Abstract

**Purpose:** This study is to identify major issues related to the revitalization of the US-led UNC and to suggest an appropriate approach strategy for Republic of Korea (ROK).

**Method:** In this research, the history of the United Nations Command (UNC) was reviewed in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) enacted in response to the Korean War, which broke out due to North Korea's illegal and surprise invasion of the ROK. A literature review was conducted to identify major issues related to UNC's revitalization, and the reliability of the study was increased by using the Delphi technique in a qualitative way through a group of experts.

**Results:** Major issues for UNC revitalization were derived as follows. 1. United States' commitment to revitalize UNC, 2. Sustainability of UNC, 3. Establishment of chain of command between UNC and Future Combined Forces Command, 4. Scope of UNC member countries and participation of ROK forces in UNC Staff, 5. Declaration of the end of the Korean War, 6. Future UNC mission and role innovation.

**Conclusion:** Republic of Korea should actively participate in the revitalization of the UNC for the national interests based on strategic clarity even though the ROK is not a founding country of the UNC. The United States is willing to innovate the future mission and role of the UNC as a multinational peacekeeper capable of supporting a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula while maintaining its influence in East Asia. In conclusion, it is important that the UNC continue to support liberal democracy in the Republic of Korea and develop into a multinational peacekeeping force in East Asia.

**Keywords:** UNC's Revitalization, ROK & US Alliance, Wartime Operational Control Transition, Armistice Management, Peace Agreement, Strategic Clarity

1. Introduction

Efforts to restore the Republic of Korea and the United States (ROK-US) military alliance and trilateral military cooperation between ROK, US and Japan have been strengthened in response to North Korea's nuclear and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threats since the inauguration of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration. Fortunately, combined and joint military exercises and large-scale field trainings have been normalized. Those regular military activities were reduced or suspended under the pretext of preventing the spread of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and improving inter-Korean relations during the previous Moon Jae-in administration.

Despite the evolutions in the dynamics of the Korean Peninsula and fluctuations of security environment in East Asia, the US has resolutely conducted exercises to revitalize the United Nations Command (UNC). The UNC was established on June 25, 1950 in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) to defend the free and democratic Republic of Korea from the brutal invasion of communist North Korea. Even after the armistice agreement was signed...
on July 27, 1953 and the Korean War ended, the UNC as an warfighting command continued to manage the armistice and carry out combat missions along the front line.

In response to changes in the international strategy of the US and the improvement of the ROK military capabilities, the ROK-US Combined Forces Command(CFC) was established on November 7, 1978, taking over operational control(OPCON) from the UNC, and the missions and roles of the UNC was reduced to armistice management and provision of force.

Following the transition of armistice operational control from the CFC to the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff(ROK JCS), wartime operational control transition from the CFC to the Future CFC is also underway, and a new approach to the UNC’s missions and roles is being pursued. This reflects the Strategic Flexibility and the Global Defense Posture Review(GPR) of the US, the request of the ROK government, the improvement of the ROK military capabilities, and the atmosphere of inter-Korean reconciliation[1].

Two discussions are ongoing throughout the entire ROK society. Considering the importance of the ROK-US alliance, it is necessary to revitalize the UNC as the warfighting command for effective and robust operational control, and the opposite is the dissolution of the UNC and the withdrawal of United States Forces Korea(USFK) to restore ROK’s military sovereignty.

Even if the UNC is disbanded and ROK faces a national crisis, it is impossible to pass another UNSCR because opposition from China and Russia is expected[2]. Therefore, from the ROK’s security perspective, the UNC’s revitalization must be considered as a key issue. The US also needs to strategically promote the restoration of the UNC’s missions and roles for East Asia’s hegemony, peace, security, and disaster cooperation.

Previous studies on the UNC are as follows. 1. The legal status of the UNC in the establishment of the UNC in 1950, 2. The relationship between the UNC and the CFC after the activation of the CFC in 1978, 3. Transition of operational control from the US to the ROK, and 4. The mission and role’s evolution of the UNC in the future. This study reviews and analyzes major issues in revitalization of the UNC and presents ROK’s response strategy.

2. Establishment and Evolution of UNC

2.1. Establishment of UNC

On June 25, 1950, the Korean War broke out when communist North Korea launched an illegal surprise attack on the Republic of Korea. In response, the United Nations(UN) adopted Security Council Resolution(UNSCR) 82, which demanded an immediate cessation of North Korea’s hostile actions and withdrawal north of the 38th parallel. When North Korea continued its aggression on June 27, the UN has passed UNSCR 83, which called for support from UN member states to restore peace and security on the Korean Peninsula[3]. Based on these resolutions, UN member states such as the United States(US), United Kingdom(UK), Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and France decided to send military troops to ROK and began preparing for military deployment. On July 7, UNSCR 84 was adopted, calling for the establishment of a unified command led by the US to command UN forces for the restoration of peace on the Korean Peninsula. This resulted in the first-ever multinational UN force composed of 16 countries taking part in the war to restore peace on the Korean Peninsula. At the time of its establishment, the missions and roles of the UNC were to repel the North Korea’s armed attacks and defend the Republic of Korea, support Korean unification, maintain and abide by the Armistice Agreement, and provide forces in the event of a Korean War-like situation on the Korean Peninsula. The major resolutions and agreements that provided the basis for the establishment and evolution of the UNC include UNSCR 82, 83, and 84, UN General Assembly Resolution 376 of October 7, 1950, the Armistice Agreement of July 27, 1953, and others[2][4]. The US established the UNC in Tokyo, Japan on July 24, 1950, in accordance with UNSCR 84.

On July 27, 1953, the Korean War ended with the signing of the Armistice Agreement, and the UNC entered a state of armistice. In order to resolve the issue of the status of UN forces
stationed in Japan, the UN and Japanese government signed the "Agreement Regarding the Status of United Nations Forces in Japan (UN-GOJ SOFA)" on February 19, 1954. This UN-GOJ SOFA serves as a legal basis for the UNC sending states to use the US military facilities and bases in Japan. In order to prevent the termination of the UN-GOJ SOFA and to continue to use US military bases in Japan for the purpose of supporting the unification of the Korean Peninsula and maintaining and abiding by the Armistice Agreement, the UNC established a "UN Rear Headquarters" while moving its headquarters from Tokyo, Japan to Yongsan, Seoul, on July 1, 1957. Since the establishment of the ROK-US Combined Forces Command (CFC) on November 7, 1978, the missions and roles of the UNC have been reduced to supporting the unification of the Korean Peninsula, maintaining and abiding by the Armistice Agreement, and providing forces in the event of a Korean War-like situation on the Korean Peninsula[3][5].

2.2. Evolution of UNC

As shown in the following <Figure 1>, the UNC is composed of four major organizations: the Military Armistice Commission (MAC), the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC), the UNC Rear Command (UNC-Rear), and the Multinational Coordination Center (MNCC)[6].

![UNC's organization](image)

The first is the Military Armistice Commission (MAC). The MAC is jointly composed of the UNC forces and the representative from the communist military and oversees the implementation of the armistice agreement and cooperatively resolves any violations that occur. The second body is the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC), an independent organization separate from the UNC that works to maintain the armistice on the Korean Peninsula in conjunction with the MAC. The third is the UNC Rear Headquarters (UNC-Rear), which is located near the city of Tokyo, Japan, and according to the UN-GOJ SOFA would deploy UN sending states’ military troops to the Korean Peninsula through seven bases in Japan, including Camp Zama, Yokota Air Base and Yokosuka Naval Base on Honshu, Sasebo Naval Base on Kyushu, Kadena Air Base, White Beach Naval Facility, and Futenma Marine Corps Air Station on Okinawa, supplying various military materials to UNC military troops in the Korea peninsula[5][7]. The fourth organization is the Multinational Coordination Center (MNCC), established in 2009 by benchmarking the US Central Command’s multinational interoperability program. It facilitates communication and cooperation between the UNC headquarters and the Force Provider, as well as coordinates and controls the strategic RSO&I (Reception, Staging, Onward Movement and Integration) and logistics support for multinational forces. In the future, the role of the MNCC is expected to expand in conjunction with the reactivation of the UNC[8].
3. Progress in Revitalizing the UNC

3.1. Expansion of the role of UNC sending states

The discussion on revitalizing the UNC was pursued in line with the US’ efforts to transform its international strategy, strategic flexibility, and wartime operational control (OPCON) transition. In January 2003, US Secretary of Defense (SecDef) Rumsfeld instructed UNC Commander Laporte to explore ways more countries could contribute as UNC force providers. In a statement in September 2004, the UNC announced that it would further solidify its will, saying, "When the armistice ends and hostilities resume, the 16 UN member states will be reconstituted for a unified fight.". In March 2006, UNC Commander Bell stated at a US Senate Armed Services Committee defense budget hearing that the UNC would evolve into a stable multinational force. Since 2006, UNC has encouraged sending states to join the UNC Staff to form a multinational staff from in peacetime. In August 2007, military observers from the seven sending states participated in the UFG exercise for the first time, and many foreign military officers were encouraged to participate in combined exercises on a regular basis.[7][9]. To this end, the UNC organized and operated the UNC Multinational Coordination Center (MNCC) in March 2009 to benchmark the multinational interoperability program of the US Central Command (USCENTCOM). In July 2014, UNC Commander Scaparrotti officially announced the revitalization of the UNC and pursued a policy of enlarging UNC staff roles by filling them from UN member states. Since March 2016, UNC Commander Brooks has taken measures to decrease dual-hat staff positions between the UNC and the CFC while appointing a Canadian Major General as the deputy commander, the first non-US military officer to serve in the position since the establishment of the UNC. In addition, the UNC Commander Brooks made an all-out effort to increase UNC independence by opening more UNC command and staff positions. to UNC sending states such as the UK, Canada, and New Zealand. The number of multinational participants in combined exercises by UN member states is increasing. In 2016, a total of 171 military persons from the seven countries participated in the UFG exercise. This year’s UFS exercise is also expected to increase multinational staff training.

3.2. Efforts to expand UNC’s capacity

Currently, the UNC commander holds regular meetings such as the UNC Staff Working Group, the UNCMAC Advisory Group, and the UNC Ambassador Roundtable. The UNC also strengthens its external public relations activities by utilizing cutting-edge ICTs of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Since 2020, the UNC has established its own website, and has used social media such as Twitter and Facebook to introduce various mission facts, such as the management of armistice agreements, activities of Philippine Soldiers in the UNC Honor Guard, support for UNC staff members engaged in mine-clearing operations, support for the deployment of New Zealand Air Force aircraft at the UNC rear base in Japan, and Australian frigate support from UNC rear naval base[10][11]. Ultimately, the US effort to revitalize the UNC can be summarized as follows: developing the UNC into a multinational force with the participation of many countries like during the Korean War, restoring the UNC’s warfighting command function, and verifying and reinforcing UNC capabilities through combined exercises involving multinational forces.

4. Major Issues and ROK’s Response for Revitalizing the UNC

4.1. US intention for UNC revitalization

Based on recent expert qualitative interviews and literature reviews, the purpose of the United States’ revitalization of the UNC is estimated to be ① maintaining influence over the ROK military after the wartime operational control (OPCON) transition, ② evolving the UNC into
a multinational force to maintain international order in East Asia, ③ performing a role in providing UNC sending states in the event of a North Korea’s military threats, and ④ reducing USFK’s defense costs.

The key issues surrounding the revitalization of the UNC can be divided into five major areas: controversy over the UNC existence, establishment of a command relationship between the UNC and the Future CFC, scope of UNC member states and the ROK participation in the UNC staff, declaration of the end of the war, innovation in Future UNC Missions and Roles[12].

4.2. Sustainability of the United Nations Command

The existence of UNC is the subject of three ongoing debates. First, since the UNC’s legal status was established by the UNSCR, it cannot be changed by any single country, such as the ROK or the US, and a new UNSCR is required to disband the UNC. Second, unlike the UN peacekeeping operations, the UNC is operated with the US budget and has no financial relationship with the UN, therefore the decision whether to continue or dismantle the UNC rests entirely with the US. Third, China and Russia, the communist blocs of the UN Security Council continues to claim the establishment of the UNC itself to be invalid[10][13].

North Korea is using the logic of China and Russia to demand the dismantlement of the UNC and early transition to a peace regime. In a speech to the UN General Assembly on September 29, 2018, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho insisted that the UNC is under the command of the US, not the UN and the US and North Korea are also negotiating over the dissolution of the UNC and the declaration of an end to the Korean War at the request of the US[5][14]. There is also a group in the ROK that sympathizes with North Korea’s claim and demands the dissolution of the UNC. If the wartime OPCON transition and North Korea’s denuclearization negotiations are successful, it could lead to progress in the declaration of the end of the Korean war. Once a peace treaty is signed, there is a high possibility of demands for the dissolution of the UNC at home and abroad.

The UNC cannot be dismantled unless a resolution is adopted by the UN Security Council(UNSC) and the US, with its veto power, can block such a resolution. Since the US has absolute influence over the UN community, the dissolution of the UNC cannot be discussed without the consent of the US. Although there are continuous calls for the dissolution of the UNC by some progressive forces in the ROK, it will not be easy to dismantle the UNC unless the US reverses its existing policy on the Korean Peninsula. ROK should strive to expand its status in the UN society based on the strong support of the ROK-US alliance. Furthermore, it is essential to actively publicize the strategic value of the UNC in order to prevent demands for the dismantlement of the UNC and anti-American sentiment.

4.3. Establishment of a Command Relationship Between the UNC and the Future CFC

The current wartime operational control(OPCON) transition is implemented while meeting three conditions: ROK’s Core military capabilities, Alliance capabilities to respond to North Korea’s nuclear missiles, Stability of the security environment on the Korean Peninsula and in East Asia.

As shown in the following <Figure 2>, after the transition of wartime OPCON, the command of the US 4-star general in the current US-led CFC will be succeeded to the ROK 4-star general in the Future ROK-led CFC(Future CFC)[6].
Figure 2. Combined chain of command structure after the wartime OPCON transition.

The current CFC commander will perform the duties of the Future CFC deputy commander and the UNC commander. In a crisis situation on the Korean Peninsula, the UNC's role remains to provide military troops from the UNC member states. When concerns were raised about the combatant command of the UNC in 2019, the UNC commander repeatedly emphasized that the UNC’s role in a crisis on the Korean Peninsula is still in the military force’s provision from the UNC member states[15][16].

The Future CFC will become the theater combined warfighting command in the Korean Theater of Operation(KTO) after the wartime OPCON transition. The UNC is a key partner of the Future CFC as it is an essential role for UNC member states. When the Future ROK-led CFC is activated, the relationship between the Future CFC and the UNC will change significantly from the current state. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a close policy coordination relationship between the Future CFC and the UNC.

4.4. Scope of the UNC member states and the ROK participation in the UNC staff

UNC member states are countries that participated in the Korean War. Currently, there are a total of 17 UNC member states, which are combat deployment countries and/or medical support countries. The 14 countries sending combat troops are the United States(US), the United Kingdom(UK), Canada, Türkiye(formerly Turkey), Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, the Netherlands, Colombia, Greece, New Zealand, Belgium, France, and South Africa, and the 3 countries providing medical support are Denmark, Norway, and Italy[2][5].

In the 2019 Strategic Digest, the UNC introduced its member states to 18 with the addition of the Republic of Korea: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Philippines, Republic of Korea(ROK), Africa, Thailand, Türkiye, United Kingdom(UK), and United States(US). The UNC also announced in a press release at the 2019 Media Day event held on April 18 that it had organized itself as a “multinational force that maintains stability on the Korean Peninsula” and included the Republic of Korea(ROK) as one of its 18 member states. This means that the UNC recognizes the ROK as a 'force-contributing country' that provides troops and equipment on the Korean Peninsula, just like other member states. The US prefers to use the term 'member country' instead of 'sending state' or 'force-contributing country' and refers to the ROK as one of the 18 UNC’s member states in their
various meetings and activities. Some analysts say that it may not be appropriate to include ROK as a UNC member state because ROK is a host nation that operates the forces provided by the UNC during a crisis on the Korean Peninsula[9][16].

According to media reports, the UNC has requested the ROK government to send 20 officers to the UNC. This indicates that the UNC's plan to revitalize its organization includes expanding ROK's role within the UNC[7][14]. Therefore, it is necessary for ROK to review the dual position of being a party to the conflict and a member of the UNC from the perspective of national interest. As a host country and an official member of the UNC, the ROK must accurately grasp the overall activities of the UNC, share operations in real time, and maximize operational cooperation with fellow member states to enhance the efficiency of UNC multilateral operations.

Expanding and strengthening the appointment of ROK generals and officers to key UNC positions will serve the national interest. Then, it will be possible to work together with the UNC coalition staff in real time, and multilateral combined operation requirements can be smoothly reflected in the UNC operations. In addition, ROK should promote inter-Korean cooperation to maximize its influence within the UNC in order to overcome the reality that UNC operations are completely dependent on the US.

4.5. Declaration of the end of the Korean war

In the case of the declaration of the end of the Korean War and the conclusion of a peace treaty, the role of the UNC is essential. The declaration of an end to the war is a political act, and the signing of a peace treaty is a legal act.

The Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula, agreed upon by former ROK President Moon Jae-in and North Korea Chairman Kim Jong-un on April 27, 2018. In particular, in Article 3, Paragraph 3 states that "The South and North Korea will declare the end of the war this year, which marks the 65th anniversary of the Armistice Treaty, and establish a lasting and solid peace regime by advancing three or four party talk involving the ROK, the North Korea, the US, and/or China to transform the present armistice into a peace regime."

There is an argument that since ROK did not sign the Armistice Agreement, it is not a party to the Armistice Agreement and therefore cannot be a party to the peace agreement. On the contrary, ROK was a party to the Korean War and participated in the Korean War as a member of the UNC, and the UNC commander signed the agreement as a representative[9][11]. In this context, it is very important for the ROK to promote a permanent and peaceful regime on the Korean Peninsula in which the ROK, the US, and the UNC respond with one voice based on a strong ROK-US alliance.

4.6. Innovation in future UNC missions and roles

After the declaration of the end of the war and the signing of the peace treaty, the existence of the UNC could be an issue. In fact, the declaration of an end to the war is a political agreement and does not affect the existence of the UNC. However, if the armistice agreement is replaced by a peace treaty, the existence, mission and role of the UNC may be substantially affected.

Although the legal status of the UNC is expected to remain unchanged even if the armistice agreement is replaced by a peace treaty, it is likely that its status, mission, and role will be affected in some way in reality. Therefore, caution should be exercised when discussing the dissolution of the UNC in connection with the declaration of the end of the war or the conclusion of a peace treaty[6][12].

Once a peace treaty is signed, it is necessary to review measures such as managing the ROK’s peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, deterring and maintaining stability in military conflicts in Korea Peninsula and East Asia, and converting and operating a multinational peacekeeping force to respond to disasters in East Asia. In this process, it is strategically important to seek an agreement from China and Russia, which are permanent members of the UN Security Council.
5. Conclusion and Implication

It is estimated that the US is eager to revitalize the mission and role of the UNC as a multinational peacekeeping force that can support the ROK's peace regime on the Korean Peninsula while maintaining its influence in East Asia by pursuing evolutionary activities beyond the current armistice management and force provision of UNC member states.

The UNC's contribution to peace on the Korean Peninsula can be summarized in three major areas. First, the UNC contributed to the restoration of liberal democracy on Korean peninsula by helping ROK overcome the crisis of the Korean War. Second, by firmly defending the ROK's security, the UNC helped its grow from one of the world's poorest countries during the Korean War in 1950s to the world's 10th largest economy in 70 years. Third, as the armistice manager, the UNC has managed the unstable situation on the Korean Peninsula by monitoring the implementation of the armistice agreement between the two Koreas along the Military Demarcation Line(MDL) and the Northern Limit Line(NLL). The UNC is also helping to mitigate military tensions through on-site inspections, maintaining dialogue channels with North Korea, and responding to provocations or military conflicts.

Revitalization of the UNC should be approached in conjunction with the ROK's national security after reunification, as well as the transition of wartime operational control. During the Korean War, President Rhee Syngman, the first president of the Republic of Korea, opposed the armistice agreement for the reunification of the two Koreas. As a result, North Korea has denied that ROK is a signatory to the armistice agreement.

Therefore, although ROK is not a UNC founding country, it is very important for ROK to actively participate in the UNC revitalization blueprint from the perspective of future national interest.

The UNC must continue to support the liberal democracy of the Republic of Korea on the Korean Peninsula and evolve into a multinational peacekeeping force in East Asia. In 2004, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld expressed the hope that with the wartime operational control transition initiative, United States Forces Korea(USFK) and Republic of Korea(ROK) Armed Forces would work together for future peace and security in East Asia.

When transitioning wartime operational control, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld mentioned in 2004 that the United States Forces Korea(USFK) and the ROK military would shoulder their responsibilities together to ensure peace and security in East Asia. In conclusion, it is expected that the ROK should actively participate in the revitalization of the UNC while maintaining strategic clarity based on the solid ROK-US alliance for practical national interests.

6. References

6.1. Journal articles


6.2. Thesis degree


6.3. Books


7. Appendix

7.1. Author’s contribution

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