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The Relevance of the South Korea-US Alliance

Given South Korea's economic transformation, how important is the presence of U.S. troops today?

By John Power
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More than 60 years old, the South Korea-U.S. military alliance has weathered monumental change on the divided Korean Peninsula. Since the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty at the close of the Korean War in 1953, South Korea has transformed from a poor authoritarian state to a prosperous democracy. The once poorer sibling's economy now dwarfs that of neighboring North Korea, its primary security concern. Further afar, the Cold War has been consigned to history. Meanwhile, China has entered the [international consciousness](#) as a burgeoning superpower.

Yet, fundamentally, the alliance remains little changed. South Korea's defense continues to be the responsibility of the U.S., which retains wartime control over the local military and stations close to 30,000 troops on Korean soil. A plan to transfer wartime control to South Korea, first agreed upon in 2006, has been delayed repeatedly, most recently to 2015 – a date that itself looks in doubt due to trepidation from the conservative government in Seoul.

Despite the now vast development gap between the Koreas, both Washington and Seoul insist their partnership remains essential. Marking its 60th anniversary last May, a joint statement described the relationship as an “anchor for stability, security, and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, in the Asia-Pacific region, and increasingly around the world.”

Kwon Kih-yeon, foreign communications officer at South Korea's Ministry of National Defense, told *The Diplomat* of the continuing importance of the alliance. “Going beyond the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula, the two countries, through the alliance, are currently fostering the advance of a comprehensive 21st century strategy that is to the benefit of the Asia-Pacific region and international law.”

Bolstering the case for the status quo have been pessimistic assessments by defense officials and analysts of how the South would fare in a one-on-one conflict with the North. Speaking at a parliamentary audit last November, Cho Bo-geun, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, claimed that Seoul would likely lose such a war.

A study in 2011 by the Korea Economic Research Institute raised questions even about the security of South Korea *with* U.S. support, claiming that “it would not be entirely wrong to say North Korea’s military strength is stronger,” while adding that the U.S. and South would ultimately prevail.

Yang Uk, *a research fellow at private think tank Korea Security and Defense Forum*, said that while possessing a strong conventional military, South Korea continues to lack the kind of intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities provided by the U.S.

“If the Korean armed forces is a boxer, we have a strong punch but we don’t have any good eyes, or good movement, like the U.S. What we need is we have to train that much harder,” Yang, who describes the alliance as “crucial,” said.

“...The crucial problem of the Korean armed forces today is their intelligence, surveillance and targeting.”

But even with vastly improved intelligence and surveillance, Seoul would still lack the North’s ace in the hole: nuclear arms. Part of the U.S. nuclear umbrella and a signatory to several non-proliferation agreements, South Korea is [prohibited from developing its own nuclear deterrent](#).

“Regarding the rationale for U.S. defense capabilities augmentation to South Korea, I would answer that North’s nuclear threat is the primary reason why both Washington and Seoul have no disagreement on maintaining the robust alliance,” said Nam Chang-hee, an expert in Northeast Asia relations at Inha University in Incheon, about 30 kilometers west of Seoul. “Should the U.S. leave Korea, Seoul has no other choice but going nuclear, which, however, harms its own long-term security interest by further unleashing proliferation in the region.”

For segments of Korea’s political left, however, the calculation isn’t how necessary the alliance is, but how harmful. Rather than a force for peace and stability, they see a source of tensions and, ultimately, an obstacle to the eventual reunification of the country.

“The current Korea and U.S. alliance only reinforces the partition and confrontation structure between the two Koreas, and hinders the establishment of a peace structure,” said Oh Mi-jung, secretary general for Solidarity for Peace and Reunification of Korea, a local civic group.

Oh considers the alliance itself to be a violation of the 1953 armistice agreement between the two Koreas, noting, for instance, that the U.S. disregarded a provision prohibiting the deployment of new weaponry on the peninsula, just a few years after its signing. The defense pact, argues Oh, is incompatible with a peace treaty.

“Solidarity for Peace and Reunification of Korea takes the view that the long-held hostile relationship between the U.S. and North Korea has to be eased for the establishment of permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula. Aiming for this, we insist on the official end of the Korean War and the signing of a peace treaty of mutual nonaggression.”

In the U.S., other analysts question the alliance, too, albeit from a very different perspective – that of the non-interventionist right. Their primary concerns are cost and whether the partnership actually serves U.S. interests.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Washington D.C.-based based Cato Institute, is one such observer who objects to the United States' military subsidization of South Korea. He believes Seoul is capable of defending itself.

“I think it would have to make some adjustments in its current force structure and spending, but there's no reason to believe that South Korea, with a much larger economy and population, is not capable of dealing with North Korea,” said Bandow. “The North is quite decrepit, in terms of its economy and infrastructure, as well as in terms of its reserve capacity.”

Bandow accepts that there was a legitimate argument for defending South Korea after the Korean War at a time of communist expansion, but sees no convincing rationale today. Instead, he sees the alliance as symptomatic of a world in which “everyone wants America to defend it.”

The perception that the U.S. is unfairly burdened with being the world's watchman could have profound implications for the future of the alliance, especially if such weariness were to reach critical mass among the American public. U.S. government budget constraints, too, raise questions about the sustainability of the U.S. commitment to South Korea, despite a massive plan currently under way to modernize its installations in the country.

Bandow pointed to these two factors as spelling uncertainty for the future of U.S. involvement in the South's national defense.

“To the extent that Americans realize that they have to make some choices — and those choices include, ‘How much do you spend on the military versus social security, Medicare, Medicaid?’ — my guess is that the American population is more likely to say ‘let our wealthy allies do more, we should do less.’ And that will certainly apply to South Korea.”

He added that, in the face of diminishing resources, the Obama administration's much-vaunted “[Asia pivot](#)” may ultimately mean nothing more than the region being less affected by an inevitable reduction in military presence worldwide.

But neither South Korea nor the U.S. has given any indication of countenancing a future where Korea goes it alone. Just last October, U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel insisted that looming defense cuts would not lead to a reduction in the U.S. troop presence here.

Asked if the government could envisage a time when South Korea would not lean on U.S. military support, the Defense Ministry's Kwon said that the current alliance would not only be maintained in the future, but “elevated.”

“Even the U.S. — which possesses the world's strongest military — cooperates with European countries, Britain, Japan, Australia, and us (South Korea) to receive protection from influences

that threaten national security,” said Kwon. “In this sort of context, as an alliance, South Korea will continuously have mutual cooperation with the U.S. in the future, too.”

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