

Trump's Exercise Cuts Could Push Seoul Toward Greater Military Autonomy, but not without hurdles

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Trump's Decision to Cut Exercises

On August 27, President Trump [shared](#) on his Truth account that he is “not happy with the fact that the United States has, long ago, agreed to participate in the Joint Military Exercises with South Korea.” Following this, South Korea and the US cut short the Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS) exercise on August 21, from the planned 11 days to roughly five days. The shortened exercise also [canceled](#) the second-week counteroffensive phase.

UFS is primarily a [theater-level command-post exercise](#) (CPX) based on computer simulations of a full-scale war on the Korean Peninsula. Field training exercises are conducted alongside the CPX to make the simulation approximate actual combat conditions.

Trump's actions can be viewed through two lenses. First, on both of his terms, Trump has consistently maintained his firm position on sharing the burden of defense with allies and increasing costs for American troops in Korea. For instance, in 2018, he [ordered](#) the Pentagon to prepare options for withdrawing troops. In 2019, Trump wanted a five-fold increase in the annual payments. He also [called](#) South Korea a "money machine" and suggested that Seoul should pay USD 10 billion every year for the US troops.

Second, this is not the first time that Trump suspended major exercises with South Korea. He did so in 2018 following the Singapore Summit with Kim Jong-un, [describing](#) the exercises as expensive and provocative. This is a part of US diplomacy toward North Korea. Trump is actively pushing to revive personal diplomacy and secure another meeting with Kim. He has mentioned his "good relationship" with Kim several times. Also, the 2025 US National Security Strategy completely [removed](#) any mention of North Korea and its denuclearization goal for the first time in over twenty years.

The recent decision to cut exercises reflects continuity in Trump's approach and his broader alliance philosophy, which holds that American allies should shoulder more responsibility for their own defense.

While cutting exercises has once again raised questions about the reliability of U.S. security commitments, it has also strengthened Seoul's determination to assume greater military autonomy. However, the path toward pursuing greater military autonomy is not without hurdles.

Seoul's Road to Military Autonomy

Even before Trump's announcement on military exercises, South Korea was already on a path of pursuing military autonomy.

OPCON

Since the 1950s, South Korea has had operational control (OPCON) of its military under armistice conditions. However, the US would “[take over in wartime](#).” This is one of [the unique](#) characteristics of the US-South Korea alliance, in which “the Combined Forces Command or CFC (alliance war-fighting command)...is headed by a US four-star general while a South Korean four-star general serves as a deputy commander.” Military exercises such as UFS usually help both countries assess South Korea’s wartime readiness and whether it is ready to take full operational control.

OPCON [means](#) the “authority to perform functions of command over subordinate forces.” Thus, if a war breaks out, the US commander would have the authority to direct and organize South Korean forces under the combined command. Nonetheless, this authority is limited, as the commander remains accountable to both the US and South Korean presidents, and major decisions are made jointly.

The OPCON is a deeply political issue in South Korea. Several presidents, including Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), Moon Jae-in (2017-2022), and Lee Jae Myung (2025- present), have actively campaigned for wartime OPCON. Originally set for a fixed deadline under President Roh, the wartime OPCON transfer is now a conditions-based process that Seoul is actively working to complete. The three conditions [include](#) Seoul’s ability to lead the combined defense, sufficient capabilities to counter North Korean threats, and a stable regional security environment.

OPCON is also linked with South Korea’s sovereignty. Many Koreans argue that a sovereign country should ultimately have control over its own military, including during wartime. Many times, even North Korea has exploited Seoul’s lack of wartime OPCON to question its military sovereignty. In July 2026, North Korean state media called South Korea a “puppet” after its participation in a US-led maritime exercise. Therefore, regaining OPCON has significance beyond command arrangements.

Capabilities and Money

One condition for OPCON transfer requires South Korea to have sufficient capabilities to deter North Korean threats. Consequently, the Korean government is investing in its defense industry and developing weapons.

South Korea is [revamping](#) its defense budget. By 2027, it is set to surpass USD 51 billion for the first time. Earlier, the budget only covered force operations and weapons acquisition. From next year, the budget will also include military manpower administration along with other defense-related spending. Out of the budget, about USD 15.8 billion is allotted for capabilities related to the OPCON transition.

The budget includes upgrading air-ground communication and a new wartime military information distribution system, accelerating the deployment of a medium-altitude surveillance drone, and the L-SAM long-range surface-to-air missile system. The Korean government is also increasing spending on the production of the KF-21, the 4.5-generation fighter, and nuclear-powered submarines.

Recently, President Lee nominated Kang Shin-chul, a former four-star general and former deputy commander of the RoK-US Combined Forces Command. Within days of his nomination, Kang publicly [emphasized](#) pursuing OPCON transition while strengthening the alliance.

Hurdles to OPCON Transfer

The OPCON Paradox

After Trump's post on *Truth*, President Lee "[stressed](#) South Korea's responsibility as a direct party to peace on the Korean Peninsula," and reiterated his commitment to regain wartime OPCON from the US. Under his administration, 2028 is selected as an internal target for the OPCON transfer.

This poses a paradox for South Korea. While scaling back joint exercises with the US may help create space for dialogue and reduce tensions with North Korea, these exercises are also crucial for assessing Seoul's readiness for OPCON transition. Reducing them could create additional hurdles in the transfer process.

Korean experts believe that military exercises such as the USF are a [litmus test](#) for wartime OPCON. The US and South Korea have agreed to transfer OPCON through a three-stage process: Initial Operational Control (IOC), Full Operational Capability (FOC), and Full Mission Capability (FMC). South Korea is currently in the second stage (FOC), and its [verification](#) was supposed to take place in 2026.

This year's UFS included exercises that allowed the two militaries to practice command-and-control, operational procedures, and combined responses to contingencies, capabilities that are important as Seoul prepares to assume wartime OPCON. Trump's decision to scale it back could therefore complicate the process just as Seoul hopes to complete FOC verification and secure a target for the OPCON transfer at the Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in October 2026.

Lt. Gen (retd.) Chun In-bum, who once commanded South Korea's Special Warfare Command, also [warned](#) that reducing large-scale joint exercises limits opportunities to realistically test scenarios and operational readiness, making it harder to demonstrate that two forces are fully prepared for OPCON transition.

Nonetheless, Seoul [maintained](#) that the shortened exercises have not derailed the OPCON process, as key FOC assessments were completed during the initial phase of UFS and other evaluations continue throughout the year. While this may keep the formal transition process on track, concerns remain over whether reduced large-scale exercises can provide the same

level of realistic training.

Changing Pyongyang's Threat and Gaps in Seoul's Capabilities

Initially, when South Korea proposed transferring OPCON, the North Korean threat was primarily conventional. But today, South Korea needs to be prepared to lead combined operations against a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Park In-kook, former Ambassador to the UN, [raised](#) a key command-and-control problem. He said the future CFC commander would be a South Korean four-star general, but US nuclear forces would remain under US national command. A nuclear contingency will require close coordination between the two countries.

Also, political willingness cannot simply substitute for military capability. Seoul still needs to strengthen critical capabilities. Kim Yeoul-soo, a senior researcher at the Korean Institute for Military Affairs, [warned](#) that continuous reductions in joint exercises could delay OPCON verification, particularly as Seoul still faces gaps in areas such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

Likewise, current US Forces Korea (USFK) Commander Gen. Xavier Brunson has [cautioned](#) against letting political timelines outpace military readiness, estimating that the conditions needed for OPCON transition may not be met until around 2029.

Looking Ahead

Trump's decision to scale down military exercises may, therefore, have contradictory consequences for the alliance. In the short term, reduced exercises could complicate the testing, verification, and combined readiness required for OPCON transition. Yet at the political level, the decision may strengthen the very forces pushing Seoul toward greater military autonomy.

It highlights South Korea's continued vulnerability to shifts in Washington's political priorities and reinforces the argument that Seoul needs greater responsibility and agency in managing its own defense.