

## **Relocating USFK Bases: Background and Implications**

*Nam Chang-hee*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since the inauguration of the Roh Moo-hyun government in 2003, South Korea and the U.S., through a consultative body dubbed the “Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance Policy Initiative,” has laid down a blueprint with regards to realigning the United States Forces Korea (USFK). Withdrawal or reduction of U.S. military forces has historically played a significant role in the dynamics of ROK-U.S. relations and security on the Korean peninsula to such an extent that the Korean public has often believed that the full scale withdrawal of U.S. forces and the North Korean invasion of the South were correlated with one another. In this vein, the plan to merge the Second Infantry Division (2ID) bases around Camp Casey and Camp Red Cloud (Dongduchon area), and then to relocate them south of the Han River would significantly change the security environment on the Korean peninsula by ending the role of forward-deployed U.S. ground forces as a “tripwire.” The paper aims at analyzing the context in which the realignment of the U.S. forces in Korea has

unfolded since the inauguration of the Roh Moo-hyun government—both from a domestic standpoint and in the context of the change of U.S. policy vis-à-vis the locations of U.S. forces stationed overseas. The paper also projects the degree of impact that a change in the deployment of U.S. forces is likely to have on the security and peace of the Republic of Korea.

#### USFK REALIGNMENT: DOMESTIC FACTORS

The most conspicuous characteristic, indeed, the biggest problem, of U.S. military bases in Korea is that large-scale posts and training sites are concentrated in the vicinity of Seoul. In contrast, most U.S. troops in Japan are stationed in Okinawa, a region far from Tokyo while very few bases (e.g., Yokota and Atsugi) are located near the capital. This difference is connected with the fact that U.S. ground forces in Korea have enhanced deterrence by serving as a metaphorical “tripwire.” In other words, their presence automatically induces U.S. military intervention if the North Korea attacks the South. Moreover, Seoul, the capital of South Korea is also very close to the demilitarized zone. As Seoul has rapidly spread and connected to neighboring satellite cities, and also as a growing number of people have moved closer to Seoul, many U.S. bases are now downtown. No longer is Yongsan on the outskirts of Seoul. Uijongbu, Dongduchon and Paju have all urbanized rapidly. This has put a strain on the relations between U.S. military bases as well as on urban planning, the soaring housing demand and business interests in construction in the metropolitan region.<sup>1)</sup>

Urbanization has not been confined to the Seoul area but has proceeded on a national scale. This has increasingly placed many

---

1) Kyonggi Research Institute, *Discord and Integration: The U.S. Forces and Local Communities in Korea* (in Korean), (Suwon: KRI, 2001).

U.S. military bases in the way of development of neighboring cities, especially impeding geographical expansion and traffic flows. Camp Page (Chunchon), Yongsan Garrison (Seoul), Camp Walker (Daegu), and Hialeah (Busan) all fall into this category.

Even though a substantial portion of the SOFA Grant Land is owned by private landlords, there has been virtually no compensation for them. Out of the lands South Korea grants to the USFK—exclusive use grants and training area easements—privately-owned lands account for 24.2 percent. Nevertheless, central government has never paid rent to the landlords. According to data submitted for National Assembly's Inspection 2002, the SOFA Grant Land is valued at around 1 trillion won and private lands account for 19.4 percent and 48 percent of the USFK exclusive use grants and training area easements, respectively. (It is worth noting that the Japanese government pays landlords for the use of land granted to the U.S. Forces Japan, based on a certain proportion of the land value. Thus, complaints regarding the rights to private lands are not as serious.) At the same time, the problem in Korea has also worsened because democratization has reinforced a sense of ownership regarding their land, and has triggered friction with the U.S. Engineer Command. The Land Partnership Plan, 2001, basically a decision to return a sizable amount of privately-owned land to the original owners, was based on the understanding that neither continued free use by USFK of privately-owned land nor compensation by the South Korean Ministry of National Defence (MND) for land use was feasible.

U.S. bases are scattered across Korea, which unnecessarily increases operational costs: In particular, the numerous small camps dispersed in northern Kyonggi Province. Their protection, telecommunications and transportation has become so expensive that since the mid-1990s a plan has been discussed to integrate them into a large-scale hub. This provides the background for the 2001 Land Partnership Plan, and also correlates with the plan in the Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance Policy Initiative to merge USFK

bases into a few large camps prior to backward-deploying them.

Another issue: the current location of bases reflect the warfare doctrine set up back in the 1950s, which does not take into consideration the many technological and strategic changes that have transpired during the past 50 years. Yet, it stands to reason that the structure of bases should remain flexible in accordance with emerging threats, development in military technology and changes in base environment. For instance, South Korea and the U.S. would continually reevaluate whether the current stationing structure is in line with its original purpose and addresses other key factors. In the meantime, the design of each base would reflect its strategic and tactical value (location, functionality and scalability), economics (efficiency and cost-saving) and other implications (social, developmental and ecological).<sup>2)</sup> However, the opposite has been the case for the USFK bases. They have seldom been redesigned to address strategic, tactical, budgetary, or social needs. In fact, most of the current USFK bases were constructed in the 1950s—either during the Korean war or immediately thereafter. The long-range capability to strike and detect the enemy, and the mobility of troops and equipment has significantly improved compared to 50 years ago. Nevertheless, most of the base structures set up in the 1950s have not changed.

When the USFK serves as a Northeast Asian security cooperation force, in addition to current deterrent power against the North, the base installation is likely to experience significant changes. In particular, should troops be relocated to enhance mobility, part of the forces currently in northern Kyonggi will necessarily be transferred close to airbases or seaports in the rear. Furthermore, as the air force has come to play an ever greater role in the initial stages of war, as illustrated in the Gulf War, changes are foreseen in the USFK structure, currently centered on ground forces along the DMZ.

---

2) Kang Han-gu and Sung Chae-gi, *Mid- and Long-Term Policy to Protect Military Facilities* (Seoul: Korea Institute for Defense Analysis, 1996).

If overwhelming air superiority is mobilized to paralyze the enemy's central command to isolate the enemy's armored units through close air support, and finally to intercept enemy supply lines in the rear, the ROK Army's forces can win without USFK ground forces. The US Army can lend assistance through state-of-the-art military maneuverability (i.e., attack helicopters and artillery detection capabilities) while the ROK Army plays a major role in ground battles. Should such a division of roles materialize, it might lead to a reduction of division-level U.S. ground forces in northern Kyonggi and also to a partial relocation to the rear. This scenario is actually reflected in the 2003 plan for the realignment of the USFK troops.

Lastly, despite official denials by the U.S. government that the realignment plan has anything to do with rising anti-U.S. sentiments in the wake of the accidental deaths of two middle-school girls caused by a U.S. armored vehicle, it is likely that complaints related to U.S. bases and growing anti-U.S. resistance play some role. Those issues deal mainly with military training, noise, property damage, accidents and crime. Complaints about noise include aircraft landings/takeoffs, air-to-ground artillery fire, artillery fire, and the sounds of helicopter flight and hovering, and armored vehicles. Property damage reportedly includes loss of crops and livestock and damage to rooftops due to fighter/helicopter contour chasing; vibration and road damage due to tank maneuvers; and accidental bombing and firing. However, the most serious causes of anti-U.S. sentiment among local residents are the all-too-common bodily injuries and loss of life and the crimes committed by U.S. soldiers. A prime example is the case of the two middle-school girls who were crushed by a U.S. armored vehicle in 2002, igniting massive candlelit vigils, and putting a serious strain on the U.S. troops stationed in Korea.

Such damage, both physical and economic, and crimes, coupled with public resentment over the bars and brothels near U.S. bases, have complicated the environment in which U.S. troops are stationed. A failure to harmonize with local communities and

continued conflict will negatively impact training efficiency and morale. Thus, wanting to avoid conflict with local communities, the USFK naturally became more serious about its realignment. Presumably, friction with residents might have affected, albeit indirectly, the decision to move 2ID in Dongduchon and Uijongbu to the rear. Therefore, the course in which the realignment proceeds may possibly be affected by how the public responds to the expansion of U.S. bases in some regions.

Though Washington does not accept it publicly, many U.S. citizens took umbrage at large-scale anti-U.S. demonstrations triggered by the two girls' deaths. During a major TV broadcast, the commander of 8th U.S. Army was infuriated over an anti-U.S. mob destroying the star-spangled banner. This, in turn, induced several members on Capitol Hill to threaten a reduction of the USFK. For instance, after the candlelit vigils were aired, opinion leaders including Richard Allen, a former U.S. National Security Council advisor, columnist Robert Novak and Washington Post columnist Fred Hiatt as much as stated that if the Koreans didn't want the U.S. troops, America should pull out altogether. Even though the current plan to relocate 2ID has nothing to do with anti-Korea resentment on anti-U.S. sentiment, it still suggests that the USFK has not harmonized with residents in northern Kyonggi and that conditions surrounding the bases are deteriorating. In this vein, it is fair to say that complaints about the U.S. military indirectly set off the discussion about revamping the U.S. bases in Korea.

#### **USFK REALIGNMENT: EXTERNAL FACTORS**

##### *Department of Defense Relocation Plan*

As stated above, the plan to realign USFK bases was originally triggered by societal changes within South Korea and by shifts in the

Korean strategic environment. However, other factors also come into play. First, the move to relocate the USFK is in part related to the three-step East Asian Strategic Initiative (EASI) plan to reduce the U.S. troops, which was basically a request for peace dividend and burden-sharing at the dawn of the post-Cold War era. It can be traced back even further to the Nixon doctrine that focused on naval and air power in planning the roles of the U.S. forces stationed overseas.<sup>3)</sup>

The drive toward military innovation that has gained momentum since the 1990s has further accelerated the relocation of U.S. forces stationed overseas. The revolution in military affairs (RMA) refers to a fundamental transformation in military operations and strategy that transpired in the process of amplifying combat capabilities by linking ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) and PGMs (precision guided munitions) with highly sophisticated C<sup>4</sup>I (command and control, communication, Computer, and Information) via advanced IT technology.<sup>4)</sup> The so-called system-of-systems that obtains accurate information through sophisticated battlefield awareness capabilities and relays it to the shooter has proved its effectiveness in wars in the Gulf, Kosovo, Afghanistan and, more recently, Iraq.

One salient aspect of this transition has been Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's strong commitment to parlaying future-oriented military capabilities such as air power and Missile Defense (MD) into leading roles in future warfare. The hard lesson from the Vietnam War was that air power should be applied to the depths of enemy territory in order to strategically paralyze the enemy command system and thus, take the initiative at an earlier stage of the war—a strategy first

---

3) Lee Ki-taek, *A History of International Politics* (in Korean), (Seoul: Ilshinsa, 1983), pp. 510-542.

4) Kwon Tae-young and Choon-il Jung, *A New Horizon for Advanced Defence* (in Korean), (Seoul: Ulchi, 1998); Kwon Young-keun, *Future Warfare and Revolution in Military Affairs* (in Korean), (Seoul: Yon-gyong, 1999).

conceptualized in the context of air land battle. After long-range bombing campaigns via air refueling achieved remarkable results in Kosovo and Afghanistan, U.S. top brass came to a clearer realization that large-scale ground forces no longer play a conventional role. In addition, the RMA dramatically enhanced combat effectiveness for the U.S. military, which led to the recognition that its forces, ground troops in particular, could be concentrated. As a U.S. military analyst recently predicted, "when the system of systems is in place sometime in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the actual personnel levels of the U.S. armed forces will no longer provide much indication of their ability to safeguard American interests."<sup>5)</sup>

Other striking changes include enhanced lift capabilities and improved deployability of rapid deployment forces (RDF). Airlift aircraft like the C-17 have allowed for rapid airlift of cargo and marines, reducing the need for advance deployment of large-scale ground troops. The Stryker, an RDF unit, which replaced the former 2ID brigade that was withdrawn from Korea in 1992, can dispatch light infantry troops together with light armored vehicles to any part of the world. This attests to the desire of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff for a global base installation that would keep U.S. troops overseas to a minimum and also enhance responsiveness to various regional conflicts. The U.S. Department of Defense is known to be planning to reorganize 2ID into light mobile infantry forces and realign them to locations where they can move swiftly. Therefore, a part of 2ID might move to Osan where it would facilitate airlifts, or somewhere near Pyongyang Port where troops would be dispatched in navy vessels to regions in conflict.

Recent developments around the Korean peninsula, however, raised questions on the timing of relocation, that is, suspicions about the North's nuclear ambitions, and some U.S. political leaders'

---

5) Brian R. Sullivan, "The Reshaping of the U.S. Armed Forces: Present and Future Implications for Northeast Asia," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (1996 Summer), p. 137.

discussions on a preemptive strike on the North's nuclear facilities. Fueling concerns, some U.S. media reports bluntly argued that a backward deployment of U.S. 2ID would place it out of the range of North Korea's 170mm artillery and 240mm multiple rocket launchers and, as a result, allow the USFK a flexibility on its North Korea operations.

#### **USFK REALIGNMENT: PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS**

The first official, working-level discussion on USFK realignment began with the Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance Policy Initiative in April 2003, when Seoul and Washington agreed to integrate the USFK bases as well as to move the Yongsan Garrison as soon as possible in order to promote the efficiency of USFK base operations and achieve a balanced development of national lands.

In June 2003, the two sides held the second meeting of the Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance Policy Initiative in Seoul to lay down a blueprint for USFK realignment. At the second meeting, Yongsan's relocation became an accomplished fact and a few basic concepts regarding USFK realignment were introduced. According to the joint statement,<sup>6)</sup> "in order to support the early movement of U.S. forces currently located in Yongsan out of Seoul and the overall realignment of U.S. forces in Korea, to include those north of the Han River, both sides agreed that the ROK government would start procuring appropriate land in 2004." With regards to 2ID realignment which will proceed in two phases: "Under the first phase, U.S. forces north of the Han River will consolidate in the Camp Casey and Camp Red Cloud area. In Phase II, U.S. forces north of the Han River would move to the key hubs south of the Han River." The two sides also agreed to sustain a U.S. military rotational

---

6) [[http://www.usfk.or.kr/kr/future\\_initiative.php](http://www.usfk.or.kr/kr/future_initiative.php)], (Searched on August 11, 2003).

training presence north of the Han even after the completion of Phase II.

Since the agreement was announced, the South Korean defense ministry has argued that, as Phase I alone will take several years and the completion of both phases will require six to seven years, 2ID will not be moving south of the Han River immediately. Thus, the claim that the plan is a preparation for preemptive attack on the North is argued to be groundless. The joint statement also suggested that some of the heavy equipment like tanks, artillery and helicopters might stay in forward areas, since it will allow the ROK-U.S. alliance to carry out joint exercises at a training center to be located in northern Kyonggi Province.

At the third meeting, held in Hawaii in July 2003, the two sides agreed to work jointly for Yongsan relocation by the end of 2006, to begin jointly drafting a Master Plan (MP) for Yongsan relocation this year, and to start land acquisition for relocation, facilities design and construction in early 2004.

Analysis of the three joint statements suggests that the relocation of a large part of Yongsan Garrison to the Osan and Pyongtaek regions is certain. In addition, the two sides seem to be reaching a consensus that in Phase I (4 to 5 years), U.S. bases in northern Kyonggi Province will be moved and consolidated at bases in the Dongducheon-Uijongbu area and, in Phase II, be aligned into key hubs south of the Han River like Osan-Pyongtaek on the one hand, and Daegu-Busan on the other. It was also announced that besides the two aforementioned key hubs, Gunsan, a joint training center north of the Han River, some remaining facilities at Yongsan will be added by the time the USFK realignment is completed.

Consolidating small bases in northern Kyonggi to Camp Casey and Camp Red Cloud and relocating them again to south of the Han River in a matter of a few years may seem a redundant investment and thus, unfeasible. Camp Casey and Camp Red Cloud are already saturated, and cannot accommodate additional engineering facilities and equipment originally used throughout the Paju and Munsan

areas. Given the bilateral agreement that some bases will not be consolidated into Camp Casey and Camp Red Cloud, but relocated south of the Han River, it is possible that only a portion of 2ID may move to key Kyonggi hubs like Camp Casey while a majority of the bases will move to Pyongtaek early on. Some civilians and Korean employees may, in fact, have to face job loss due to redundancy.

Besides, though the U.S. military currently frames the realignment of 2ID to south of the Han River as a mid- and long-term undertaking, the joint statement does not stipulate the time planned for the implementation of Phase II. Some interpret this absence of a clear roadmap as a move to be more flexible in putting the agenda at work. By comparison, the specific timeline was clearly announced in the case of Okinawa consolidation in Japan. It seems, although the U.S. publicly denies it, should diplomacy fail and the nuclear threat from North Korea significantly intensify, the U.S. might reduce 2ID forces, close some of its bases and relocate the remainder to south of the Han River quite early in order to allow strategic flexibility for a preemptive military campaign against Pyongyang. Also, the U.S. might go ahead with an early reduction or relocation of the USFK in response to an increase in demand for ground troops or a possible terrorist attack on a large U.S. base in the Middle East surrounding Iraq and Iran.

At any rate, the U.S. seems to be moving ever closer to securing more lands and constructing a hub in the Osan-Pyongtaek area, and reorganizing its troops into rapid deployment forces for the mid- and long-term. In this vein, some of the heavily armored equipment may stay at a northern-Kyonggi training center to be maintained by a small unit for peacetime operations. It is also expected that while new land will be granted in the Osan and Pyongtaek regions, most of the supplementary facilities in areas like Daegu, Busan, Jinhae and Pohang will remain as is, with the possible exception of Daegu and Busan, where Camp Walker might be consolidated into Camp Carroll and Camp Hialeah closed.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOUTH KOREAN SECURITY

A realignment, should it proceed as planned, would inevitably compromise the tripwire, a role traditionally played by the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division. However, since modern warfare, by definition, begins with bombers and missiles that attack strategic centers and command and control centers in the depths of enemy territory, the need to forward deploy troops along the DMZ may not be nearly as strong as it was at the time of the Korean War. Meanwhile, the plan to realign 2ID seems likely to generate “unexpected” benefits which were not premeditated in the realignment planning stage, as it minimizes possible damage from retaliatory attacks by the North and thus gives the U.S. military more room for maneuvering in the case of a preemptive attack into the North. Some of the enhancements, valued at over 11 billion dollars, and part of the U.S. military commitment in the joint statement, are actually directed at deploying surveillance and attack UAVs and new precision-guided bombs. These might provoke Pyongyang since they are aimed at strengthening the capability to strike the North’s military facilities.

However, it would constitute a leap in judgment to claim that the U.S. is backward-deploying 2ID as a means to protect its troops from retaliatory attacks by the North in response to precision air strikes on nuclear facilities. For a start, the U.S. can hardly afford to divest any of its military and diplomatic capabilities from postwar Iraq at this time. Plus, a precision attack on the North’s nuclear facilities, whose effectiveness is very much in question, might open a Pandora’s box, which could engulf the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia in a full-scale war. Also, the attack might destroy nuclear facilities, allowing fallout to spread to Japan. More importantly, the South Korea and Japan governments are not very likely to go along with a U.S. surprise attack into the North unless security measures against North Korea’s retaliation are assured. Besides, many American

residents make their homes in Seoul and U.S. servicemen and women are on duty in northern Kyonggi Province. Moreover, South Korea and the U.S. share numerous interests in trade and investment, not to mention the common political values of democracy and free-market economy. All these render an attack on the North highly unlikely.

Secondly, the backward-deployment of 2ID may force South Korean armed forces to make up for a part of the 2ID fire power which is currently at the corps level, possibly increasing military expenses for the South and triggering U.S. pressure on Seoul to purchase its state-of-the-art weaponry (Multiple Launch Rocket System, Apache Longbow and artillery fire finding radars). The U.S. has said it would invest in 150 enhancements valued at over 11 billion dollars over the next three years to fill the security vacuum that will be caused by 2ID realignment.<sup>7)</sup> However, this investment is likely to oblige South Korea to bear a greater military burden and to purchase more U.S. arms. The purchase of a PAC-3 to strengthen the air defense capabilities of South Korea's armed forces might lead to their synchronization with U.S. Missile Defense (MD).

The realignment of U.S. 2ID might also bring about positive results by intensifying U.S. military pressure on the North and bringing the North to the negotiating table. This, then, would raise a need to link the realignment of U.S. 2ID to the rear, and for North Korea, to reciprocate by deploying a part of its troops and artilleries 100 to 200km backward from the DMZ in the context of confidence building and arms control.<sup>8)</sup> By stepping up pressure for dialogue, the realignment of the USFK and the enhancements of ROK-US

---

7) The USFK announced that it would consider introducing the Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), maritime deployment of one middle brigade, PAC-3 Patriot missiles, surveillance and attack unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) such as Predators, Hunters and Shadows, and new precision-guided bombs (JDAM, GBU-28/37 Bunker Busters).

8) For peace regime and arms control in the Korean peninsula, see Jong-Chun Baek and Young Jae Kim, eds., *Peace and Stability on the Korean Peninsula* (Seoul: Korea

combined forces could have a positive impact on resolving the security crisis surrounding the Korean peninsula by inducing the North to engage in negotiations and addressing the nuclear threat. Should this be coupled with an expansion of inter-Korean economic cooperation and an inter-Korean sharing of logistical channels, both economies could benefit.

Also, 2ID realignment could stabilize the environment in which the USFK is stationed and, perhaps in the long term, expand public support for the ROK-U.S. alliance by reducing tension between residents in northern Kyonggi Province and the U.S. armed forces. Collateral damage to civilians caused by the USFK fanned anti-U.S. demonstrations, and strained the ROK-U.S. alliance at the same time. Seoul will be able to address the root cause of growing anti-U.S. resentment only when it takes positive action, and makes an investment to compensate for, and minimize civilian damages caused by the USFK.

### CONCLUSION

As analyzed above, the realignment of the USFK is related with internal changes in Korean society on the one hand, and the U.S. strategy to realign its troops on a global scale on the other. In addition, the anti-U.S. sentiment that has grown since last year as well as an increasing number of complaints about U.S. bases are strengthening the argument for the relocation of 2ID in northern Kyonggi Province, at greater speed than most Koreans would have predicted. Though it may be far-fetched to view the backward-deployment of 2ID as a preparation for preemptive attack on North Korea, the North may still interpret the move as a military threat since it will place the troops out of range of its field artillery and

---

Association of International Studies, 2001); and Byong-Moo Hwang and Yong-Sup Han, *Korean Security Policies Toward Peace and Unification* (Seoul: KAIS, 1996).

multiple rocket launchers. In other words, though it was not premeditated, the talk of backward-deploying the USFK may indeed result in increased military pressure on North Korea. Now that the realignment of the USFK seems to be a *fait accompli*, Seoul and Washington must closely coordinate and consult to moderate the speed at which the realignment proceeds. Otherwise, it may heighten internal security concerns and discourage foreign investment in Korea.