From Commitment to Vacuum: The Risks of US Military Withdrawal from the Korean Peninsula

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Abstract: *This paper examines the strategic significance of the United States military presence in South Korea, challenging narratives that frame it merely as a financial burden unnecessary for the United States. It argues that the US forces stationed on the peninsula serve as a critical pillar of deterrence, alliance credibility, and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. Drawing on discourse and content analysis of government documents, strategic assessments, and a comparative case study of the US troop withdrawal from the Philippines in 1992, the paper demonstrates that a withdrawal from South Korea would not only be detrimental to national security on the peninsula but also embolden adversaries such as China and North Korea. The study highlights how forward-deployed US troops reinforce Western influence, prevent regional power vacuums, and symbolize enduring commitments to allies. By illustrating the geopolitical costs of retrenchment, the paper contends that maintaining the US-ROK alliance is not a sunk cost but a long-term investment in peace and stability in East Asia.*

Keywords: US-ROK alliance; deterrence; alliance credibility; military withdrawal; regional security; Indo-Pacific strategy

Introduction

In recent years, debates surrounding the United States military presence abroad have resurfaced with amplified intensity. Throughout his campaign and in the first few months of his second term, US President Donald Trump repeatedly threatened to withdraw US troops from South Korea unless Seoul commits to greater financial contributions to defense cost-sharing. This has been a hot topic following the recent push by the Department of Government Efficiency on government agencies to reduce the US debt. While often treated as a budgetary or transactional matter in US domestic politics, such rhetoric carries weight far beyond cost accounting. In the context of East Asian international relations, even the suggestion of a US troop withdrawal has profound implications for regional stability, alliance dynamics, and the projection of power. Not only is the security of the Indo-Pacific region at risk of being jeopardized with such a withdrawal, but the US will also forfeit significant defense system support without a presence in South Korea.

The US-Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance, formalized through the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953 following the Korean War, has evolved into a significant strategic military partnership in the region. Today, approximately 28,500 US troops remain stationed in South Korea, serving not only as a defense commitment to Seoul but also as a forward-deployed force central to broader Western interests in the Indo-Pacific region. With the looming threat of North Korea's nuclear program and growing Sino-US tensions, questions surrounding the cost and value of this military presence warrant serious strategic reflection.

This study utilizes a qualitative research design through two complementary approaches: discourse analysis of government policy documents, official statements, and strategic assessments, and content analysis of academic literature and reputable news sources related to US force posture in East Asia. The discourse analysis approach is used to examine the narratives and policy framings that shape perceptions of deterrence, alliance credibility, and regional stability. Content analysis identifies patterns and themes in existing scholarship and media reporting. These approaches are fused into a comparative analysis at the end. This combined approach is appropriate for capturing both the strategic logic and the political-symbolic dimensions of US military presence in South Korea.

This paper seeks to explore a central question: In what ways is the US military presence in South Korea a strategic asset rather than merely a commitment cost? While many in the Trump administration frame US troops on the Korean Peninsula as an outdated Cold War-era financial burden, this perspective misses their enduring strategic utility. This paper argues that the US military presence in South Korea enhances regional security, bolsters deterrence, reinforces alliance credibility, and secures the American forward defense posture in East Asia as a subregion within the broader Indo-Pacific. A withdrawal would not only jeopardize South Korea's national security but also send damaging signals to US allies and adversaries across the Indo-Pacific. This paper's contribution lies in connecting three strands of strategic analysis in deterrence, alliance credibility, and regional stability. Analyzing these specific strategy points within a single, integrated framework allows for their application to a comparative case study of US troop withdrawals to support the aforementioned argument. While prior work, such as John Ikenberry's analysis of alliance credibility[1] and Victor Cha's exploration of power dynamics in East Asia,[2] has addressed individual elements, this study explicitly examines their interdependence and cumulative effects. To support the argument, the study draws parallels between the 1992 US withdrawal from the Philippines and contemporary debates about the Korean Peninsula. The review of the case study highlights overlooked parallels that exacerbate the broader risks of military retrenchment in the Indo-Pacific. While these details have been discussed separately, when combined and integrated with theoretical insights, they generate an original perspective on

the consequences of US force posture decisions.

Historical Context

The origins of the US military presence in South Korea are rooted in the broader dynamics of the Cold War and the start of the Korean War in 1950. Following World War II, Korea was divided along the 38th parallel, with Soviet troops occupying the North and American forces stationed in the South. This division, initially intended as a temporary measure, solidified as tensions increased. When North Korean forces, backed by the Soviet Union and later China, invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, the US responded under the banner of the United Nations to repel what it viewed as communist expansion.[3] There are multiple perspectives on what was the leading catalyst for the US intervention in the war. The strategic move was driven not only by alliance commitments but also by fears of a "domino effect" in Asia, as articulated in the Truman Doctrine and reinforced by the Chinese transition to communist ideology in 1949.[4] The subsequent conflict set the stage for long-term US military involvement. In 1953, the US and South Korea signed the Mutual Defense Treaty,[5] establishing a formal alliance that committed the US to aid in the defense of South Korea against external aggression. This treaty resulted in an ongoing US military presence, as well as the development of a bilateral command structure under the United Nations Command and the Combined Forces Command. The US-ROK alliance has undergone multiple transformations since its inception in 1953, adapting to threats ranging from conventional invasion to nuclear brinkmanship.[6] Unresolved historical grievances, such as abductions and memory politics, have also shaped alliance trust and public opinion in South Korea.[7]

Initially, the US presence in Korea was intended to deter North Korean aggression and prevent the spread of communism; however, its purpose has since evolved. The US presence is now critical to regional stability and border security when it comes to East Asian international relations. Today, it is reported that about 28,500 US troops are stationed on the Korean Peninsula, with a majority housed at the largest overseas US military base, Camp Humphreys.[8] The military presence not only allows the US to defend South Korea and other neighboring allies but also provides the US with an outlet for power projection. Geography is no longer a weakness for the US as its overseas military bases act as hubs of American influence across different regions of the world. As Ikenberry explains,[9] the US alliance system in Asia, often referred to as the "hub-and-spoke" model, depends on a credible forward presence to ensure that American commitments are perceived as reliable. Even as the "hub-and-spoke" model evolves, this concept remains relevant when discussing US partnerships in Asia. The US-ROK alliance is not only about defending South Korea but

also about anchoring the US strategic posture in a region that includes several nuclear powers and rising great power competition.

Strategic Functions of the US in Korea

The rise of China as a competitor to the US further reinforces the strategic importance of a US presence in Korea. This is exemplified by increased tensions over the Taiwan Strait and growing assertiveness in the East China Sea. Having such a strong presence in the region ensures the US retains access to key areas of operation and infrastructure.[10] This further underscores the argument that the presence of the US in South Korea is not merely a bargaining chip, but rather an asset with broader regional benefits. Historically, the Cold War politics were what shaped the US posture; however, this relationship has evolved over the years due to shifts in international relations. It has now become a multidimensional security platform with a strategy that would be difficult to alter.

The threat from North Korea was a pivotal reason for the US presence in South Korea, and amid growing tensions and unpredictability, this rationale still holds. Victor Cha and David Kang[11] refer to the placement of US troops in South Korea as a "tripwire" strategy, which implies that if North Korean troops were to attack, it would result in casualties of US troops, triggering a larger-scale involvement. This strategy is effective as the US operates on the foundation that it will react to an attack on its land or bases. This complicates North Korea's ability to invade South Korea, meaning any attack they would attempt would be in the form of a proxy war or limited strikes. One critical part of the US presence in South Korea is how the underlying intention is perceived. It is noted by many scholars that deterrence fails when intentions are misunderstood.[12] If the US presence in Korea is questioned, it would likely alert adversaries to make strategic moves whenever circumstances change. It is common military practice to attack at an escalated rate once the enemy is weakened. Thus, a perceived weakening of the alliance could invite aggression and destabilization.

Besides deterring the threat of North Korea, the US forces in Korea are not isolated in their mission and serve a broader mission in the Indo-Pacific. Having multiple military bases in South Korea has positioned the US to strengthen its response capabilities in the region. Many US bases are strategically placed to allow the US to operate under its jurisdiction while overseas.[13] Not only does this support the US when it comes to maintaining its defense systems, but it also stabilizes allied forces by providing defenses along with what the host nation provides in hard power. Based on Xi Jinping's view on the Indo-Pacific, one major strategy point is displacing US influence and reducing the presence in Korea, falling into a strategic trap[14]. Historical narratives and nationalism

have also shaped China's regional posture, particularly in disputes involving Japan and the US alliance system.[15] US credibility is reliant on its physical presence in the regional states, and a withdrawal could lead to a declining commitment to allies in the region.[16]

As mentioned previously, the "hub-and-spoke" alliance system in Asia is heavily dependent on the perception of the US to uphold its end of commitments in the case of a crisis. The US withdrawal or commitment to no longer intervene in foreign affairs would send a message to other allies like Japan and the Philippines. Ikenberry emphasized that alliances are not just hard power instruments but act as symbols of politics, and for the US, represent the nation's commitment to global leadership.[17] Rana Mitter and Elsbeth Johnson support this view by suggesting that China may interpret inconsistencies in the US as declining resolve and see it as an opportunity to start targeting areas such as the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea.[18] China's coercion tends to increase when collective allied resilience is weakened. The US presence helps deter China indirectly, and a withdrawal could embolden it.[19] The symbolism of the US presence in South Korea should not be taken for granted, as a strong alliance represents something just as much, if not more than, a physical presence. If there are signs of either the physical or perceptual effect getting weaker, it could result in an imbalance of power.

Counterarguments and Rebuttals

There are many who critique the continued US military presence in South Korea, often raising arguments grounded in financial prudence, strategic redundancy, and rising Korean self-sufficiency. One argument is that South Korea is now a well-developed and technologically advanced country that does not require defense support from the US. This view suggests that the US should cut the costs and reduce its military presence or require Seoul to pay more to support additional defenses. Furthermore, recent calls for a more isolationist or "America First" foreign policy have reframed overseas deployments as unjustifiable burdens on US taxpayers. While these concerns reflect legitimate debates about cost and sovereignty, they overlook the broader strategic function of US forces in South Korea: preserving deterrence, reinforcing alliance cohesion, and sustaining a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Rather than being burdensome, the US presence communicates resolve and stabilizes the region against potential threats. This fact is repeatedly demonstrated when power vacuums lead to coercion and conflict elsewhere.

Advocates for military retrenchment argue that scaling back or eliminating overseas bases serves long-term strategic and fiscal interests without compromising security. An example of this is presented by Paul MacDonald and

Joseph Parent, who contend that great powers can undergo "graceful decline" by reducing military commitments abroad, reallocating resources to domestic priorities, and avoiding overstretch.[20] Similarly, Barry Posen argues that offshore balancing can maintain deterrence at lower cost by relying on regional partners rather than permanent US military installations.[21] These perspectives challenge the assumption that forward-deployed forces are always indispensable. While these arguments recognize cost and sustainability concerns, they often underplay the signaling value or "mission need" of permanent forces and the speed with which regional power vacuums can emerge when such forces are removed. Historical cases suggest that retrenchment can invite opportunism from adversaries before replacement security arrangements can take hold.

Burden-sharing is a prominent argument among the recent US administration, as there is a push for efficiency and the reduction of the US debt. There is no doubt that US troops in Korea are costly (for comparison, Mike Krumboltz reports that each US soldier deployed in Afghanistan costs the government approximately $2.1 million per year).[22] Factors such as location, soldier's rank, and skillset all affect the costs, not including any support services needed. The claim being made with this counterargument is that the taxpayers' burden is unfair, and the solutions would be either for Seoul to share more of the cost or a withdrawal of US troops. The rebuttal to this is that, according to both Ikenberry[23] and Robert Kagan,[24] the cost of a preemptive presence is less than the cost of responding to a war that may take place in the region. It is also important to note that South Korea does pay a substantial share of hosting costs under the Special Measures Agreement, amounting to around $1 billion annually, depending on the exchange rate. This includes labor, logistics, and construction contributions to ensure that the facilities are livable for those affiliated with the base.[25] In recent years, US troops in South Korea were relocated from Yongsan Garrison to Camp Humphreys as former President Yoon Suk Yeol wanted to convert the land to a park.[26] This transformation has faced some challenges, as there are negotiations on who should bear the cost of environmental damages to the land due to the US presence.[27] It is known that despite the Korean government making compensation claims, their pleas are often disregarded.

Another counterargument that is presented is that South Korea is more capable now of defending itself than it was at the very end of the Korean War. There is no doubt that Korea has developed substantially after the Korean War and has developed advanced defense capabilities. However, to rebut this, it is important to note that despite South Korea's military advancements, it is not a nuclear power like its neighbor, North Korea. Removing US troops would make South Korea more favorable to nuclearization considerations and more advanced militarization, which Cha[28] and Scott Snyder[29] both mention, which in turn could lead to a regional arms race. Furthermore, the US also benefits from the shared intelligence, training, and strategic positioning while in Korea — it is not just

a defense hub.[30] There is little reason to believe that the US is giving more in defense than it is receiving from South Korea in return, as the parameters in multiple agreements outline reciprocal obligations and benefits.

The counterargument that the US should prioritize domestic needs and reduce entanglements in overseas conflicts is the most notable when compared to others. Especially in recent years, there has been more polarization in US politics, which is leading to unrest within its cities in the form of boycotts, protests, and other demonstrations. The US has domestic affairs that need priority-setting independently of external factors. The rebuttal for this claim is centered around the credibility of the US in international relations and how it is critical that even if the US chooses to reduce its presence, the nation needs to remain present in global affairs. Mitch McConnell argues that withdrawal undermines US global credibility as it will end up costing the nation more in the long run, as there will be signs of instability.[31] Moreover, as Kagan specifies, the hegemon status provides the US with the benefit of economic, security, and ideological likeness.[32] However, should the US retreat, it will invite power vacuums that adversaries could fill in, resulting in the loss of the advantages provided by its prolonged involvement.

Case Study: US Troop Removal from the Philippines

The potential consequences of the US troop withdrawal from South Korea can be analyzed through comparison to historical cases. Although the scale is not identical, the 1992 US withdrawal from the Philippines is a relevant one. A closer process-tracing analysis reveals how the US withdrawal from the Philippines reshaped the strategic environment. In the years leading up to 1992, China's maritime posture was comparatively restrained, constrained by limited naval capabilities and ongoing domestic priorities. Following the closure of Subic Bay and Clark Air Base, however, Chinese forces began a steady expansion of presence in the South China Sea, culminating in the 1995 seizure of Mischief Reef. The withdrawal process was accelerated after the Mount Pinatubo eruption in 1991, which damaged the Clark Air Base, contributing to the decision to fully withdraw troops in 1992.[33]

This pullback led to several strategic consequences. After the withdrawal, China became noticeably more assertive in the South China Sea. Carl Baker[34] notes that the withdrawal from Subic Bay had a direct correlation to China's increased assertiveness, as it had left a vacuum that China swiftly filled. The aforementioned Mischief Reef (a territory previously claimed by the Philippines) seizure marked a turning point in China's maritime expansion efforts. It also highlighted how vulnerable the Philippines became once the US military presence had dissolved. In response to this aggression, the Philippines re-en-

gaged with the US, later signing the Visiting Forces Agreement, which allowed for joint exercises and a temporary US presence. In 2014, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement allowed for rotational deployments of US troops in the Philippines. The US alliance has since evolved with rotational troop agreements and defense cooperation initiatives, reflecting renewed US interest in maintaining a regional presence.[35] To summarize, within three years of the US vacating the Philippines, China quickly took action to insert itself in the region, which demonstrates how quickly a shift can happen if a weakness is evident.

Applying the three dimensions argued in this paper (deterrence, alliance credibility, and regional stability), the case study breaks down parallel situations that could occur in South Korea. The absence of US assets reduced immediate military costs for potential Chinese moves, lowering the threshold for assertive action, which is reflective of deterrence. For alliance credibility, US disengagement signaled uncertainty to other regional allies, including Thailand and Japan, about Washington's willingness to defend peripheral territories. Lastly, the sudden power vacuum heightened competition in contested maritime zones, prompting not only Chinese advances but also a regional arms buildup, affecting regional stability. These outcomes underscore how forced withdrawals specifically undermine different pillars of regional security at the same time.

This case alone is effective in demonstrating how US military retrenchment in one area can have a ripple effect in regional power dynamics. The Mischief Reef incident in 1995 is often cited as a direct consequence of the US departure and is comparable to fears surfacing around the Taiwan Strait if the US withdraws from South Korea. China's move on Mischief Reef in 1995 reflected a long-standing pattern of opportunistic expansionism in the South China Sea.[36] This case underscores the importance of a forward presence for maintaining deterrence. Now that the forces are in place, removing them would create a security gap. As Cha[37] explains in his theory of "powerplay," the US alliance system in Asia was designed to maintain maximum control over allies while deterring adversaries. This also stands for alliance reassurance: China felt that the alliance was weakening, emboldening it to claim the territory. Although the US and the Philippines eventually restored their defense relationship, it took decades to rebuild the trust lost after the US withdrawal.

Conclusion

The US presence in South Korea is not merely financial; it holds strategic value in maintaining international order. The foreign policy direction of the recent US administration is aimed at isolationism and distancing itself from global conflict, and although the US needs to manage its domestic affairs during times

of turbulence, it should uphold its long-standing role of defensive deterrence abroad. A retreat into isolationism would greatly impact not only the US but also allied nations whose development and security have been supported by US engagement. In the future, it will be important for the US to maintain its relationships with countries in Asia through core commitments, especially considering that China is rising in power. If the US is seen as relinquishing agreements and abandoning alliances, it will open a power vacuum that adversaries will be more than willing to exploit. This paper asked: *In what ways is the US military presence in South Korea a strategic asset rather than merely a commitment cost?* Through historical analysis, strategic assessments, alliance theory, and comparative case study, the answer has been made clear – US troops on the Korean Peninsula serve as a vital instrument of deterrence, alliance credibility, and regional stability, and should not be used as an instrument of domestic political debates in the US.

From their role in the Korean War to their current role in balancing North Korean threats and China's assertiveness, these forces represent a forward-deployed pillar of power in East Asia. Far from being outdated, this presence adapts to changing security dynamics and serves the dual purpose of defending a key ally while bolstering American influence in the broader Indo-Pacific. Efforts to withdraw or reduce this commitment risk signaling a decline in US resolve, emboldening adversaries, weakening alliances, and unraveling a regional order that has helped prevent major conflict for decades. As demonstrated by the Philippine case, the costs of retreat are not symbolic but strategic. The vacuum created by a US departure from Subic Bay and Clark Air Base in the early 1990s led to Chinese aggression in the South China Sea and left the Philippines exposed for years to come. A similar move in Korea would send a worrying message to allies like Japan and Taiwan, while incentivizing adversaries to probe for weakness, both militarily and diplomatically.

In a rapidly evolving security environment marked by nuclear proliferation, regional rivalries, and authoritarian assertiveness, maintaining the US presence in South Korea is essential. To withdraw now, or even to threaten withdrawal as a bargaining chip, is to invite instability, erode hard-earned trust, and cede strategic ground in one of the most contested regions in the world.

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