

US Forces Korea in the balance: Time to go home?

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by Linde Desmaele

There are several reasons why it is appealing for Trump to downgrade US military activities in South Korea. For starters, any reduction of overseas military commitments fits well with his “America first” approach and would likely play to his domestic base. Despite repeated claims by the Pentagon that it is cheaper to maintain troops overseas than in the US given Washington’s commitment to defend Seoul in case of external armed attack, these claims have fallen on deaf ears with the president. Trump is frustrated with the cost of military drills. He has successfully pushed Seoul to take on a larger financial burden - \$923 million, an 8 percent increase – to support the US deployment, but he remains unsatisfied. Admittedly, a bipartisan House group recently introduced the “United States and Republic of Korea Alliance Support Act” to prevent Trump from unilaterally drawing down American presence. Yet, it is unclear for now whether the bill is constitutional, as it seemingly paves the way for interference with the commander-in-chief’s power to make tactical decisions amid hostilities.

Another important factor pushing Trump to reassess the value of maintaining presence below the 38th parallel relates to the ongoing negotiations with Pyongyang. The North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has continuously argued that his nuclear program is a response to what he calls American hostility. The regime has traditionally disliked US presence and regarded US-South Korea drills as a preparation for an invasion. Trump agreed in a tweet that war games with Seoul are “highly provocative.” In fact,

Since entering office, US President Donald Trump has been determined to withdraw US troops from South Korea. In May 2018, he reportedly ordered the Pentagon to prepare options to draw down US Forces Korea (USFK). He also pledged to halt US-South Korea war games, and on his watch, the Pentagon replaced existing military drills with smaller, less expensive ones. US foreign policy pundits and lawmakers have expressed concern about these actions, citing them as another example of Trump’s lack of geopolitical insight and a dangerous concession to Pyongyang and Beijing. But albeit for reasons slightly different than those put forward by the White House, there is a case to be made that removing US troops from South Korea could be an important step in reaffirming Washington’s leadership over the region.

the Pentagon declared that the decision to downsize joint military drills reflects its desire to reduce tension and support diplomatic efforts to achieve the final, fully verified denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. True, Kim reportedly did not insist on US troop withdrawal and the discontinuation of exercises in recent negotiations. Nonetheless, removing US troops from South Korea would significantly undermine the regime’s justification for developing nuclear weapons, not least for its domestic audience.

Sending USFK home would thus likely serve well the immediate agenda of the Trump White House. But there is more to this story. As a matter of fact, irrespective of whether one shares Trump's views and objectives, the possibility that it would actually strengthen US leverage over the Korean Peninsula in the long term should not be a priori excluded.

Many American observers are alarmed by the thought of troop withdrawal primarily because of its expected impact on Sino-American geostrategic rivalry in the region. The US increasingly views dynamics on the Korean Peninsula through the lens of great power competition with Beijing. In this regard, USFK are seen as critical to the US "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept and to countering China's efforts to reduce American influence in Asia.

It is possible, however, to conceive of another dynamic taking hold on the Peninsula. First, withdrawing US troops could ease tensions between Beijing and Washington and mitigate an emerging security dilemma. Alternatively, it could also allow the US to drive a wedge between China and North Korea. Less likely to perceive the US as a hostile force on the Peninsula, Beijing and Pyongyang would lose a unifying threat. For now, the North Korean regime cherishes independence and autonomy, arguably, more than anything else. No longer directly bound together by a common adversary, North Korea may in fact develop an interest in keeping the US actively involved in Peninsula affairs as a safeguard against excessive Chinese influence. And even if Kim continues to refuse to curb his nuclear program because it limits the leverage of outside forces on the Peninsula, this would become more of a problem for Beijing than for Washington at that point.

Following this logic, China would likely push more for North Korean denuclearization. Beijing has tolerated Pyongyang's nuclear program because it ensured a buffer between China and the US

military. With those troops gone, Beijing might lose patience with its reckless southern neighbor.

Interestingly, the current South Korean government may well be open to Trump's inclinations. As South Koreans have become a premier fighting force themselves over time, American defense analysts Doug Bandow and Dave Majumdar have argued that it would be fully capable of handling the Korean People's Army in a conventional conflict, provided there is no direct intervention by China. In 2018, South Korea had the 10th highest national defense budget in the world. Between 2019 and 2023, it is to be increased by an average of 7,5 percent each year in a bid to equip South Korea's armed forces with "self-reliant national defense capabilities."

In addition, it is an open secret that Seoul is more interested in peace than in denuclearization. Several months ago, Moon Chung-in, Special Advisor to the South Korean President for Foreign Affairs and National Security, even floated trial balloons questioning the appropriateness of US troops presence in South Korea if a peace treaty were signed. A backlash followed, and the Blue House was quick to distance itself from the comments. The official position of Seoul remains that the issue of US troops stationed in the South is unrelated to the inter-Korean peace process. Nevertheless, the fact that Moon Chung-in has made similar comments in the past without losing his position suggests that his views may be much closer to the administration's true agenda than is openly admitted. This is important because, if the decision to withdraw troops is made with mutual consent, there is no risk to US credibility and commitments elsewhere.

Trump has made a habit of putting into question national security issues many in Washington consider long settled. Breaking with tradition is always a gamble. But there is no harm done by exploring alternative scenarios. And, in any case, decisions can always be reversed in the future.

About the author



Linde Desmaele is a KF-VUB Korea Chair PhD Candidate. Her PhD project is embedded within the Chair and focuses on the changing role of Europe in American grand strategy as Washington rebalances to the Asia-Pacific region.

linde.desmaele@vub.be

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Institute for European Studies
Pleinlaan 5
B-1050 Brussels
T: +32 2 614 80 01
E: info@ies.be
www.ies.be



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