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## **Dismantling of UNC is what nuclear-armed North Korea wants**

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The United Nations Memorial Park is located on ‘UN Peace Road’ in Nam-gu, Busan. But until 2000, the park was known as the United Nations Memorial Cemetery in Korea (UNMCK). During the Korean War, the bodies of fallen UN troops were temporarily buried here before being repatriated to their home countries. Over 10,000 people were laid to rest here during the war and the cemetery still hosts the remains of 2,309 soldiers, making it the only UN-designated cemetery in the world. It is a reminder that today’s Republic of Korea exists thanks to the sacrifice of countless young people from all over the world who died for their love of liberal democracy.

Following the North Korean invasion of the South in June 1950, the United Nations Command (UNC) was established in July in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 84. In response, 16 countries sent combat forces, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Australia, and Turkey, while five countries contributed medical units, including Sweden and Denmark. During three years of war, nearly two million troops fought under the UN flag, and approximately 150,000 lost their lives. Because of the UNC’s existence, the Korean War became a war between “communist invaders versus the free world.”

The UNC has functioned as the enforcer of the Armistice and defender of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. But as North Korea’s nuclear threat increases, the UNC’s functions are again receiving attention. However, there seems to be some concerns about the revitalization of the UNC in South Korea. Those who are critical of revitalizing the UNC make two points. First, they think Washington’s move to revitalize the UNC is a “ploy” to maintain its control over the ROK military even after the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON). They are concerned that even as a ROK general assumes leadership of the ROK-US Combined Forces Command (CFC), the United States will use the UNC to maintain control of ROK troops. Second, they accuse the UNC of interfering in inter-Korean cooperation projects.

Regardless of whether these charges are true or not, it is unfortunate to see such claims being made in South Korea, which would have not achieved today’s level of prosperity without the help of the UNC. First of all, the UNC is not an organization with command or control authority over the CFC. Since the

establishment of CFC in 1978, wartime OPCON of ROK forces has rested with the CFC, not the UNC, and the fact that the commander of United States Forces Korea (USFK) concurrently serves as the commander of the UNC does not give him control over ROK forces.

Moreover, the claim that the UNC has put a brake on the delivery of major supplies and personnel movements for inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation may be caused by the “lack of consultation.” The UNC explained that it is not an accurate observation that it had deliberately interfered with the provision of Tamiflu aid to North Korea and the inter-Korean railway connection projects. The UNC mentioned that it has approved 93% of all DMZ access requests, except requests to entry in dangerous areas or requests of incomplete documents. It would be reasonable to revise existing regulations through consultation if they no longer accorded with the changed situation.

Another reason why the domestic controversy over the UNC is so worrying is that it may end up giving weight to North Korea's longstanding calls to neutralize or dissolve the UNC. When we consider the sheer magnitude of the geopolitical reality that South Korea lies at the eastern edge of the vast Eurasian continent that connects Russia, China, and North Korea, our security will face serious challenges if the UNC's function is reduced or if it is dissolved.

Since the establishment of the CFC in 1978, the UNC has been acting as a “force provider” that receives troops from the existing UNC member states and supplies them to the front lines in the event of war. General Burwell Bell, the Commander of the UNC in 2007, began to emphasize the role of force provider of the UNC. In order for the CFC to perform its mission properly in an contingency, the seven UNC-Rear bases located in mainland Japan and Okinawa are important. The UNC itself is therefore an important deterrent force given the fact that it provides international support and UNC-Rear bases.

When North Korea re-enacts a provocation similar to the sinking of the Cheonan or the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, the ROK will not be able to respond actively due to the threat of North Korean nuclear weapons. If the UNC does its job successfully, it will help the ROK in many ways.

The UNC requires sufficient personnel and training to function properly. But the UNC only has 30 personnel dedicated to it. The UNC should perform various tasks including liaison and consultation with the Sending States in the event of an armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula. With its current personnel size, it will be difficult for the UNC to carry such tasks. This is why the subject of revitalizing the UNC has been brought up.

A state cannot survive on cause and pride alone. A state can exist only when it has the power to defend itself. This was true during the Korean War, but with North Korea's nuclear weapons threatening the ROK today, a properly functioning UNC ensures a minimum of security readiness. The basic principle of the UN is to preserve peace and freedom, and the UNC is the organization that embodies this vision on the Korean Peninsula. We can make the UNC the “key” to peaceful unification rather than seeing it as a “shackle” against “national self-determination.” That is the only way to repay and honor the sacrifice of the 150,000 UN soldiers who died for the ROK.

\* The view expressed herein does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.