desire to go to higher ranks and each would have to make distinguished devotion to get promotion. For this, the work routines, patterns of association, information channels, and predictable services are needed. Also, as a bureaucracy, the organization needs to maintain its influence and support from the government organizations and assembly. It is all related to managing revenues, productive factors, legislatures, courts, politicians, and interest groups (Wilson, 1989: 221).

Interview with former general and defense minister has included such discussions. The general said that though one has ideas and dreams to execute once becoming the defense minister, actually, there are not many that the minister can do. While the Finance ministry controls the budget, the Blue house (or the executive power or politicians) controls the personnel matters.²⁵

The intertwined governmental networks, which work as a check and balance mechanism, also make it difficult to institute change. Wilson points out that key tasks of a federal executive are keeping maintenance of their organization. In addition to capital and personnel, he argues that political support is critical. Political support enables military organization to implement change when they perceive that change is needed (Wilson, 1989: 181).

Understanding that the Korean military is a large organization size of 600,000 soldiers and is a part of Korean government, military change for Korean military is seems difficult.

Organizational Morale

Military organization leaders consider organization morale. The organization becomes effective when the members of the organization are highly motivated. For the members to be motivated, organization should have a stable existence, and let the members know their job is a meaningful one that promotes the national interests. Also, the members will be motivated, when future opportunities for advancement and promotion to top positions are open. In a nutshell, leaders would not be pleased with contraction of size (Halperin *et al.*, 2006: 54). During the past 10 years since the wartime OPCON issue was first raised, there was a very

²⁴ Interview held on July 31, 2015.

²⁵ Interview held on July 16, 2015.

minor change in number of generals in Korea.²⁶

Interview with former lieutenant colonel, who have supported the senior military elites closely being in charge of organizational matters, share the above discussion. According to the officer, generals usually have their forces people sit in important positions, and the common criticism of protectionism of its own forces is true. Having one's subordinate succeed the powerful posts may guarantee to overshadow any mishaps or mistakes if discovered after they leave their post. Also the continuation of people from the same school, same region, or same family root to be in leading positions will boost their pride and identification.²⁷ This will naturally make organizations try to maintain the organization morale through making a homogeneous group of career officials.

As leaders of an organization, especially a hierarchical organization like the military, organizational morale becomes critical. Any change that may contract the size or weaken the military capacity, or affect the promotion pattern or budget will not be welcomed. Thus, to the organization leaders, short-term accomplishments or budget increase becomes more important than long-term benefit of the organization. Career officials would first consider the effect on budget increase when there is a proposal (Halperin *et al.*, 2006: 54). Also, career officials who become head of the organization, such as the Joint Chiefs of Staff, calculate the national interest based on the organizational interest of the service they belong to (Halperin *et al.*, 2006: 61).

The above analysis that military organization is a large organization and bureaucratic organization shed light on why changes to standard procedures are difficult. Some have asked aren't the generals the hawks who would even make nationalistic comments to defend the nation? Understanding the military organization and its characteristics as a large bureaucratic organization will answer why military armed forces are not as bellicose as people expect (Halperin *et al.*, 2006: 59).

Military Culture

Obstacles to change may come from the unique culture and role of the military. The Korea Military Academy indicates that the goals and characteristics of military organization as following: during peacetime, the goal of military organization is to absolutely perfectly prepare military exercise to defend the nation in case of war. Characteristics of military are that it is rigid, values norms, have standardization in tasks, has formal, strict rules and punishment measures, and charismatic leadership. The structure of the military organization is bureaucratic (KMA, 1984). Military organizations fight with uncertainty. Though military prepare their best during peacetime, whether the preparation was working well or not can only be discovered after the battle occurs (Nielsen, 2003: 14). Military deals with violence, so it is hard to make changes (Lang, 1965). It is not easy for military leaders to try a new method that may cause risks of lives, giving up the "tried-and-true" weapon systems (Nielsen, 2003: 14).

Former general and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff emphasized that military is unique. Supervisor can command orders to one's own subordinate even though one knows that their lives may be at risk. Military matters are very sensitive. Thus, decisions are made considering the worst situation that may happen. The Chairman emphasized that wartime OPCON is a military matter and it should be discussed as a military matter. Politicians

²⁶ *Yonhap News*, October 29, 2015.

²⁷ Interview conducted 3 times from July 28, 2015 to August 27, 2015.

should not politicize wartime OPCON issue to their advantage. Also, accurately speaking, there is no such as self-reliant defense (*Jaju Gookbang*) in fighting in a war. No one goes into war by itself. Countries have to cooperate to win in battles. And maintaining a stable diplomatic and military relationship with allies is important to receive the needed cooperation when we need it.²⁸

Military force is a group of soldiers who are armed and trained under a special organization for the purpose of defending a nation (Kim, 2007). Moskos compared institutionalism and professionalism in analyzing organizations. Military was examined to have institutionalism features. These organizations justify making organization and institutions that aim for higher values, norms, and missions that go beyond achieving self-interest. On other hand, professionalism justifies values based on market needs (Moskos and Wood, 1988). Paik and Lee note that military organizations are large bureaucratic organizations and in newly born countries, the military works as social and political reformers (Paik and Lee, 1975). Military can do the role because of its broad range of hierarchy, and professional soldiers have bureaucratic authority.

The military will only choose the decision that will make a winning war and members of the organization will have a tendency to share a common thought. When a hierarchical organization like the military meets the Korean culture that respects elders and seniors, it will be difficult for the military organization members to make a different voice. The Korean Veterans Association with some 8,500,000 members and The Korea Retired Generals and Admirals Association with some 2,200 former generals have strongly opposed the OPCON transfer.

According to a staff that worked deeply with retired generals, said that the defense minister who took the lead to do OPCON transfer during President Roh's time is not active with his peers. He is not welcomed after expressing a different voice.²⁹ Another interview with a lieutenant general who held executive positions in The Korea Retired Generals and Admirals told that during President Roh's time, the association's role was to increase its voice as retired generals to delay the wartime OPCON transfer. According to the general, those who are still in active duty may not be able to raise their own voice because they have to follow the president; therefore, it is the role of the retired people and seniors to stand on the truth instead of being political military officers who just follow the president to get a promotion.³⁰

Military being a large bureaucratic organization with a unique goal, change resistance from the decision makers is possible.

5. LESSONS FROM THE RESEARCH

First, military as an organization, opposition on wartime OPCON transfer opposition seems to be a reasonable answer. The military is an organization that has a mission to win the war, and will build strategies in military terms under such goal. While South Korea faces a threat by the enemy, North Korea, the best deterrence is to have the U.S. on South Korea's side. The military is also an organization that is large and bureaucratic. Changing a system

²⁸ Interview held on August 10, 2015.

²⁹ Interview held on August 27, 2015.

³⁰ Interview held on July 19, 2015.

that has been deeply rooted in its own ways for 60 years, OPCON, will not be easy, and it will be overwhelming for the organization to bear burdens of change. The senior military elites, who have to retain the organization's influence and presence as much as possible, will desire to justify what they have done in the past, and may wish to finish well in the office instead of creating risks. In regards to the ROK-U.S. military alliance, those in the elite positions who have to deal with the U.S. would not want to risk or harm the ROK-U.S. relations. Former colonel who worked at the CFC shared that when President Roh raised the issue, the working ambiance in the CFC office was not as calm and amicable as before. It is natural, he says. It's a relationship, when the relationship is known to be terminated, how can it be the same as before.³¹

Second, there is matter related to baggage from the past. President Roh's speech to the 50th meeting of the Standing Committee of National Unification Advisory Council included words as "if you tell me we are weaker than North Korea in defense capability," ... "our former defense ministers should be charged with negligence of duty." Such strong comments can be related to the corruptions of the previous governments, which had repressed the democracy movements, and in *Gwangju* movement.³² Interview with former brigadier general discussed how the corrupted military officer turned Presidents, President Chun Doo-hwan, and President Roh Tae-woo, have decreased the organizational morale and dignity and lowered the citizen's respect for the military.³³ Recent military weapons corruption reports lowered the organization morale and trust.³⁴ Interview with a lieutenant commander in office, says that he does not think the current 2015 military budget is small. If the money lost by corruption were effectively managed, and the military budget was effectively used, military budget could have been enough. He asks seniors or the generals in position should have integrity.³⁵

If the military has done their job well, if there were no political military people who caused interventions in the democratic movements or used the military force to achieve one's own power desire, thus the military has gained trust from the people, if the military official were not corrupted and was examples of man of integrity and dignity, if the military has continuously strengthened their military capability despite the structured difficulties in building our own informational technical strategies,³⁶ if the political leaders such as the president have given continuous support to strengthen our own military capability, and if the senior military officers came across to always be alert and sensitive in defending the nation, then, there would have been more understanding on the military's strategic position to delay the transfer.

Interview with former brigadier general shared in the researcher's interview that the Korean military would have been stronger if President Park Chung-hee had not passed away. President Park Chung-hee developed Korea's own military defense program, *Tae-guk 72 plan* and later *Yulgok defense* improvement plan. It is also known that President Park has tried to develop Korea's own nuclear weapons system. But when President Chun came into office, he gave up all military documents to earn the U.S.'s favor and to conceal his

³¹ Interview held on July 6, 2015.

³² Interview held on July 31, 2015.

³³ *Yonhap News*, April 25, 2014.

³⁴ *AP News*, July 15, 2015.

³⁵ Interview held on September 16, 2015.

³⁶ *Chosun Ilbo*, January 29, 2015.

illegitimate way of achieving the presidential position.³⁷

Third, it is important to listen to the different voices that come from the military. In an organization, there cannot be one voice and not all criticisms are valid but it is worth listening to the different voices.³⁸ Former brigadier general is someone who has quietly agreed to the OPCON transfer. He does not want his name to be disclosed, especially when all of his colleagues and seniors of his are against the transfer. He first made it sure that his opinions are not political. He is not a fan of President Roh and his administration. He said he is not agreeing with the transfer because he is a progressive. He said he thought about what can be called as ‘wartime OPCON paradox.’ Wartime OPCON has protected the Korean nation strongly, but because of such protection, Korean military grew abnormally. Such protection has weakened the capability of the South Korean military to stand on their own. Wartime OPCON protected the Korean nation in a strong way with advanced systems and training but paradoxically; the wartime OPCON has loosened the Korean army. The Korean army was not pushed to the edge to stand alone, that is, it was not desperate to build a stronger independent army. There are so many political generals who would try their best to line up to the politicians so that they can take a step closer to promotion. Because the U.S. is there, the senior military elites are somewhat relieved in terms of defense. Looking into history, winner of wars are not necessarily who is stronger in capability, but the nations who has those willing to fight.³⁹

Here to clarify, those who insist on delaying the transfer or urging the transfer, clearly know that it is not the U.S. who will fight for us, it is their advanced military systems, information technology and know-hows they are mentioning. Unlike Korea that has not experienced a big war for the past 65 years, the U.S. had chances to continue to sharpen its capability as it had more chances to be in a war.

A former air force colonel said in his interview with *Hankyoreh Shinmun* that to have Kill Chain system ready, a condition that Korea has to meet to get the wartime OPCON transfer, an overall change is needed. The core of Kill Chain is joint command control among the army, navy, and air force and building joint military capability with a focus on the air force. However, to do all this on our own, not depending on the U.S., we need to transfer wartime OPCON and build plans and strategies on our own from now on.⁴⁰

Former defense minister stood on the position against the transfer. He candidly shared his grave concern over the Korean military. He is pitiful that the Korean army is confronting a situation that has to delay the transfer. Though delay was necessary because Korea was not ready and the dissolution of the CFC and harming the ROK-U.S. alliance is not strategic for Korea, it would have been different if Korean army had built up much stronger military capability. It is true that the military depended a lot on the U.S. umbrella, and possibly gotten used to the pattern and fallen into mannerism.⁴¹ The U.S. taking the OPCON in 1953 was a blessing to Korea. Holding SCM, MC yearly is an unprecedentedly special relationship Korea has with the U.S. What Korea should have done and at least should do from now is

³⁷ Interview held on July 29, 2015.

³⁸ Some may argue that it is usually those who failed from promotion criticize the military organization, but it is worth listening to the arguments. They would be able to see what those in position cannot see.

³⁹ Interview held on August 6, 2015.

⁴⁰ *Hankyoreh Shinmun*, November 3, 2014.

⁴¹ The military has also received criticisms that it is showing a path dependent action by disagreeing with the transfer.

strengthen its own military capability while Korea has this institution, of course though we are not having it for free. President Park Chung-hee time has consistently tried to strengthen the military capability and at the same time drive the national economic development. I miss that strong will of President Park. We as a nation should firmly express our will to protect our nation, and economically and militarily make a rich and strong nation.⁴² Park's care for the nation is demonstrated in his dream that he hopes Korea to be Northeast Asia's Israel in 2025. Our army has to show that it is willing to make a strong army, and the President should also show his/her will to make a strong army especially through raising the military budget or even collecting 'defense tax.'⁴³

Fourth, it is important to remember that the criticisms should not lead into generalization towards the senior military elites nor those who have pursued the transfer. It is only some military leaders in the past Korean history who were corrupted, and few military leaders in the past who were only concerned with their vested interest, however, that should not make the whole military look bad. Korea would not have developed this much if it were not for the security of the nation. General Walter Sharp in his memo about wartime OPCON transition in Korea shares that "Korea has this capability being the 12th richest country in the world with an outstanding military" (Sharp, 2013). We could only had built an 'outstanding' military because the senior military elites and generals have defended the nation for the past 65 years. Also, it does not mean that those who are against the transfer are all against President Roh's thoughts. Many interviewees have shared that they agree with President Roh's ideal thoughts and his attempt to strengthen the military. And President Roh has practically spent more budget to the military. President Roh "thinks the U.S. forces should be stationed in Korea, however, the U.S. forces should not be a political issue domestically nor a political card the U.S. uses." And a prerequisite for that is "Korea to have a military capability that can provide security to the Korean people without U.S. forces in Korea. What we need is self-confidence that we can do it by ourselves and a strong attitude towards self-reliant defense."⁴⁴ As a Korean national, and especially a uniformed officer, such ideal thoughts are something none can deny. And it is true that President Roh's 'bold approach of new thinking' for more autonomy from the U.S. left a lesson for the military and people (Sheen, 2008: 155-156).

6. CONCLUSION

This article asked why the senior military elite group was against the wartime OPCON transfer. While previous literatures analyze the situations related to the issue, this research introduces a new approach combining theories from organization, decision-making, psychology, economics, and security studies.

From an organizational perspective, as the military is a large and bureaucratic organization, making changes will be difficult. Status quo bias will prevail for decision makers. Moreover, military has a unique culture and role. The military's goal is to win the war and view national interest in military terms, thus, make best efforts to choose a military strategy that will be beneficial in winning the war against North Korea. Considering the

⁴² *Future Korea*, June 15, 2015.

⁴³ Interview held on June 19, 2015.

⁴⁴ *Hankyoreh Shinmun*, May 28, 2003. Translation was done for this research.

above factors, for the short-term, at least, the senior military elites' decision to oppose the wartime OPCON will continue.

A direction for further research will be civil-military relations. The South Korean wartime OPCON transfer was initiated by President Roh, civilian politician, but was opposed by the senior military elites. President's order to transfer the wartime OPCON faced organized opposition. The succeeding two Presidents have accepted the military's opposing opinion and delayed the wartime OPCON transfer. It would be a challenge for civilian politicians to override the massive opposition from the military.

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