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FOR THE U.S., TOO SOON TO WITHDRAW TROOPS FROM THE KOREAN PENINSULA

(Updating Asian Studies Center *Backgrounder* No. 83, "For the Bush Administration, Policy Challenges on the Korean Peninsula," December 9, 1988.)

Ever since communist North Korea's June 1950 invasion of the Republic of Korea (ROK) triggered three years of war in which more than 50,000 Americans died, the U.S. has maintained a troop presence in the ROK with the aim of deterring further North Korean aggression. Today, some 43,000 American soldiers are stationed in South Korea.

This month, however, the U.S. Senate is considering S.1264, legislation that calls for the reduction of American troops in the ROK by 10,000 over the next three years. This proposal is based upon the mistaken assumptions that the majority of South Koreans do not support the U.S. troop presence, that the ROK bears too little of the allied defense burden, and that, given the ROK's rapid economic growth and a population twice that of the North, South Korea can deter the threat from the North on its own. More important, this proposal mistakenly presumes that stability on the peninsula would not be adversely affected by U.S. troop reductions. These congressional moves would threaten the peace in Korea as well as U.S. interests throughout Asia. Superpower interests converge on the Korean peninsula, and an outbreak of war there could destabilize all of East Asia.

For the past forty years, South Korea has been one of the most pro-American nations in the world. It has prospered economically, building up its trade to become the seventh largest U.S. trading partner. As U.S.-ROK ties have grown more complex in recent years, strains have developed in the friendship between the two allies. This is probably most apparent in the area of trade. Many South Koreans resent U.S. pressure aimed at opening ROK markets to more American exports. And "anti-Americanism" has been demonstrated by some South Korean students and other radicals.

Strong ROK Support. Despite these tensions, the Korean people strongly support the U.S. troop presence. A poll taken last October by the Korea Gallup Organization found that an overwhelming majority of South Koreans, 73.6 percent, favors the stationing of U.S. troops in the ROK. Only 16.2 percent expressed support for troop withdrawal.

Those in the Congress supporting troop reduction also have argued that the ROK is not spending a fair share on its defense. But in 1988, South Korea spent about 5.4 percent of its gross national product (GNP) of \$169 billion on defense. The U.S., by contrast, spent about 5.9 percent of its \$4.86 trillion GNP. Military expenditures last year accounted for nearly 33 percent of the ROK government's total budget, compared to about 25 percent in the U.S. The proportion of both GNP and national budget that Seoul spends on defense is substantially larger than the proportions spent by Japan and most NATO countries.

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The U.S. Department of Defense spent about \$2 billion last year on the American troop presence in Korea. Seoul contributed \$277 million in ROK government funds and also supplied the U.S. forces with various goods and services, including rent-free property, manpower, and tax exemptions, last year valued at \$1.9 billion.

Using A Relevant Yardstick. Finally, critics of America's role on the Korean peninsula argue that, since the ROK's economy has for years been outperforming that of North Korea, the threat posed by the North has diminished. But the only relevant yardstick in this case should be North Korea's military strength and its intentions.

North Korea today probably is the most isolated and repressive country in the communist bloc. With a population of only 20 million, North Korea has about one million soldiers under arms. The combined force strength of the U.S. and the ROK, on the other hand, is about 700,000. The North holds roughly a 2 to 1 advantage in tanks, artillery pieces, armored personnel carriers, and combat aircraft and a 3 to 1 edge in surface warships. It also maintains a commando force of about 100,000, trained to strike at the South's command and supply infrastructure. The North deploys some 65 percent of its military strength near its border with the ROK. In short, a strong first-strike capability appears to be a high North Korean priority.

North Korea's Goal. Three decades of sporadic South-North talks have produced no substantial progress toward tension reduction. Despite recent diplomatic initiatives advanced by the U.S. and the ROK, Pyongyang has refused such basic confidence-building measures as South-North summit meetings, trade ties, and exchange of separated relatives. The North's lack of commitment to good faith negotiations and its continuing willingness to use state-sponsored terrorism against the South, such as the November 1987 bombing of an ROK airliner that killed 115, suggests that Pyongyang still approaches inter-Korean relations with only one outcome in mind: the eventual domination of the entire peninsula under the North's rule.

Last month's Chinese crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators, moreover, could result in the North's stiffening its hardline stance. Over the past few years, China has exerted a moderating influence on Pyongyang by urging it to negotiate with Seoul and to consider economic reform. Preoccupied with domestic affairs, China's leaders could relinquish this mediating role.

Since the end of the Korean War, the strong U.S. political and military commitment to the ROK has deterred North Korean aggression. The litmus test for the U.S. military presence in Korea is simple: when the threat from the North has diminished, U.S. troops can be removed from Korea. This course sustains adequate deterrence; it also allows Seoul to bargain with Pyongyang from a position of strength. The recent U.S. experience in dealing with the Soviet Union bears out history's lesson: Totalitarian regimes usually repudiate belligerence when faced with their opponent's strength, not their weakness.

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