

Policy Forum 04-29A: U.S. Troop Withdrawals and Self-Reliant Defense

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US Economic Diplomacy Toward North Korea

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U.S. Troop Withdrawals and Self-Reliant Defense

by Taik-young Hamm

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I. Introduction

This essay by Taik-young Hamm, Professor of Political Science at Kyungnam University and Advisor

to the Civil Network for a Peaceful Korea, discusses the US troop withdrawal from the Korean Peninsula and its implications for the ROK. Prof. Hamm writes, “the current asymmetric ROK-U.S. alliance structure is excessive, as is the South Korean mentality of dependence on the United States for security. South Korean citizens and government alike need to overcome this latter neurosis, while the government additionally must foster self-reliant defense posture and doctrine, diplomacy skills, and an effective indigenous ‘crisis management’ system rather than undertake simple arms buildups with an enlarged defense budget.”

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II. Essay by Taik-young Hamm

“U.S. Troop Withdrawals and Self-Reliant Defense”
by Taik-young Hamm

Introduction

It has been fifty years since the conclusion of the Mutual Defense Treaty, and the U.S.-ROK alliance is at a crucial turning point. While the United States appears to seek to transform it into a regional alliance aimed at the containment of China, South Korea desires a more equal alliance partnership--a military alliance limited to the security of the Korean peninsula. This change in interpretation of the alliance on the part of South Koreans cannot be labeled anti-Americanism or a weakening of “security consciousness.” In the difficult times of the past, South Korea relied unconditionally on its alliance with the United States for national security. Now, however, Seoul understands the need to move on and pursue “quality” of security, something that includes military sovereignty and equality in the alliance partnership.

In spite of this development, the recent announcements of redeployments and reductions of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) had quite an impact on the Korean people's perception of national security. For many people, anxiety set in. However, the incumbent U.S. administration's recently-conceived plans to redeploy overseas U.S. forces is based on both confidence in the ROK defense capability and the new U.S. military policy known as the Global Defense Posture Review (GPR). While the timing or manner in which the announcements have been made has something to do with the current atmosphere of Seoul-Washington relations, it does not represent any basic change in the ROK-U.S. relationship. Nevertheless, the United States does keep a watchful eye on anti-U.S. sentiment in South Korea, and in announcing its plans to withdraw or redeploy its troops, it does take advantage of Koreans' sense of reliance on the United States.

Today, almost no nation is able to be solely reliant on its own capabilities for self-sufficient defense (charyok kookbang). Despite the emergence of the slogan “self-reliant defense” (chaju kookbang) in the mid-1970s, with the ROK-U.S. alliance based on a “trip wire” role of U.S. ground troops in Korea seen as essential to national security, a mentality of dependence on the United States for security remains deep-rooted in the South Korean psyche. In Washington, however, the new doctrine of self-reliance is perceived as a basic shift in the alliance. Furthermore, the Roh Moo-hyun government has been charged with being soft on the North Korean nuclear issue, paying less attention to the U.S. demand for close policy coordination. On the other hand, to those in the ROK military, the recent government policy of self-reliance in national defense is seen as a policy of arms buildup through the purchase of state-of-the-art weapons rather than an attempt to cope with U.S. military redeployments and the withdrawal of 12,500 U.S. troops. The criticism is that the government has

neglected to foster its own capabilities for strategic planning and operations.

A more important issue in the debate on self-reliant national defense is the construction of a peace system on the Korean peninsula. A friendly relationship in the ROK-U.S. alliance is not an end in itself but a means for establishing peace and reunification on the Korean peninsula. Also, it is necessary to overcome the pessimism that seeks national security solely by means of a military balance between North and South Korea (or better, ROK superiority over the North), in spite of the efforts at reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas. Rather than a purely military approach, a “comprehensive security” approach that seeks “joint security” through arms control and disarmament on the Korean peninsula would be more desirable in this post-cold war era.

Military Capability Between North and South Korea

In coping with the reduction of the USFK and planning the national self-reliant defense, it is necessary to objectively reevaluate the military balance between North and South Korea. While North Korea has superiority in the number of troops and many categories of equipment, South Korea enjoys a qualitative edge over the North in terms of organizational capability in military training, equipment support, logistics, state of readiness, etc., supported by much larger defense spending. In particular, it is important to pay attention to the fact that, owing to the so-called Emerging Technology (ET) or Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), the South is far superior to the North in information-oriented capability, something that has become an extremely important force multiplier in the evaluation of military capability. To oversimplify, the so-called “Lanchester Square Law,” widely adopted as the basis for dynamic analyses including war-game models, is nothing but a generalized formula of “fire power multiplied by mobility and information capability.” While the North Korean military is at the level of mechanization, South Korea is now advancing into an “information-revolution” stage centering on what is known as “C4I” (Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence).

The USFK is a clear example demonstrating that the WEI/WUV-based “combat capability coefficient” (chonryok chisoo), which lays stress on sheer firepower and neglects information capability, is an outdated method. While in 1988 the combat capability of the USFK was valued at 5 percent of the North Korean People's Army (KPA), or 8.3 percent of the ROK armed forces, its military capital stock was estimated to be \$15.9 billion by the ROK Ministry of Defense in the early 1990s--36.5 percent of that of North Korea. The USFK's information capability that includes early warning capability was rated very highly, which was not reflected in the calculation of combat capability coefficient. Also, the combat capability is the “flow” of firepower (military capability's KW) at a given point in time, not the “stock” of firepower (military capability's KWH) that includes the time factor. It is widely believed that the over-armed North is inferior in the duration of firepower, due to the limitation of its logistics and deteriorating economy.

A war game that predicts a possible outcome from a combat scenario is the most representative type of dynamic analysis of the military balance. It predicts the probable casualties on both sides and the change in the front line by calculating various weapon system scores and multiplier effects into a combat scenario. The details of a war game are usually kept confidential, but they are commonly a synthesis of environmental factors such as weather, geographic conditions, and configurations of the terrain; and operational factors such as operational posture, the differences between attack and defense, the effects of a surprise attack, etc. The lessons from the Korean War are that the geographical conditions on the peninsula--that is, hilly and mountainous--favor defense, and that the most important component of the ground forces is infantry supported by artillery. When one looks at the space-to-force ratio and the current deployment of ground troops of the two Koreas with a

consolidated, continuous defense line with strong links to adjacent units, a future ground war on the Korean peninsula would become a war of attrition that characterized the trench warfare in World War I and during the latter half of the Korean War. Even if the KPA managed to make an initial breakthrough in a major sector, a lack of close air support, mobile anti-air defense, and logistics would make it difficult to employ its Soviet-style Operational Maneuver Group (OMG).

At the same time, because the national capital is close to the DMZ, the biggest concern of South Korea is a KPA blitzkrieg utilizing surprise attack. However, a North Korean surprise attack and/or use of chemical weapons is a worst-case scenario. South Korea's defense readiness and early warning capability against such possible aggression are reasonably sufficient. In fact, to maximize the effect of a surprise attack, the KPA would have to launch an attack using only frontline infantry units, which would lessen its impact. Introducing its armored/mechanized units on the second line in the hopes of making a breakthrough would diminish the effect of a surprise attack. The only area where North Korea does have a major strategic advantage is in long-range artillery--such as its 240-mm multiple rocket launchers and 170-mm SP guns--something that has the potential to rain down destruction upon Seoul.

A more objective indicator for static comparison of military capability is military expenditure. The ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) also uses the military capital stock, or the so-called "cumulative investment," apart from the simple bean counts. However, the MND data should not be accepted since it 1) defines only the spending on procurement and R&D through the "Yulgok Project" as military investment, ignoring U.S. military aid, the prime source of military investment for South Korea till the mid-1970s; 2) overestimates North Korean military expenditure; and 3) does not take into consideration the depreciation of military capital stock (8 percent per annum adopted by the Rand Corporation). Instead, if one defines the total national defense expenditure as "defense expenditure plus military aid," estimates total defense expenditures of the two Koreas since 1960, and compares the military capital stock of the two Koreas by calculating cumulative investment--as this author did--the result would reveal that South Korea has been surpassing North Korea in total military expenditure since 1976 and military capital stock since the early 1980s.

The military capital stock approach shows that North Korea could not match South Korea's military expenditure, based on the latter's overwhelming economic power. In the 1990s, the military expenditure of North Korea decreased dramatically due to the cessation of military aid resulting from the economic decline and collapse of the socialist bloc. Spending on weapons imports dropped dramatically to below the yearly average of US\$100 million in the 1990s. North Korea could not carry out military modernization by introducing information technology to its armed forces. It is still armed with the 1950- and 1960-vintage Soviet weapons. Moreover, it is unable to manage and maintain these obsolete weapons effectively due to serious shortages of energy and foreign currency. As a result, even the outdated conventional military capability has weakened.

Compared to the North, South Korea dominates not only in its war potential, but also in war-fighting capability. In fact, South Korea has been planning arms buildups to cope with potential future security threats from regional powers in Northeast Asia. A considerable number of weapons acquisition programs are a provision for a security threat from neighboring powers such as China or Japan. Hence the recent U.S. decision of troop redeployment and withdrawal is partly based on the net assessment of the inter-Korean military balance. This considered, the problem of the South Korean military is not one concerning hardware. The real problem is that it relies too heavily on the United States, neglecting efforts to enhance its own strategic planning, intelligence, and operational capability.

On its part, North Korea has been pushing ahead with labor-intensive arms buildups to match the capital-intensive growth of South Korea. Recently, however, the North has emphasized a more frugal

kind of deterrent capability, that is weapons of mass destruction (WMD), rather than the ability to conduct conventional warfare, thereby switching over to an "asymmetric arms race." Apart from the effort to develop credible unconventional (chemical or nuclear) deterrents as a last resort, North Korea also possesses conventional deterrents, in particular the 500 long-range artillery pieces deployed within striking distance of Seoul.

To sum up, between the two Koreas, with South Korea's superior ability to conduct conventional warfare, and North Korea's imposing deterrent capability, an "asymmetric military balance" or "balance of threat" has been reached. North Korea holds more of a threat to devastate Seoul than it does to seize and hold the city. Accordingly, South Korea's increase in conventional military capability, focused on digitalization, may not be effective from the perspective of North Korea's deterrent. The threat from North Korea's long-range artillery capable of hitting Seoul, ballistic missiles, and its alleged weapons of mass destruction, will not disappear through an arms race. It is next to impossible to achieve "absolute security" in which all North Korean threats are eliminated. Increases in military spending by the South to achieve absolute security only serve to incite the North to arm itself with other relatively cheaper yet fearsome weapons. What is required is seeking "reasonably sufficiency" in deterrence and defense capabilities, while at the same time pursuing arms control and disarmament.

The ROK-U.S. Alliance and USFK

Since the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty was finalized in 1953, USFK--both a symbol of the ROK-U.S. alliance and core deterrent--has remained a necessary prerequisite for security both on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia. Thus, in discussing the future role of the USFK, the first thing to consider is what the vision is for the future of the ROK-U.S. alliance system itself. Both Washington and Seoul need to re-adjust the nature of the alliance. The former has been increasingly interested in transforming it into a regional alliance--which many Koreans fear, as the sensitive missile defense (MD) issue has shown, may transform the bilateral alliance into a de facto U.S.-Japan-South Korea triple alliance against China--while the latter party prefers to maintain it and the existing role of the USFK on the Korean peninsula. To mitigate the fears and find a mutually satisfactory solution, harmony needs to be sought by expanding the common interests of both parties.

Regrettably, the periodic USFK force reductions thus far have been carried out via unilateral decision making by the United States, sometimes leading to conflict in the alliance (as happened during the withdrawal of the 7th Infantry Division in 1971 and further withdrawals of infantry troops during the Carter administration). In the future, it is desirable that the two governments engage in close consultations to decide further reductions.

As in the past, the recent U.S. announcement concerning its redeployment and withdrawal of USFK ground forces has been the subject of controversy and has stirred up latent anxieties within Korea. However, in reality, the current U.S. decision will not have as significant an impact on Korea's security as the 1970s' withdrawals. The augmentation of the ROK military and the deterioration of North Korean forces have rendered U.S. forces an "excessive deterrent." Furthermore, even with the withdrawal of troops, their equipment will remain in a state of pre-positioned deployment. Apart from the countermeasures against the KPA long-range artillery aimed at Seoul to ease public anxiety, measures to ensure the Korean defense capability to replace the U.S. forces are not urgent or pertinent. A more serious concern is the potential conflict and mistrust the planned withdrawal and reductions may create between Seoul and Washington, as was the case in the 1970s. Nonetheless, the situation may be exploited as an opportunity to pursue arms control and

disarmament on the Korean peninsula and to enhance the ROK capabilities for strategic planning, intelligence, and operation--the prerequisites to wartime operational control of its own armed forces.

Still some people are seriously worried about a North Korean military threat. The psychological dimension of national security is of course important. However, the so-called fictitious "security emptiness" is a false consciousness that should be eliminated. In order that North Korea does not underestimate South Korea's will or ability to defend itself, Seoul has to confidently play-down the supposed security threats from Pyongyang while emphasizing that it has the upper-hand in defense.

The future of the ROK-U.S. alliance depends heavily on the developments on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia. If one examines the future security environment of Northeast Asia, especially the international power configuration, one sees that although Korea has developed into an economic powerhouse--ranked twelfth in the world--it is still a small and weak nation in this region. Although the three weak states in the region (i.e., North and South Korea and Taiwan) maintain high military manpower ratios and defense burden, they cannot overcome their military inferiority in size. It is even difficult to image any of them playing the role of a balancer. If major powers in Northeast Asia ever engage in power politics or an arms race, Korea would become the most likely victim. For example, a scenario where an expansion of Chinese national power led to a Sino-Japanese conflict--along with an ensuing Sino-American struggle for supremacy--would pose severe challenges to Korea's security. In the event of a Sino-American military conflict, Korea would have no choice but to participate on the side of the United States. Of course, for China's continued stable economic growth, it needs to cooperate with and participate in the global capitalist system led by the United States (and Japan). The view that China will overtake the U.S. in GDP in the first quarter of this century is overly optimistic. Furthermore, even if it exceeds in terms of GDP, China will still be far behind in military power measured in terms of military capital stock or technology. More importantly, 19th century Britain and 20th century America have shown that unless a country can lead other nations in economic productivity, science, technology, culture and ideology, it cannot achieve global hegemony.

However, Korea should maintain a friendly relationship with China, its number one trade partner and, as the six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear issue show, an important partner in security cooperation as well. Korea's security strategy, which has hitherto mainly relied upon the strength of the ROK-U.S. alliance, must now confront the reality of an increasingly multilateral security environment. South Korea must actively lead the way for both inter-Korean and Northeast Asian arms control and disarmament, while at the same time maintain a minimum requirement for self defense vis-a-vis its neighbors under the framework of the U.S.-ROK alliance. To this end, it needs to foster its latent capabilities, especially in the area of research and development. In the long term, Korea will be compelled to carry out cool-headed cost-benefit analyses of the ROK-U.S. alliance and the USFK, centering on the issues of China policies as well as friction in trade issues and defense burden sharing. In this case, a ROK-U.S. "alliance without the U.S. troops" or even a "political (i.e., non-military) alliance" are alternatives that deserve consideration.

Conclusion

The basis for a South Korean self-reliant defense lies in an awareness of its national independence. Self-reliant national defense does not refer to self-sufficiency. The cardinal point of self-reliance should be a philosophy that is dedicated to peace and the unification of the Korean nation. The current asymmetric ROK-U.S. alliance structure is excessive, as is the South Korean mentality of dependence on the United States for security. South Korean citizens and government alike need to overcome this latter neurosis, while the government additionally must foster self-reliant defense

posture and doctrine, diplomacy skills, and an effective indigenous "crisis management" system rather than undertake simple arms buildups with an enlarged defense budget. Hence, the ROK-U.S. alliance structure, particularly in accordance with U.S. redeployments, the role and location of the USFK, wartime operational control, allied forces command structure, weapons development and procurement, and so forth should be carefully re-evaluated.

In following their own security policies, North and South Korea have only brought about hostility and an unproductive arms race. In the end, neither side enjoys more security. South Korea does have to ensure its own deterrent capability for its self-reliant defense posture, but at the same time it must not arouse threat perception in North Korea that could set off a new round of arms races. Instead, both should work to overcome military confrontation and arms buildups, and follow a political solution aimed at peace and unification through "joint security" that includes tension reduction, confidence-building measures, arms control and disarmament. Based on the encouraging progress of the Kaesong Industrial Complex project and the results of the June 2004 North-South General-level Military talks, the two Koreas should now look forward to the long-term goals of arms control and disarmament.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

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