

US GROUND FORCES WITHDRAWAL: KOREAN
STABILITY AND FOREIGN REACTIONS*

Withdrawing US ground forces from Korea involves a variety of risks that revolve around stability on the peninsula and international reactions -- especially of the other major Asian powers. Following a withdrawal, the military situation in Korea will be less certain than it is now, and the general perception of the US as an Asian power will be diminished. The extent to which these tendencies develop depends largely upon the combination of measures employed to offset or reduce the risks of a withdrawal.

Stability on the Peninsula

Impact on the Koreans

1. Pyongyang has not renounced the use of force as a means of reunification. It has thus far been deterred by US-South Korean military strength and the US commitment to the South, the most credible manifestation of which has been the presence of US combat forces on the peninsula. Pyongyang will view a withdrawal of US ground forces [redacted] as removing key elements of deterrence. Moreover, since 1970 the static military balance between North and South Korea has changed from rough equality to one that substantially favors the North. This imbalance is likely to continue for at least the next five years.

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2. In deciding whether to undertake major hostilities during or after a US withdrawal, Pyongyang would be heavily influenced by its perceptions of the reliability of the US security commitment, the military balance, and political conditions in the South. If Pyongyang decided to attack the South, its most likely immediate military objective would be the rapid seizure of Seoul, and the consolidation of its gains. In so moving, Pyongyang would hope to deny the South

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the opportunity to bring its larger reserve forces into play, minimize the duration and extent of US involvement, and avoid reliance on Soviet or Chinese military assistance. It might calculate that the US, China, and the USSR would all seek to bring hostilities to an end at the earliest possible time. In such a situation, with the ROKG likely in disarray, the North would see itself in an extremely advantageous position.

3. The impact on South Korea will range over a wide area:

-- The South Koreans will likely seek greater control of their own forces in light of a significant reduction in US ground forces. This would remove the restraining influence of the US over ROK reactions to North Korean provocations.

-- A US ground force withdrawal could greatly reduce ROK command and control and intelligence capabilities. [REDACTED]

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-- A ground forces withdrawal may make it more difficult for South Korea to attract needed foreign capital. South Korea depends on a heavy flow of foreign capital to pay off existing debts, keep its economy growing, and build up its defense industries. Seoul's economic progress over the years has been a critical factor in maintaining political stability and general confidence in the Pak government.

- A US withdrawal, combined with a deterioration in US-ROK relations, could create political instability in the South. President Pak's ability to remain in power hinges in an important way on his management of relations with the US; this could become critical during and after a troop withdrawal.
- A withdrawal of US ground troops could undermine South Korean resolve. US ground forces have always been an important psychological factor in South Korea. The withdrawal of these troops would have a major impact on the morale of the South Korean military and is also likely to affect general civilian confidence in the future of the country, as well.

Compensating Measures

4. South Korea has a limited ability to increase defense allocations above planned levels without seriously reducing economic growth. The US, however, can reduce the risks attendant to withdrawal in a variety of ways:

- Retaining US tactical air capability will maintain an impression of commitment and a capability for supporting ROK forces in combat. It is unlikely, however, that air power would be a decisive factor in defeating a surprise thrust by North Korea toward Seoul.
- Phasing troop withdrawals. Leaving open the date for the final withdrawal of all ground forces would have important effects in Pyongyang and Seoul. Both would view an open-ended schedule as an indication that withdrawal would be governed more by security conditions on the peninsula than by US domestic pressures.
- Retaining intelligence assets that might provide early warning of a North Korean attack. Early warning of an attack is essential for the successful defense of the South.

- Assisting the ROK in strengthening its defenses and in acquiring the military equivalence of the US ground forces now stationed in Korea. A strong, unequivocal US effort to improve ROK military capabilities would be critical to continued stability on the peninsula. Such an effort would alter Pyongyang's perception of the military balance, enhance the prospects for continued political stability in the South, and diminish any inclination in Seoul to reconsider a nuclear weapons option.
- Avoiding other US actions or statements which could send the wrong signal to either the North or the South. Diplomatically, the ROK is acutely sensitive to the possibility of US-North Korean contacts and to any modification of the cross recognition formula. On the other hand, initiatives to increase understandings among the major powers about the desirability of stability on the peninsula would be seen by Seoul as continued US willingness to work in its behalf and by Pyongyang with discomfort.
- The US security commitment would also be reinforced in Pyongyang and Seoul by the augmentation of US air power in the South, forward basing of US Navy assets in the Pacific, and demonstrations of US mobility capabilities through field exercises.

International Reactions

Japan

5. Japanese leaders, believing that stability in Korea is essential to Japan's own security, prefer that US ground forces remain in Korea. The Japanese government has voiced greater concern about our intention to withdraw the remaining US ground forces than it did in 1970 about the removal of the 7th Infantry Division. Nonetheless, Tokyo is resigned to a withdrawal. It is unlikely that Japanese security policies will be changed appreciably. Tokyo still considers any direct military contribution to South Korean security a political impossibility in light of its "no war" constitution, its limited self-defense forces, and consistently negative Japanese popular attitude toward issues termed either "Korean" or "military."

6. In voicing concern about a withdrawal, Tokyo is re-assuring South Korea that it remains of paramount importance in Japan's view of the peninsula. At the same time, Tokyo is privately signaling its willingness to expand trade, cultural, and unofficial political exchanges with North Korea. Predictably, Pyongyang has reacted strongly to Tokyo's public support for a continued US military presence in the South. But Tokyo's continuing support for Seoul is no surprise to the North, and the economic benefit of closer ties with Japan may prompt some positive responses by Pyongyang. Tokyo does not expect the North to change its hostile attitude toward the South or to abandon its objective of controlling the entire peninsula. The Japanese, however, believe that closer ties with Pyongyang will at least improve their chances of acting as a moderating influence and serve as a hedge against any further unanticipated adjustments in US policy in the region. Still, Tokyo realizes that its increased nonmilitary involvement in Korean affairs cannot compensate for a shrinking US military presence in the South. Thus, Japan can be expected to continue to work for new international understandings that would shore up stability on the peninsula; in this respect, Tokyo would undoubtedly welcome any new US initiatives.

7. A possible lingering Japanese concern that will need to be offset by US actions and words is that our unwillingness to treat North East Asia with anything approximating the same concern as Western Europe is the product of a racist order of priorities. This theme has appeared recently in the Japanese press.

Taiwan

8. The Chinese Nationalists on Taiwan probably will see a withdrawal of ground forces from South Korea as reinforcing their view of Washington's reduction of its commitments in East Asia and of the inevitability of an eventual normalization of relations between Washington and Peking. Over the short term, however, Taipei may also argue that the US should not simultaneously withdraw its ground forces in South Korea and abrogate its security treaty with the Nationalists.

ASEAN

9. The ASEAN states share the general concern that stability be maintained on the peninsula and see a continuing

link between the maintenance of American power in Asia and their own security. None, with the possible exception of the Philippines, has confidence that the US would defend them in any regional conflict. But all of them believe that a continued American presence and interest -- including a military presence "over the horizon" -- is an essential element in maintaining the present equilibrium in Southeast as well as Northeast Asia.

The Chinese-Soviet Equation

10. A major factor currently shaping the strategic balance in Northeast Asia has been a rare convergence of Chinese and Soviet interest in maintaining Korean stability. The PRC and USSR approach the Korean situation in ambivalent terms. Both are Pyongyang's treaty allies and traditional military suppliers, and both, in part because of their political rivalry with each other, publicly support North Korea's call for withdrawal of US forces from the South. On the other hand, both Peking and Moscow clearly have placed pursuit of useful relations with the US and Japan above North Korean ambitions for reunification. They seek to disassociate themselves from Kim Il-song's more rash actions and view the US security commitment to Seoul as a useful ingredient in the mix of factors that keep peace on the peninsula and restrain any Japanese impulse toward rearmament. The Chinese tacitly have taken an especially positive view of US military presence, not only in Korea but throughout East Asia, seeing it as a help in blocking the expansion of Soviet influence in the region.

11. The Chinese and Soviets are probably concerned that any withdrawal of US ground forces be accomplished in a manner that does not disrupt the basic political and military status quo on the peninsula. As long as a US force reduction is accompanied by effective compensating measures -- and the maintenance of US air and naval power in the area -- it will not be seen by Moscow and Peking as the removal of a credible US security commitment to South Korea. Moscow and Peking, moreover, would be motivated to discourage Kim from embarking on a major conflict with all of its troublesome and uncertain implications for Japanese security policy, bilateral relations with the US, and the power balance in East Asia. But, if Kim became convinced that the US no longer posed a credible deterrent and that other signs of weakness or instability in the South had opened the door for a quick victory, it is doubtful that either Moscow or Peking would be willing or able to place a veto on the venture.

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12. Moscow and Peking no doubt are anticipating North Korean pressure for increased military assistance in the event that a US force reduction leads to a substantial upgrading of South Korean military capabilities. Pyongyang would have to turn primarily to Moscow since China cannot supply the advanced equipment North Korea would require to match a US assistance package for the South. If the Soviet Union believed that South Korea's military capability had been significantly upgraded, it would probably respond with assistance to strengthen the North. Over the next year or so, Moscow is not likely to respond to requests for offsetting aid in a manner which further tilts the military balance in favor of the North.

13. Both Moscow and Peking, for some time, have seen the US as generally on the defensive internationally and, more specifically, as unwilling to become engaged in a future land war in Asia. But there are some important differences in the manner in which the Chinese and Soviets will view an American reduction of force in South Korea.

14. The bellwethers of the US-Soviet relationship continue to be SALT, commercial dealings, CSCE review and MBFR; Moscow will continue to deal with all of these on their own merits. In this context, we do not believe that a withdrawal of ground forces from South Korea will significantly complicate the US-Soviet relationship or lead Moscow to conclude that the US is less of a global adversary.

15. Peking's perception of the value of the US relationship depends primarily on its reading of US resolve in dealing with the USSR on a global basis. Nevertheless, a US force reduction could raise some troublesome implications for Peking. The Chinese tacitly have supported a US military presence in South Korea not only as a deterrent to rash action by Kim Il-song, but as one element of the strategic counterweight to the threat of Soviet military "encirclement" of China. Indeed, the Chinese have generally taken a positive view of US military presence throughout East Asia (except in Taiwan), seeing it as a help in blocking the expansion of Soviet influence in the region and as a sign of continuing US resolve to play a great power role in opposition to the Soviet Union. Peking, however, is primarily concerned that the US maintain an ability to project military force as a Pacific power. If a ground force withdrawal from South Korea is accompanied by effective compensating measures -- and the maintenance of US air and

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naval power in the area -- we do not believe that China's view of the value of the US connection will be significantly downgraded.

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