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SPECIAL REPORT

# **Building Peace and Security on the Korean Peninsula**

## **Whither the US-South Korean Alliance?**



**Richard Sokolsky**  
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**STIMSON**

## About the Author

**Richard Sokolsky**, currently a nonresident senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, worked in the State Department for six different administrations. During his tenure at State he was the director of the arms control office in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs from 1990-1997 and a member of the Secretary of State's Office of Policy Planning from 2005-2015. He has also been a senior fellow at Carnegie, RAND Corporation and the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. His writings have been published in numerous outlets, including the Washington Post, the New York Times, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, Politico, The National Interest, The Atlantic, CNN, and USA Today.

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# Building Peace and Security on the Korean Peninsula: Whither the US-South Korean Alliance?

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## Introduction

Further progress toward building a permanent peace and security regime for the Korean Peninsula will require, at least in the short-run, heavy lifting from North and South Korea if the Trump administration continues to thwart progress on a declaration officially ending the Korean War and other steps to lower tensions and build trust on the peninsula.<sup>1</sup> If the two Koreas are successful in moving toward a peace treaty, or if the Trump administration decides to pull US troops out of South Korea, Washington and Seoul will need to take a hard look at adapting the US-South Korean alliance to changing geopolitical dynamics in the region. In the event that US troops leave South Korea, there are alternative security and military arrangements the two countries can and should adopt if North Korea ceases to be a military threat and enduring North-South reconciliation is achieved. These changes are feasible and affordable and would maintain stability and the balance of power in Northeast Asia. Before they are implemented, however, Washington and Seoul must first agree on the purpose of their alliance if it is no longer needed to deter aggression by a hostile North Korea. Reaching a consensus on this question will not be easy.

## A Slippery Slope?

Many US experts on national defense strategy and Northeast Asia security approach the prospect of a peace treaty on the peninsula with trepidation, fearing that it will inevitably lead to the withdrawal of all 28,500 US troops in South Korea and the end of the US-ROK alliance. According to [press reports](#), this apprehension partly explains why the Trump administration did not agree at the recent Hanoi summit to a so-called end-of-war declaration—the first step toward concluding a peace treaty.

This fear is understandable but overblown. As the current commander of US Forces in Korea has [said](#), the US military presence in South Korea is “an alliance decision that has nothing to with any potential future peace treaty.”

Even if peace breaks out on the peninsula, both Seoul and Pyongyang have strong incentives to maintain some US troops in South Korea. This is the case partly out of their shared concern over a potential struggle between China and Japan for regional hegemony, and partly because both countries would see a continued US presence as a crucial counterweight to Chinese and Russian ambitions. North Korea might also see a continued US military presence in the South as a potential check on a more conservative and hawkish South Korean government in the future. Moreover, while relations between Japan and South Korea are poor, Japan would have grave concerns if the US walked away from its alliance with the ROK. President Trump may also be deterred from making good on his threat to pull out US troops by the domestic political firestorm it would ignite in the Congress and the media and the US foreign policy establishment.

One reason for US foot-dragging on an [end-of-war declaration](#) is tactical: the Trump administration believes that the North's desire for such a declaration gives it leverage to press Pyongyang for significant and immediate steps toward denuclearization and is waiting for the optimal time to play this card for maximum advantage. The other and perhaps more important reason is strategic: many members of the US national security establishment worry that a formal end of the Korean War would deprive the United States of its longstanding rationale for the US-ROK alliance and the presence of US troops in South Korea: maintaining deterrence of North Korean aggression and a military and geopolitical counterweight to China's rising power (often cloaked in the more politic rhetoric of "preserving regional stability").

To be sure, a comprehensive peace and security regime on the peninsula is likely to generate pressure, both in the US and South Korea, to reduce the American military footprint in the South and to place more of the burden of collective defense on Seoul's shoulders. It might also be seized upon by President Trump, who is preternaturally disposed to treat all American allies as economic rivals and free riders, to liquidate another American security commitment he sees as at odds with his "America First" view of US foreign policy—a risk that is likely to grow if the Trump administration pushes Seoul, when it's current cost-sharing arrangement expires in a year, to accept a much more costly formula that is [reportedly](#) under consideration. What if North Korea ceases to pose a threat to South Korea and US forces are drawn down or removed completely from the South? What options are available to the US and ROK to maintain peace and security in the region?

## Alliances Adapt or They Die

As history has repeatedly demonstrated, alliances that fail to respond to changing geopolitical conditions or adapt too slowly are at serious risk of collapse. Some, like the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) established in the 1950s, collapse because they either outlived their utility or were unable to fulfill the purposes for which they were intended; other alliances modernize their roles and missions, membership, and internal structures and processes in an effort to maintain their value and relevance.

Over the years, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has adapted its strategic concept, force posture and plans, and internal procedures—though often with great difficulty—to its changing security environment and strategic priorities. The US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty

is far more balanced and reciprocal in its obligations today than it was 40 years ago. There are far fewer US troops stationed on NATO territory and in Japan today than there were during the height of the Cold War. The US-ROK alliance, codified in the October 1953 [Mutual Defense Treaty](#) (MDT), is one of the US' more successful alliances, but it, too, has not remained static. In addition to its core mission of deterring North Korean aggression against the South, US and South Korean forces have broadened their security cooperation to include military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Changes have been made over the years to annual US-ROK military exercises. US force levels in South Korea have gone up and down depending on the geopolitical environment, both in and outside of Northeast Asia. In 1991, the first Bush administration redeployed several thousand US combat troops from the South and removed all nuclear weapons based on ROK territory. Several thousand American soldiers were relocated from South Korea to Iraq [in 2004](#), a change in force structure that occurred less than a year after Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld stated that Seoul [no longer required](#) the US military to deter a North Korean invasion.

Operational control (OPCON) of South Korean forces has also evolved. For two decades after the Korean War, the OPCON of almost all US and ROK forces in situations of war and peace was retained by the UN Command, which was commanded by a US general. In 1978, the Combined Forces Command (CFC), which was also led by a US general, assumed both armistice and wartime OPCON of US and ROK forces. Yet as ROK military capabilities improved, OPCON of South Korean forces during the Korean War Armistice was transferred from CFC to the South Korean joint chiefs of staff in 1994. There will soon come a time when a ROK-led military command is given full OPCON, an objective former Defense Secretary James Mattis and ROK Minister of National Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo [reiterated](#) last year at their Security Consultative Committee meeting.

If the bilateral security relationship is to survive, the US and South Korea will need to engage in a difficult but necessary conversation about alliance restructuring in the context of progress toward creating a comprehensive peace and security regime on the Korean Peninsula. The US troop presence in South Korea and the mission of these forces, the transfer of wartime operational authority of South Korean troops from Washington to Seoul, and a review of alternative futures to longstanding US-ROK security and military arrangements will all need to be on the table.

## More Than One Way to Skin Security Arrangements

The US has extended implied or “virtual” security assurances to a number of countries with whom it does not have a formal security commitment—and where the American peacetime military presence is minimal. These arrangements may be applicable in a security environment on the Korean Peninsula that is evolving away from confrontation and tensions to peace and security. For example, with Israel, Taiwan and many of America’s partners in the Middle East—notably Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Jordan and Egypt—political constraints preclude the construction of permanent US military bases and a large, visible peacetime American military presence. (It should also be remembered that the US came to the defense of Kuwait in the first Gulf War even though it had no mutual defense treaty with that country.)

The military and security relationships with these countries are cemented, in varying degrees, by many forms of cooperation including: regular and in many cases large-scale combined exercises; the sale and logistics support of sophisticated weapons and equipment; the transfer of advanced military technologies and cooperation on military research, development and production; pre-positioning of US military equipment; rotational US combat aircraft and naval deployments and port calls; agreement on contingency US military access in a crisis or emergency; contingency planning, intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism cooperation; and regular, high-level military-to-military dialogue. In some countries where there is no formal US security commitment, bilateral strategic cooperation is carried out within the diplomatic and legal framework of strategic partnerships, Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreements (DECA), and Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA) that signal a strong American commitment to joint defense.

The US-ROK MDT commits the two nations to provide mutual aid if either faces external armed attack and allows the United States to station military forces in South Korea in consultation with the South Korean government. There is no reason to assume that a future government in Seoul, regardless of its political or ideological persuasion, would not want to preserve the MDT in some form—if only as a hedge against geopolitical risks and uncertainty. The MDT is a flexible instrument that is compatible with varying levels of US troop deployments on South Korean soil as well as alternative US-ROK military and security cooperation arrangements. Options would include a mix of the following approaches, none of which are mutually exclusive.

### *Places, Not Bases*

Within the United States Indo-Pacific Command (PACOM), US forces operate out of permanent bases in South Korea, Japan and Guam. But in other countries, for example Australia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, a basing strategy of “[Places, not Bases](#),” enables US forces to use existing facilities owned by allied and partner nations, creating a networked infrastructure from which these forces could operate in a crisis or conflict. All these facilities are configured to meet US wartime requirements for fuel, munitions storage and runway suitability. In the event a comprehensive peace and security regime on the Korean Peninsula leads the ROK to request a lower US military profile, or if the Trump administration decides to withdraw American troops from South Korea, the “places, not bases” model provides a viable option for accommodating these circumstances.

### *More Offshore Balancing-Lite*

The US defense of South Korea relies heavily on the rapid reinforcement of the small tripwire force it maintains in peacetime with massive air, naval and ground forces from outside the peninsula. In other words, the US already practices a heavy form of offshore balancing on the Korean Peninsula. Commensurate with the decline in the North Korean military threat, the US presence in South Korea could shift even further away from highly ready, forward deployed, ground forces to a more “over the horizon” presence that would deploy more air and naval forces, which are currently committed to the defense of the ROK, in Japan and Guam, where they would be available for conducting exercises with South Korean forces or responding rapidly in a contingency. Such a strategy would put greater emphasis on South Korean forces to provide more of the initial forward defense of its territory against North Korean aggression while the US would husband more of its military strength off-shore to intervene militarily if North Korea

reversed course and once again became a threat to South Korea. Lightening the permanent US military footprint in South Korea will also be easier in the future as a result of the Pentagon's new concept of "[dynamic force employment](#)," which allows the US military to move its forces around the world more quickly and unpredictably.

### *Rebalancing Military Missions*

If North Korea ceases to be a threat to South Korea, any US ground and air forces remaining in Korea, along with ROK forces, could shift their focus from static territorial defense toward more regionally-oriented missions such as stabilization, peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations—a posture that would underscore the importance the US attaches to its alliance with South Korea. The operational requirements of these missions would be vastly different from the “fight tonight” mantra US and ROK units have followed since the 1953 armistice was signed. As the US has done with NATO allies, peacetime combined training and operational planning with South Korean forces, as well as the composition of US forces on the peninsula, would support more expeditionary operations. This change would enable South Korea to make a greater contribution to missions carried out by the UN, ad hoc coalitions of willing countries, or members of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Simply put, the US force presence in South Korea should be tied to the evolving operational and geopolitical environment. If and when peace, economic integration and diplomatic normalization between the two Koreas is fully established, there will be a diminishing need to maintain 28,500 US troops at high levels of readiness and the current footprint of the American military's posture in the South. The 800-pound gorilla in the room, however, is China. What role, if any, should a US presence in South Korea play in deterring the geopolitical and military challenges posed by a rising China?

## **Crystal Ball Gazing: The Future of the US-ROK Alliance**

Peace on the Korean Peninsula would raise some first-order questions that Washington and Seoul need to start thinking about: what would be the purpose of the US-South Korean alliance if North Korea ceased being an enemy of South Korea and the United States? What interests would the two countries want the alliance to serve? Where would those interests align and where would they conflict—for example, would Seoul sign up to participate in a US-led campaign to contain China? What would the two countries want to achieve and how—if at all—would China stand in the way of achieving those objectives?

Unless the US and South Korea, individually and together, reach a consensus on the answers to these questions, discussions about the future US security role on the peninsula will quickly devolve into tactical debates about force structure, operations, burden sharing, command structure arrangements, force relocation and the like—untethered from the question of what the two countries want the alliance for. If the US and South Korea don't know where they want the alliance to go in a post-peace treaty environment, any road will take them there.

From a parochial US perspective on grand strategy, there are legitimate questions about how the alliance—and whatever force structure ultimately emerges on the peninsula—fits into the

Trump administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, both of which emphasize the emerging strategic competition for influence between the US and China (and Russia). Without a compelling rationale for the MDT in a post-peace treaty environment that serves US strategic interests, the value of the US-South Korea alliance will come under more intense scrutiny by those in the US national security establishment who would like to rebalance more of America's force posture in the Indo-Pacific region toward southeast Asia or regain greater operational flexibility globally by reallocating forces dedicated to the defense of South Korea to other US regional or global defense needs. This will be a hard conversation for the US and South Korea to have, but the sooner they hash out the purpose of the alliance, the sooner they can begin the difficult process of adapting it to changing geopolitical circumstances.

Three strategic perspectives have been put forward about the future direction of the US security relationship with South Korea and America's broader security responsibilities in a transformed regional security environment. One view [maintains](#) that the threat of Chinese hegemony over the Korean Peninsula has been vastly overblown and the US does not need to contain China's influence in the region or maintain its alliance with or troops in the ROK if the North Korean threat has ceased. A second perspective [argues](#) that the US should form a new strategic partnership with South and North Korea to protect their sovereignty and independence against a self-aggrandizing China and to balance against China's rising power in the region. A third vision would [preserve but reorient](#) the US-South Korean alliance for regional missions (e.g., peacekeeping, stabilization, and HADR) that would require adjustments in the US force posture in South Korea that China should not find threatening. These alternatives need to be thoroughly debated between the two countries. These discussions, hopefully, would produce a consensus on a strategy and policies that would guide decisions on force postures and resource allocation. Where there is common purpose and shared interests, there should be common action; where they diverge, Washington and Seoul will need to manage those differences to avoid endangering their broader relationship.

## Conclusion

The US-ROK alliance and a US military presence in South Korea are likely to survive in some form if there is a formal end to the Korean War. But if the alliance is to maintain its value and relevance into the future, the mission, structures and operational concepts of the US-ROK defense relationship cannot stand pat. Change should not cause consternation. In the context of the MDT remaining in place, agreements on confidence building measures and conventional force reductions, normalization of North-South and US-DPRK relations, and construction of a peace and security regime for the peninsula, the configuration of the American force posture in the ROK could be changed without undermining deterrence and stability and the balance of power in Northeast Asia.

It would be prudent, however, for this transition to proceed at a deliberate pace—and only after the US and South Korea gain a high level of confidence that the transformation of the security environment on the peninsula has become permanent. Until those conditions are met, the ROK should avoid taking premature, irreversible measures, especially those affecting the future of US ground forces in South Korea; for its part, the US should continue to tangibly demonstrate its capacity to deter North Korea and to reassure South Korea of the credibility of the US security



commitment. Finally, the South Korean government will need to conduct an aggressive public diplomacy campaign to persuade public opinion that a continued troop presence on South Korean territory, though not necessarily at current levels and with the same missions, remains critical to national security even as the two Koreas turn the page on 70 years of hostility and mistrust.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This report is adapted from a previous article by the author and Daniel R. DePetris published on *38 North* on November 15, 2018, entitled, “[Imagining a New US-South Korean Security Architecture](#).”