

“President Opposes Role for USFK in Regional Conflict”
Korea Times: March 8, 2005

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President Roh Moo-hyun, Tuesday clarified that South Korea will not allow U.S. troops to become involved in any dispute in Northeast Asia without the consent of the government.

“Although there has been concern about the expanded role of the U.S. Forces in Korea, I believe it is a matter of strategic flexibility,” he said during a speech at an Air Force Academy commencement ceremony.

“I can clearly say that our people will not get entangled in regional disputes against our will in the future. We will go ahead with this as a firm principle,” he said.

Roh said his government would conditionally acknowledge the “strategic flexibility” of U.S. troops stationed here. Such flexibility focuses on a change in role and the transformation of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) into rapid deployment forces with improved mobility to more efficiently cope with new security threats.

A Chong Wa Dae official explained Roh's statement represents the government's stance in that it would allow the change in the USFK's role, including the withdrawal of some forces and the redeployment others to southern areas.

“The U.S. forces' movement has come under the so-called global posture review (GPR) program that affects global U.S. forces,” he said on condition of anonymity.

It is the first time that the head of state has expressed willingness to accept the change in the role of U.S. troops here.

Roh's statement came after a report that the United States is adopting “strategic flexibility” with the goal of transforming the U.S. soldiers stationed in South Korea into “rapid deployment forces” for involvement in military conflicts in Northeast Asia, possibly including any military conflict between China and Taiwan.

Roh reiterated that his administration would never compromise on the issue, rebuffing growing concerns that an expanded role for the USFK would provoke China and undermine the regional security environment.

He again stressed the importance of the role of U.S. troops in maintaining peace and stability here.

“U.S. troops will also continue to play a major role on the Korean Peninsula,” he said.

Roh said South Korea will strengthen its role as a "balancing power" in Northeast Asia to prevent possible disputes in the region.

"To that end, we will seek to set up a regional security structure through close cooperation with the U.S. and other neighboring nations," he said.

He recalled that the nation suffered from wars on the peninsula between Japan and China, and Japan and Russia some 100 years ago.

"At that time, we eventually lost our nation due to a lack of power. But it is different now as we are currently strong enough to protect ourselves," he said