

Withdrawal of U.S. Forces from South Korea Is Long Overdue: Examining the Military Balance on the Korean Peninsula

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Introduction

On the eve of the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, the armistice of 1953 has still not led to a peace treaty, to U.S.-DPRK diplomatic relations, or to an end to the U.S. embargo on DPRK trade. Military affairs analyst Taoka Shunji makes a case for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea based on an analysis of South Korea's military superiority over the North and the ability to call on U.S. naval and air support if necessary. While high level negotiations and Presidential summits involving Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump hold out the possibility of an accord, tensions remain high and there has been no basic agreement.

Taoka Shunji's proposals in this article share much in common with measures advocated by a number of American civilian and military leaders since the mid-1970s. As a candidate for president in early 1975, Jimmy Carter proposed removing U.S. forces from South Korea. Of Carter's meeting that year with researchers at the Brookings Institution, Senior Fellow Barry M. Blechman recalled, "I told Carter we should take out the nukes (nuclear weapons) right off and phase out the ground troops over four or five years. I said the most important reason was to avoid getting the U.S. involved with ground forces almost automatically in a new war which is, of course, why the South Koreans want them there." However, Major General John K. Singlaub, U.S. Forces Korea Chief of Staff at the time, publicly criticized Carter's proposed withdrawal and CIA Director Stansfield Turner privately expressed misgivings.¹ It was never implemented.

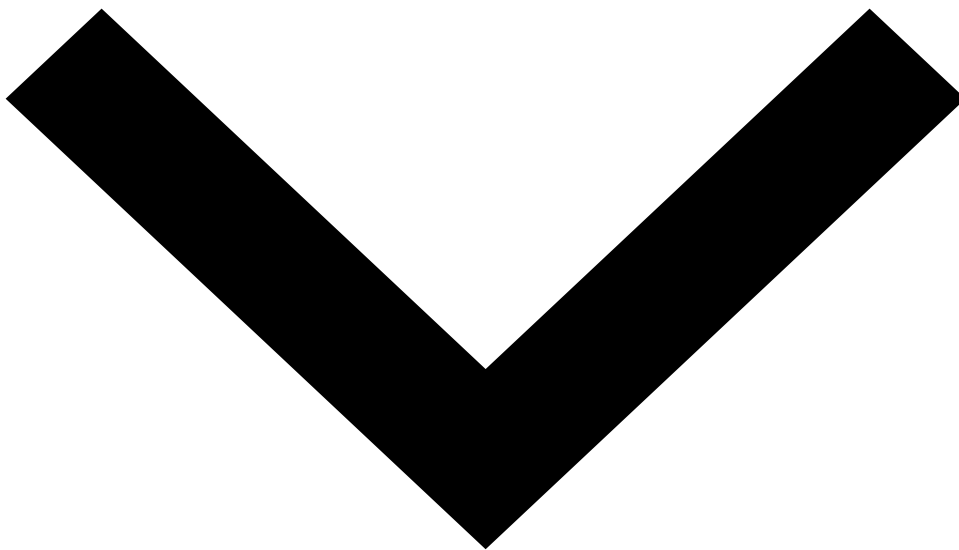
Retired Admiral Gene R. Laroque, Director of the Center for Defense Information, also favored U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea. He also advocated closing U.S. bases in Okinawa as strategically unnecessary and fiscally wasteful.² Chalmers Johnson, a former CIA consultant and later Director of the Japan Policy Research Institute, has written that South Korea "is twice as populous [as North Korea], infinitely richer, and fully capable of defending itself."³ Johnson also explained why "defending Korea" and "defending Japan" are false rationales for perpetuating the oppressive burden of U.S. bases in Okinawa, documenting the many atrocities committed by U.S. forces there, even after its reversion from U.S. military occupation to Japanese administration in 1972.⁴ Moreover, the leaders of North and South Korea have recently proposed far-reaching measures to reduce tensions on the peninsula. In short, leaders and experts on both sides of the Pacific have warned that

current U.S. military policies in East Asia are anachronistic, seemingly perpetuated by inertia. Yet their recommendations are ignored and new policy initiatives thwarted.

Responding to the South Korean government's August 23 announcement that it was ending the intelligence-sharing General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan, the U.S. Department of Defense issued a statement expressing "deep concern and disappointment" that "repeated requests for reinstatement have been ignored."

In Japan there is an assumption that if U.S. forces withdraw from South Korea, the peninsula will unify under North Korea putting Japan on the front lines in any confrontation. Such anxiety results from the impression that the U.S. military remains today the main force defending South Korea. In reality, however, the American presence there is very small compared to the South Korean military.

In September, 2018, the U.S. Defense Department reported troop strength at 17,200 Army and 8,100 Air Force for a total of 25,800. This compares to a total of 625,000 South Korean forces as reported in the 2019 issue of *Military Balance* published annually by the U.K.'s International Institute for Strategic Studies. They include 490,000 Army, 65,000 Air Force and 70,000 Navy. Thus, the South Korean Army outnumbers the entire U.S. Army worldwide of 476,200. The 17,200 U.S. Army troops in South Korea are one twenty-ninth the size of the South Korean Army.



Headquarters of U.S. Forces Korea at Pyeongtaek, sixty kilometers south of Seoul. Previously located twenty kilometers north of Seoul at Uijeongbu, the U.S. division is no longer positioned to block a North Korean invasion, but, with a nearby port and airbase, Pyeongtaek is convenient for deploying forces to other locations worldwide. (Asahi Shimbun-sha)

The South Korean Army has approximately 2,500 tanks, 2,800 armored vehicles, and 590 helicopters. It is technologically inferior to the U.S. Army, but at least as strong materially as the armies of other Western countries, which were sharply reduced after the end of the Cold War.

The U.S. sent 440,000 troops to the Korean War (1950-53) withdrawing most of them after

the truce. When the Cold War ended in 1989, they numbered 43,200 of which 31,600 were Army.

The U.S. military in South Korea used to be one component of America's containment policy toward the Soviet Union until the U.S.S.R. collapsed in 1991. During the 1970s the U.S. was in a quasi-alliance with China, even closely cooperating to develop China's F-8 II fighter aircraft. As a result, the U.S. concluded at the time that antagonism between North and South Korea was an internal matter on the peninsula, which led to proposals to withdraw U.S. forces from South Korea.

With prolongation of the Iraq War, which had begun in 2003, the U.S. military shifted one brigade of the Second Infantry Division in South Korea to Iraq in 2004. Even after the Iraq War wound down, that brigade did not move back to South Korea, but returned to the U.S. The Second Infantry Division, in which the brigade of 4,700 had been its nucleus, then became a division in name only with troops who were not permanently stationed, but rotated in and out from the U.S.

The division headquarters was located at Uijeongbu, twenty kilometers north of Seoul blocking the main route the North Korean Army would take in an invasion; but, in July of 2017, it moved sixty kilometers south of Seoul to Pyeongtaek. The headquarters of U.S. Forces Korea also moved there in June, 2018. At Pyeongtaek the Americans could avoid North Korean rocket and long-range artillery attacks, and use its port along with nearby Osan Airbase, making it a convenient place to deploy forces to other areas of the world. Readiness for deployment elsewhere is the same rationale that is being used for stationing Marines in Okinawa.

U.S. Air Force headquarters in South Korea is now located at Osan Airbase, about fifty kilometers south of Seoul. The number of fighter and attack aircraft there and at Gunsan Airbase, about 170 kilometers south of Seoul, total only 84.

The main force of the South Korean Air Force, with its strategic headquarters also at Osan, is comprised of 59 F-15K fighter-bombers and 163 F-16 fighters. Along with fifty domestically produced fighter-attack planes, it also has 174 F-5 light fighters, and 60 older model F4E fighters, a total of 522 fighter-attack aircraft. Forty F-35A stealth fighters are scheduled to replace the F4E fighters. In addition, four A330 refueling planes are on order from Airbus. Already in service are four high-speed early-warning planes remodeled from Boeing 737 passenger jets. Thus, South Korean aircraft far outnumber U.S. planes with continuing modernization of the force.

Almost all the aircraft in the North Korean Air Force are vintage models from the 1970's, the newest being eighteen Soviet-made MiG 29's. In the 29 years since the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1990, it has been extremely difficult to purchase spare parts for these planes, very few of which are still airworthy. This lessens the need for the South Korean Air Force to put assets into air defense so it can concentrate on offensive capability. Dependence on the U.S. Air Force is also sharply reduced.

The size of the North Korean Army is estimated at 1,100,000, but their equipment is woefully outdated, so if the soldiers were to leave their underground fortifications, they would likely be annihilated in air attacks. The North Korean Navy has two old-model frigates and twenty Chinese-made submarines. These are copies of the Soviet R-model submarines from the 1950s, and are not battle worthy. Some of the smaller ones are probably operable

for underwater intrusion. The South Korean Navy has overwhelming superiority with one 19,000-ton amphibious helicopter carrier, sixteen submarines (1300-1900 tons), a total of twenty-two surface combatant (cruisers, destroyers, and frigates) and eighteen 1200-ton patrol ships.

Considering South Korea's overwhelming military superiority over the North, some South Korean officers have expressed dissatisfaction that the U.S. military still holds the right of command over all forces in South Korea in the event of war. In 1994 the U.S. transferred peacetime command to the South Korean military, and in 2006 President Roh Moo-hyun requested the transfer of wartime command. In the midst of the Iraq War, the Pentagon's budget was depleted and the U.S. wanted to reduce troop levels in South Korea. On October 6, 2006, the two defense secretaries met and agreed to transfer the wartime command.

However, facing budgetary pressures and North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and missiles, President Lee Myung-bak agreed at an October 6, 2007 summit meeting with President George W. Bush to postpone the transfer until December, 2015. The next South Korean President Park Geun-hye postponed it again until the middle of the 2020's decade.

Current President Moon Jae-in intends to transfer wartime command by the end of his term in May of 2022. At a June 3rd 2019 meeting of defense secretaries it was decided that, after command is transferred, a South Korean general will be appointed commander of joint U.S.-South Korean Forces. The joint-command headquarters now at Yongsan in Seoul is scheduled for relocation to Pyeongtaek where construction of the base is expected to be completed in early 2022.

Until now the U.S. military has not been commanded by another nation's officers except for temporary cases of small units. Perhaps the reason the U.S. agreed to transfer the right of joint command to a South Korean general was a plan to withdraw American combat units.

What could happen, then, if U.S. combat units withdraw? Should North Korea launch suicidal attacks firing nuclear missiles, U.S. ballistic missile submarines stationed off Alaska would retaliate with nuclear missiles. The conflict would likely be decided in a few days so any efforts at "emergency support" would be too late.

In a war with conventional weapons, the South Korean military on its own can repulse North Korean forces. However, in a war involving nuclear weapons, missile defenses, spy satellites or cyber attacks, South Korea would have to depend on the United States. If a South Korean general assumes command of joint U.S.-South Korean forces, consulting regularly with and taking advice from an American deputy commander, actual conditions would be little changed from what they are today, only this would allow the South Korean military to heighten their superficial status.

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This is a translation of "[Zaikan beigun no tettai wa mohaya kitei rosen Taoka Shunji ga chosen hanto no gunji baransu wo bunseki](#)," AERA.dot., September 11, 2019.

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Notes

¹ Don Oberdorfer, "[Carter's Decision on Korea Traced Back to January, 1975.](#)" *Washington Post*, December 6, 1977.

² Michael Johns, "[The Admiral Who Jumped Ship: Inside the Center for Defense Information.](#)" *Policy Review*, 1988.

³ Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, Metropolitan Books, 2000, p. 58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-51.

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