

Policy Forum 00-02C: The What-If Question



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The What-If Question

By Bradley Martin, Asia Times, Bangkok

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I. Introduction

The following article is by Bradley Martin, Contributing Editor, Asia Times Online, Bangkok. Mr. Martin is currently working on a history of the DPRK. This article appeared on [Asia Times Online](#) .

Martin discusses the question of what would happen if the US were to withdraw its troops from the ROK. He warns that doing so would likely lead to an ROK arms buildup that could spark a regional arms race. He also argues that without the automatic intervention promised by US troop presence, the DPRK may decide to launch an invasion if it sees the US occupied elsewhere on the globe.

II. Essay by Bradley Martin

The what-if question By Bradley Martin

South Korea's Defense Ministry for the first time has urged officially that the country prepare for a possible pullout of US troops by undertaking a military buildup - and, of course, by increasing the defense budget to finance such a buildup.

The proposal came in a report, "National Defense in the 21st Century and the Defense Budget," posted on the ministry's website.

The warnings, or urgings, of US troop withdrawal had been left to civilians previously, as The Korea Herald noted last week in a brief report on the ministry's proposal. South Korean civilians used to do most of the warning, terrified as many of them were by the prospect of being abandoned by the United States. Advocacy of withdrawal was left largely to Americans leery of a costly commitment that they feared might lead their country into another Asian war.

Whether or not more South Korean civilians have been switching into the pro-withdrawal camp, those who are in the camp do seem more vocal lately. Two who are affiliated with the Los Angeles-based Korea 2000 reunification think tank, Lee Hwal-woong, a former South Korean diplomat, and Oh Indong, a physician, have recently published pro-withdrawal reports through the Nautilus Institute's Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network. [Ed. note: See " [A Regional Approach to Korean Peninsula Security](#) " by Hwal-Woong Lee and " [Make South Korea the Real Party to North Korea](#) " by Indong Oh.]

Lee argued that the US troops' continued presence in South Korea "prevents a comprehensive settlement of Korean Peninsula security issues." He found it "absurd that South Korea, with twice the population and more than ten times the economic strength of the North, could not take care of its own security problems by itself and had to keep security forces on its soil for so long".

In Oh's view North Korea considers the South a US puppet and won't negotiate seriously with Seoul until the US troops are gone. Like Lee, Oh believes that "it may not be necessary for the US to continue carrying South Korea, which has now become the twelfth largest economic power in the world".

Oh said South Korea's annual military budget of about \$17 billion "is almost the same as North Korea's entire GDP [gross domestic product]. Yet this \$17 billion is only about 3 percent of South Korea's GDP." There are estimates that the North spends 28 percent of its GDP on the military, "yet the total is less than one-third of the South's."

No doubt many South Koreans chafe at having foreign troops on their soil. However, there appears as yet little evidence that their discomfort outweighs the sense of security South Koreans get from the frontline presence of the Americans. The GIs are a "tripwire" that would automatically bring American participation in any second Korean war launched by the North, and thus act as a powerful deterrent to invasion.

A South Korean move to oust the Americans thus seems, in the short term, less likely than a decision on the American side, such as former President Jimmy Carter made in 1977 and started to enforce before he was convinced of the error of his ways. Certainly today there are vocal American critics of the present US policy. See, for example, "[If the DPRK didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent it](#)," by [Tim Savage](#) of the Nautilus Institute.

The Clinton-Gore Administration is committed to the policies laid out in a report by William Perry, former defense secretary. Those policies contemplate keeping the troops in Korea for the time being. And on the Republican side, Governor George W Bush, who seems to have his party's nomination locked up, is considered if anything more hawkish than Clinton-Gore.

Still, you never can tell when American opinion - or, for that matter, South Korean opinion - will start to shift decisively in the opposite direction. Thus we need to ask the what-if question: If the US did pull out, if the South Koreans did end up with all the responsibility for their own defense, who if anyone would be better off?

To frame the question a bit more solidly, let's suppose Washington issued an ultimatum: "OK, South Korea, you build up so you can defend yourself alone. Do it within X number of years, and we'll plan to leave at that point - that's your deadline."

It seems a reasonable assumption that South Korea could handle the economic costs of the military buildup that would ensue at that point. But the social costs might be more difficult. A big problem is that many of South Korea's youngsters are not ready to fight - at least they are not ready to fight fanatically, as their brainwashed North Korean counterparts, according to many reports, are. North Korean military men who defected to the South have remarked on the softness they find in Southern youth.

A solution that involved essentially brainwashing the Southern youngsters to make them just as ferocious as their adversaries probably would be unpalatable in the relatively open society that has evolved in the South.

South Korean policymakers would be attracted to the view that the only way to be sure of beating North Korea would be to have cutting-edge, high-tech weaponry: missiles, maybe even biochemical weapons and nukes to cancel out the weapons of mass destruction that the North is believed to have. Make it a high-tech war if war ever comes, so that victory goes to the rich and technologically advanced side. Such an approach would have many adherents, now that NATO in Kosovo has shown

the way to no-body-bags warfare.

South Korea to get to that point would have to become a major power, which in turn would have resounding implications for the regional situation. How would Japan react? China? Russia? Or North Korea itself, for that matter? Fear of a regional arms race would not be unreasonable.

How about Americans, across the Pacific? How would they be affected? Well, simply removing the troops would not exempt the US from being subjected to the threat of North Korea's increasingly long-range missiles and the weapons of mass destruction that might eventually be affixed to them.

That's because even with no troops in country the US-South Korean relationship almost surely would be like today's US-Taiwan relationship. Many American friends of South Korea would be busy pressuring Washington - with considerable success - to help the longtime client resist communist aggression. Both on that account and because the US is a convenient bogeyman for use in keeping its domestic population under control, North Korea would continue in a basically hostile attitude.

The main difference would be that US intervention in a war would no longer be 100 percent inevitable and automatic. So North Korea, as long as it had some elements of military superiority, could harbor the hope that the time might come when the US would be occupied elsewhere and thus the chances of success in a southern invasion would be greater.

Would the removal of the US troops help to reconcile North and South, as Dr Oh hopes? There have been no US troops in Taiwan all these years. Are Taiwan and the mainland reconciled or about to be?

Donald Gregg, when he was American ambassador to South Korea a few years ago, advised against such a drastic change of strategy as troop withdrawal during what, in chess, is called the "endgame." The endgame is still in progress and the ambassador's advice still seems sound.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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