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Korea and American National Security

STEVEN A. RAHO III

Throughout the 20th century, US policy with respect to Korea has lacked continuity and consistency. Prior to 1945, the United States was largely indifferent, acquiescing in the Japanese colonization of the peninsula. In 1945 we landed troops on Inchon, but by 1949 had determined Korea was a liability and withdrew our forces. In 1950 the US Secretary of State declared that Korea was outside the American defense perimeter in the Pacific—yet five months later we entered the Korean War and spilled the blood of thousands of soldiers on Korean soil. In 1954 we concluded the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty to demonstrate our commitment to the Asian region, but in 1969 the Nixon Doctrine seemed to pull the rug out from under our 1954 treaty obligation. By 1976, under President Carter, we seriously flirted with the notion of pulling all of our ground forces out of Korea; but by 1981 we reversed our strategy and actually increased our military force structure. Now in 1989 the United States is once again considering a withdrawal of military forces from the peninsula as a means to assist in balancing the federal budget.¹

Asia—A Regional Perspective

By the first decade of the next century much of the political, economic, and military power in the world will be centered in Northeast Asia. According to a report issued by the President's Commission on Integrated Long-Range Strategy, whose members include Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Fred Iklé, and General John Vessey (USA Ret.), most of the world's leading powers will eventually be Pacific powers. The commission's report predicts that by 2010 China may have the second largest gross national product in the world, followed by Japan and the Soviet Union. The GNPs of middle powers like Korea will also grow substantially relative to those of the countries of Western Europe.²

Owen Harries, in his article "The Coming Dominance of the Pacific," cites a century-old quotation by Secretary of State John Hay: "The Mediterranean is the ocean of the past, the Atlantic is the ocean of the present, and the Pacific is the ocean of the future."³ Harries laments that even though the Asian-Pacific region is one of the most dynamic economic regions in the world, it gets little serious attention from America's strategic planners—mostly owing to the penchant for strategists and generals to prepare to fight the last war.⁴

The economic growth of the Pacific region over the past several years has indeed been phenomenal. Since 1980 the region has surpassed Europe as America's largest trading partner, and the margin of difference grows each year. Trade with Japan alone exceeds trade with the United Kingdom, Germany, and France combined. China's GNP has doubled in the last ten years, and Japanese foreign aid now exceeds US foreign aid.⁵

The flow of natural resources throughout the Pacific is critical to the economies of industrialized nations. Asian nations provide most of the free world's supply of strategic resources—such as rubber, chromium, tin, titanium, and platinum. Japan and South Korea receive over 50 percent of their oil from the Middle East via the region's vital sea lines of communications. Over 50 percent of the world's key maritime choke points are located in the Pacific Basin. Because of the multinational and interrelated nature of world economics, trade disruptions in the Pacific would be felt worldwide.⁶

Soviet Secretary General Mikhail Gorbachev, recognizing the economic, political, and military potential of Asia, has significantly increased Soviet diplomatic efforts in the region. In a historic speech at Vladivostok on 28 July 1986, Gorbachev made it clear that he has a sweeping and thoughtful agenda for the Soviets in Asia and the Pacific.⁷ Secretary Gorbachev's strategy is to increase Soviet power and influence in the region while simultaneously undercutting that of the United States. His initiatives are unquestionably driven by economic necessity—a floundering domestic economy. Mr. Gorbachev realizes that he needs technical assistance from Asian countries, such as Japan and South Korea, in order to extract the vital raw materials (gold, coal, iron, nickel, copper, and gas) from resource-rich, permafrost-bound Siberia.

Although Soviet rhetoric now takes on a conciliatory tone, the USSR still maintains a significant military capability west of the Urals. In fact, throughout the last decade the Soviet military buildup in the region has been

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substantial. Currently, more than a quarter of the Soviet ground force (1.1 million men in 50 well-equipped divisions) is stationed along the border with China, and a 16,000-man army division is stationed in the islands north of Japan. The 860-ship Pacific fleet is now the largest of the Soviets' four fleets, and it includes an impressive array of surface ships with supporting aircraft. The submarine component has also increased substantially, now floating approximately 129 general-purpose, attack, and nuclear-powered ballistic missile undersea vessels.⁸

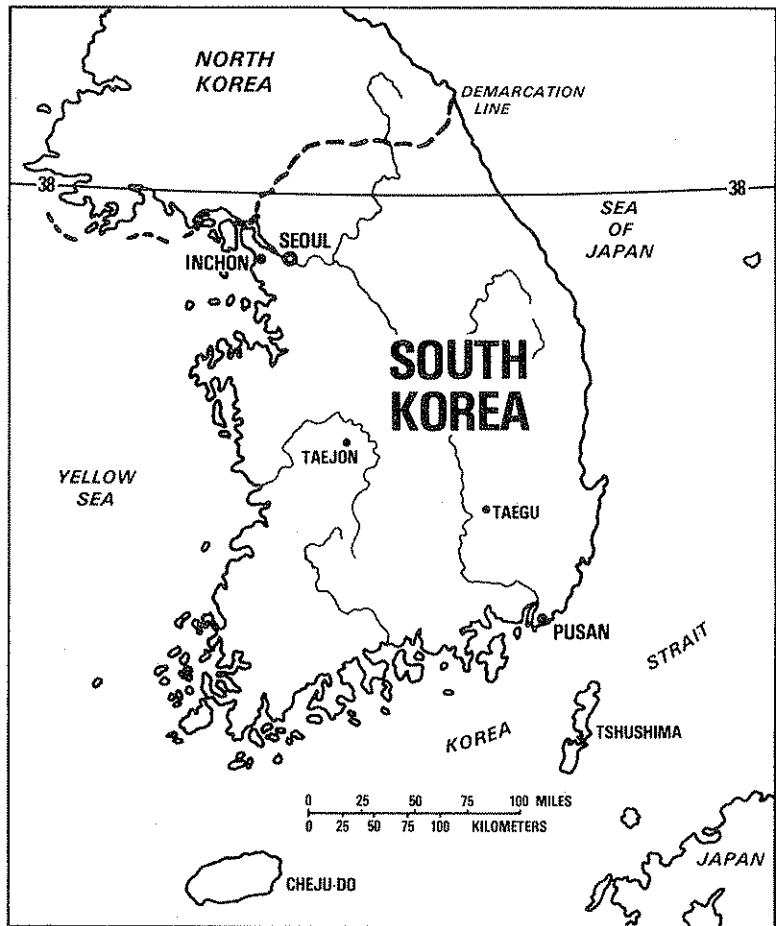
Why Is Korea Important?

Korea is geostrategically and geopolitically unique. It is the only nation in the world where the interests of four major powers intersect—the United States, Soviet Union, China, and Japan. Because of the continued tension between the economically vibrant South and the militant, unpredictable North, Korea may well be the security flash point for Asia. Stability on the peninsula is important because renewed fighting could easily draw in all the major powers. In his book dealing with Asian perspectives on international security, Australian scholar T. B. Miller assesses the pivotal role of the Korean peninsula in global politics:

Northeast Asia is an area of dangers to world peace because it provides the nexus between four great powers with competing ambitions: the Soviet Union, determined to develop the resources of Siberia and to have unimpeded access to the Pacific for mercantile shipping and the projection of naval power; China, determined to be influential over its continental sphere; Japan, a maritime power, lying across the Soviet exits and dependent upon the US for protection against Soviet hegemony; and the United States, dependent upon Japan for its Western Pacific strategic presence. The Korean peninsula lies at the nexus, manifesting by its division the competing ambitions, pulled and pressed within and without, a self-propelled pawn in a complex power game.⁹

At its southern end the Korean peninsula is separated from Japan by the Korean/Tsushima Strait, only 120 miles wide. This narrow sea lane is considered by the United States to be one of 16 vital maritime choke points for controlling Soviet naval operations.¹⁰

As a result of USSR antipathy toward the close ties between the United States and South Korea, Soviet military writers have accused South Korea of serving as "Washington's bridgehead in the Far East." According to the *Soviet Military Review*, US imperialism has steered a course for world domination, and the Seoul regime has served as its accomplice to establish a nuclear missile presence for the United States in Asia. The article notes that in contrast to the Soviets' desire to turn the peninsula into a nuclear-free zone and democratically unify the two Koreas, Washington has artificially whipped



Map by Jim Kistler, USAWC

up tensions which pose “a serious threat to peace in the Far East and throughout the Asia-Pacific region.”¹¹

It is easy to understand why the Soviet Union attempts to foster disunity between the United States and South Korea. In addition to the Republic’s strategic importance, South Korea is an economic miracle arisen phoenix-like from the ashes of war. The emerging importance of the Republic as a newly industrialized country is evidenced by the fact that Korea is now the United States’ second largest trading partner in Asia (behind Japan), although trade relations remain tense due to the US \$9 billion trade deficit. Korean merchandise exports to the United States were \$34.7 billion in 1986, \$44 billion in 1987, approximately \$55 billion in 1988, and are expected to rise to \$77 billion by 1990. The Republic’s GNP continues to rise at a stunning pace—real growth reached 11.1 percent in 1987 and was expected to exceed 12 percent for the year after.¹²

South Korea’s entrance onto the world stage was further solidified on 17 September 1988, when it became only the second Asian country ever

to host the Olympic Games. These turned out to be the largest Olympics in history in term of numbers of participating countries and athletes. However, to the dismay of many Americans, most young Koreans attending the Olympic games openly and enthusiastically supported Soviet athletes rather than Americans. According to Sung-Chull Junn, such attitudes toward the United States should be of more than academic interest to Americans. He goes on to say:

Korea seems destined to become one of the world's most powerful economies by the end of the century. That economy will be run tomorrow by those same students who are burning the American flag today. For that reason alone, anti-American sentiment should be viewed by the Bush Administration as a potentially serious foreign-policy challenge.¹³

Clearly, the United States has been an important ally for South Korea, and the maintenance of a strong US military presence on the peninsula has served as a deterrent to aggression from the North. However, as the United States ponders its future defense commitments, three major military issues should be addressed:

- The continued forward deployment of US ground forces in Korea.
- The alleged basing of tactical nuclear weapons on Korean soil.
- The military command relationship which places a US general officer in operational control of Korean armed forces.

Forward Deployed Forces

The Joint Chiefs of Staff *Statement on the Military Posture of the United States (FY 1989)* notes that a key factor in the success of US alliances has been deterrence through the forward deployment of military forces:

These forces demonstrate the US commitment to the common defense and serve notice that an attack will be met immediately by US opposition. In peacetime, the American presence among allies reduces the coercive potential of Soviet and Soviet surrogate military threats and facilitates early reinforcement in crises. If deterrence fails, sufficient forward-deployed forces can facilitate an effective combined defense.¹⁴

Although the forward deployment of US military forces has maintained stability in Korea for over 35 years, there are mounting pressures to reduce our commitment of forces as part of an effort to reduce the federal budget deficit. Many of the arguments favoring withdrawal of forces are similar to those heard during the debates over the Carter withdrawal proposals in 1977.¹⁵

Edward A. Olsen, writing in the *Naval War College Review*, states that it is time the Carter troop withdrawal proposals be taken off the shelf. Mr. Olsen feels a sizable portion of ground forces could be removed if the

United States took more aggressive measures to strengthen the conventional military capability of South Korean military forces while simultaneously pressing Japan to accept a greater share of the defense burden for East-Asian sea lanes, specifically as part of a trilateral US-Japan-South Korea defense agreement.¹⁶

Richard L. Armitage, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, takes an opposite view. Believing that Korea is the most dangerous flash point in Asia, he contends the benefits of the status quo on the Korean peninsula are underappreciated by many in the United States. As Armitage points out, the elimination of US forces from South Korea would save the American taxpayer nothing if our withdrawal resulted in a North Korean attack thus once again embroiling the United States in a war on the Korean peninsula. Here he sums up:

Talk of removing US forces from Korea may play to xenophobic and isolationist public sentiments here at home; but they are seriously misguided. They fail to account for the underlying facts or consequences of such actions.¹⁷

In a similar view, former Deputy Secretary of Defense William H. Taft IV warns that in spite of the more conciliatory tone of the Soviets, Asia is still at risk. He cautions that the United States must be careful not to embolden the Soviets by indicating that America is growing tired of its forward defense strategy. Because security is the cornerstone upon which Asian development rests, a withdrawal of forces could send the wrong signal (to all of Asia) and suggest that we are withdrawing from our collective security responsibilities.¹⁸

However, the greatest risk to withdrawing US forces from Korea ensues from the continued militarization of North Korea. While South Korea's military forces number approximately 630,000 personnel, unofficial estimates now put North Korea's military strength at over one million troops on active duty. Pyongyang's armed forces are now nearly twice as large as those of France and West Germany, and three times as large as Britain's, yet each of these countries is nearly three times as populous as North Korea.¹⁹ Moscow continues to supply the North with a wide variety of sophisticated weaponry, such as the MiG-23 jet fighter, Scud-B surface-to-surface missile, the sophisticated AA-7 Apex air-to-air missile, and the lethal SA-5 surface-to-air missile.²⁰

Both the United States and South Korea have stated that US troops will remain on the peninsula until South Korea is in a position to defend herself completely. Although estimates vary about when this will occur, most generally agree on a time frame between the mid-1990s and the year 2000. According to a collaborative analysis prepared by the Korean Institute for Defense Analysis and the Rand Corporation, South Korea's economic and technological advantages over the North will grow rapidly.

The question posed at the outset—"on whose side is time?"—can be answered directly: South Korea's economic, technological, and military capabilities can be expected to grow substantially relative to those of North Korea during the next decade. The resulting balance should increasingly and predominantly favor the South.²¹

There is no doubt, then, that at some point South Korea will be fully capable of beating back a North Korean attack. Even so, the pressing question that will remain is, "How important are US forces as a *deterrent* to an attack from the North?" It must not be forgotten that the South Korean capital city, Seoul, is only 25 miles from the demilitarized zone separating the two countries. Therefore, even a short thrust across the DMZ would put North Korean forces within artillery range of Seoul, which is already well within the range of the North's missiles. Since approximately one-fourth of the South's population and the preponderance of its financial/business institutions are in Seoul, an attack on the capital would be devastating in terms of physical destruction, casualties, and long-term economic impact.

It is important for strategists to be visionary when attempting to determine how long the United States should maintain ground forces in Korea: they must remember how quickly the world situation can change. In trying to determine the proper role for US forces 10, 20, or 30 years from today, it is important to remember history—only 15 years ago China was our devout enemy and Iran one of our closest friends! If the Soviet Union in fact achieves the economic volte-face it so desperately seeks, will it once again become belligerent and aggressive toward its Asian neighbors? Will another country in the region follow in the footsteps of Iran and turn fanatically anti-American? Will increased competition for scarce resources (oil, land, food, strategic minerals, etc.) cause border disputes that could seriously undermine regional stability? How confident would our Asian allies be of American support if no US Army forces were stationed in Asia?

It thus makes little sense to rush headlong toward reducing Army forces in Asia—our Army is already too small in force structure to carry out the wide range of strategic missions it has been assigned. A better alternative would be to restructure our Asian force in a manner allowing it to respond quickly to a wide variety of contingencies, from low-intensity conflict to conventional war. The risks inherent in premature withdrawal of forces far outweigh the costs of continued forward deployment. If we err, it surely should be on the side of continued stability.

It is important that in the future a US ground force in Asia be viewed mainly in the context of its larger deterrent and strategic role. As we move toward the "Century of the Pacific," it is critical that the United States maintain the confidence of our Asian allies; such confidence can be maintained only through an irreversible commitment to keeping a US military ground force in

this vital region of the world. As always, the most salient symbol of US resolve remains the presence of an American soldier on the ground.

Nuclear Weapons in Korea

The official position of the US government is that it will neither confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear weapons on foreign soil. However, according to Mr. Joo-Hung Nam, the presence of US nuclear weapons in Korea has been an open secret for some time. Mr. Nam contends that as early as 1975 the United States had an estimated 675 tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea.²² Recently, the alleged basing of US tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea has become a touchy issue—one that could serve of a sudden to fuel the fires of anti-Americanism. It is an irritant to Korean students and to an increasing number of Korean citizens.²³

Those arguing for positioning nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula point to the weapons' success as a deterrent to communist aggression. It is often noted that President Eisenhower's threat to use nuclear weapons near the end of the Korean War had a strong influence on the Chinese and served to break the deadlock in armistice negotiations. Once the Eisenhower Administration stated its resolve to use nuclear weapons if needed, the Chinese made concessions and concluded an armistice agreement.²⁴ The threat of US nuclear weapons is also credited with discouraging North Korea from launching an attack against the South during the last 30 years—a period when it was generally conceded they had a significant conventional force superiority over South Korea.²⁵

However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to articulate a scenario in which the United States would risk crossing the nuclear threshold in Asia, and the deterrent value of nuclear weapons has accordingly plummeted. Additionally, as the combined forces of the United States and South Korea achieve an overall balance with the North, it will become increasingly difficult to justify basing nuclear weapons in Korea even to our most ardent supporters in the ROK military (let alone to a sometimes uninformed and emotional student mob). Advocates for withdrawing such weapons based on the peninsula argue that if the situation requires their use as a deterrent, they can be deployed offshore.

If US tactical nuclear weapons are deployed in South Korea, their withdrawal makes sense. By promoting their removal as a good-will gesture and as a symbol of US desire to promulgate peace and tranquillity in Asia, the United

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States enhances its image in the eyes of the entire Asian region and serves to counter the numerous "peace initiatives" of General Secretary Gorbachev.

ROK/US Combined Forces Command

An emotional issue with many Koreans is the continued military command relationship whereby a US general officer, serving as CINC, Combined Forces Command (CINCCFC), has operational control over virtually all of the Republic of Korea's combat forces. Although some Koreans still argue in favor of the current system, an increasing number cite this command arrangement as a sore point in US-ROK relations.²⁶ Korean students consider such American dominance over Korean affairs an affront to Korean nationalism.²⁷

The Combined Forces Command, established in 1978, has an extremely complex command and control arrangement. Command relationships are established through a combination of strategic guidance, coordination authority, operational control, and command less operational control lines of authority. The CINCCFC also serves as the Commander, United Nations Command, an awkward arrangement in which he must respond both to the US Joint Chiefs of Staff and to the ROK Minister of National Defense.²⁸ Although during peacetime the CINCCFC has operational control over major ROK combat units, he has no peacetime operational control over US forces—with the exception of a few air-defense assets.

Intertwined with this complex organization is the Combined Field Army—another combined ROK/US command. The Combined Field Army is commanded by a US lieutenant general. It operates with a combined staff and has two ROK corps under its control in both peace and war. As with the Combined Forces Command, no US Army element is directly under the control of the Combined Field Army during peacetime. Once again, command arrangements require a US general officer to exercise control over South Korean military units—a relationship many Koreans feel is blatantly unfair. Consequently, anti-US sentiments have spread widely. In a poll conducted among Korean high school students at the end of 1988, the students listed the United States as the country they dislike second only to Japan, the traditional aggressor against Korea.²⁹

A short-term alternative that should be implemented is the establishment of a ground component command for the Combined Forces Command. This ground component would be commanded by a ROK army general officer, thus removing ROK army forces from under the direct command of a US general (CINCCFC). Placing ROK army ground forces under command of a national commander would give South Korea greater direct control over its own forces and help diffuse anti-American sentiment. Some argue that this alternative does not go far enough, since the overall commander would still be American (i.e. CINCCFC), but it is a progressive and logical first step.

Simultaneous with the establishment of a ground component command under a ROK commander, the Combined Field Army should be disestablished. The current US Army lieutenant general commanding the Combined Field Army would become the ground component deputy commander, and key US officers assigned to CFA would be reassigned to the ground component command to form a combined staff. This would alleviate the current situation wherein the Combined Forces Command staff finds itself immersed in a large number of issues that are specific to the ground component. Further, it would allow the Combined Forces Command staff to better concentrate on the integrative nature of their combined role. The ground component command staff would thereby be in a posture allowing it to concentrate its efforts toward fighting the land battle throughout the peninsula.

The long-term solution for the Korean command dilemma requires a truly visionary perspective, with a much broader regional focus. US strategists need to look down the road ten to 30 years to determine the most effective long-range options for our forces in the Pacific. For example, as a minimum the US Army should redesign its headquarters elements in the Pacific into a more efficient organizational structure, perhaps by combining Eighth United States Army in Korea, United States Army Japan, and Western Command into a single major command. In order to further streamline and simplify command and control arrangements within the theater, United States Forces Korea and United States Forces Japan could be combined into a single sub-unified command. This new command could be structured to serve under the US unified Pacific Command and be forward-deployed in Japan. The elimination of superfluous headquarters elements would allow for a reduction of both military and civilian personnel spaces and thus make Congress happy. In addition, it would allow the Eighth Army Headquarters to vacate Yongsan garrison in Seoul, thereby making Korea happy, providing the US Pacific Command a single point of contact for Army forces in the Pacific, and insuring that a US Army headquarters remains in the Pacific to coordinate joint/combined operations when the Combined Forces Command in Korea is eventually disestablished.

Concurrently, the US Army should restructure the Second Infantry Division in Korea into a more mobile and self-sustaining force; thus, in addition to serving as a strategic reserve for Korea, it could respond to a variety of contingencies in the entire area. Although the Pacific will continue to be predominately an air/sea theater, it will be important to maintain a credible US Army ground force in Asia as a symbol of American commitment to the Asian-Pacific region.

Looking to the Future

There is no question that Asia is the fastest growing and most dynamic area of the world. The enormous economic, political, and military

potential of Asia justifies an enlightened, visionary, and consistent long-term US strategy which insures that our adversaries have no doubts about American resolve to defend our interests in the Asian-Pacific theater. As noted by a Future Security Working Group paper submitted to the President's Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy,

In the next two decades the security environment facing the United States will change as a result of broad economic, demographic, and military trends that are already taking shape [and] it is doubtful that US strategic thinking has absorbed them The year 2010 will see a new global-military environment emerge—an environment that defense planners must understand today if they hope to shape it in years to come.³⁰

The current problems facing the United States in Korea are to a great extent the result of rising South Korean nationalism and self-confidence. Further, they are typical of the types of issues America will be faced with throughout Asia as newly industrialized countries emerge to take their place on the world stage. Actions the US needs to take are:

- Establish consistent long-range policy goals for Korea and the Asia-Pacific theater.

- Resist pressure to withdraw American forces from Korea. Maintain a forward-deployed ground force in Korea as a symbol of US commitment to the region.

- In consultation with our allies, restructure the Second Infantry Division into a more mobile and self-sustaining force which could respond to a variety of regional contingencies.

- As a symbol of US desire for peace and tranquillity in Asia, insure that no US tactical nuclear weapons are deployed on the Korean peninsula.

- Disestablish the Combined Field Army and use its assets to establish a ground component command under the Combined Forces Command. The ground component should be commanded by a Korean general officer.

- Combine the headquarters elements of Eighth Army, US Army Japan, and Western Command into a single Army major area command for the Pacific theater.

- Establish a sub-unified command for the Asian-Pacific region.

The 21st century will be characterized by change—change in a shift toward a multipolar world, change in alliances, change in the current economic, political, and military environment. Asian countries will be on the forward edge of such change.

Current US strategy which emphasizes coalition warfare and deterrence through forward-deployed forces is sound. However, the United States cannot afford to be viewed as a lumbering giant frozen in the policies of the past. We need to take appropriate initiatives to relieve tensions in Korea while simultaneously maintaining our posture and influence in Asia. The United

States cannot withdraw all US Army ground forces from Asia and expect to maintain significant influence in the area. US policy must be sufficiently adaptable to accommodate the dynamism of the region while signaling a strong commitment to the ideals of freedom and self-determination—ideals upon which our own nation was founded.

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