



## Why U.S. troops must stay in South Korea

*A recent call for an end to the American presence in South Korea misses the point*

Yu Bin Kim

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In terms of national power and global status, the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) has completely outpaced the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea).

The current gap between the two Koreas is quite stark; with South Korea's economy being about 40 times bigger than that of North Korea. At the same time, the ROK has twice the population of the DPRK. Both China and Russia – Pyongyang's traditional supporters, in ot allies – enjoy for better economic relations with the South than with the North, and thus they will not come to the latter's defense if another war breaks out on the Korean Peninsula.

Given this massive disparity, South Koreans are well-positioned to defend themselves against the North Korean theat. Unfortunately, Seoul continues to free ride from the U.S. for its own security. Washington, nevertheless, must end its security commitment to the ROK and pull U.S. troops out for what is known as “host national support,” but it covers only party of the expense of keeping American troops on Korean soil; in fact, raising military units at home often costs more than stationing them abroad.

Secondly, the Korean Peninsula has become geopolitically irrelevant, particularly in the absence of not only the Soviet Union, but also the Cold War. The U.S. should not be entangled militarily in a region in which there are three not-so-friendly nuclear powers. Lastly, the withdrawal of U.S. troop swill invigorate the nuclear negotiation process with Pyongyang. For North Koreans, giving up their nuclear weapons will become an option to consider only when they genuinely believe that Washington no longer poses an existential threat. Even if the North decides not to forgo its nuclear arsenal, it will be force dot look for another “Target” to bully without the U.S. threat.

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Lastly, the withdrawal of U.S. troops will invigorate the nuclear negotiation process with Pyongyang. For North Koreans, giving up their nuclear weapons will become an option to consider only when they genuinely believe that Washington no longer poses an existential threat. Even if the North decides not to forgo its nuclear arsenal, it will be forced to look for another “target” to bully without the U.S. threat.

This is what Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a frequent contributor to leading newspapers and periodicals, had argued in his recent op-eds for *The National Interest*

and for Forbes. He even claims that the U.S. – ROK alliance “had outlived its usefulness.” Mr. Bandow’s argument may indeed sound persuasive at first glance; but his argument is based on a shortsighted and unsophisticated analysis.

## A DROP IN THE WATER

First, in order to maintain its military bases abroad - an integral party of the American ability to project power - the U.S. spends more than \$10 billion per year, excluding personnel and operations costs. Out of this \$10 Billion, about 1.1 \$ billion goes to South Korea; if personnel and operations costs are taken into account, the figure jumps from \$1.1 billion to over \$3.1 billion. Considering the fact that the annual U.S. defense budget is more or less around \$600 billion, would withdrawing U.S. troops from the South (thereby saving \$3.1 billion) significantly alleviate an already overstretched defense budget? It’s highly unlikely.

Moreover, Bandow has completely overlooked the second, more subtle, component of “host nation support.”

While the first, more obvious component of “host nation support” consist of tangible benefits such as “direct support cash payment,” the second contains intangible benefits that are difficult to measure in monetary terms, most notably the host nation’s geopolitical position that facilitates U.S. forward presence.

By pointing out the high cost of raising military units at home, it appears that Mr. Bandow wanted to debunk that popular narrative of “it’s cheaper to keep U.S. troops stationed in South Korea than in America.”

His point here is clear enough: ending the security commitment to the South will enable Washington to cut a chunk of unnecessary costs, especially by reducing the size of the military.

However, Mr. Bandow, for some reason, has disregarded the economic benefits that derive directly from the peace and stability of the East Asian region, which has the Korean Peninsula at its core. For instance, by taking advantage of a peaceful and stable East Asia, the U.S. actively trades with China, Japan, and South Korea: all of whom are among Washington’s top trade partners.

Pulling U.S. troops out form the ROK will make a nuclear-armed North Korea more confident (even more so if Seoul continues to be non-nuclear) and a rising China more assertive. IN such an environment, the tension will only continue to escalate, creating a climate where any miscalculation could easily trigger a serious, region- wide conflict. Simply put, jeopardizing Washington’s economic security will cost more than raising and even deploying military units to South Korea.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Secondly, although the cold War is over and the Soviet Union on longer exists, the Korean Peninsula remains geopolitically important for Washington.

Perhaps Mr. Bandow forget about the rise of China and an intensifying U.S. – China rivalry in the region

As China's strength continues to grow, Beijing will try to not only secure its own "backyard" (a Chinese version of the "Monroe Doctrine" could be declared in the process) but also expand its influence into the western Pacific.

Historically, the Korean Peninsula has been a site of collision between maritime and continental powers. IN this regard. South Korea, along with Japan, becomes a strategic foothold for the U.S. to thwart such Chinese ambition. If the U.S. leaves the South, China will have one less obstacle to overcome for achieving uncontested regional primacy.

Lastly, withdrawing U.S. troops, unlike with Mr. Bandow had argued, will not pave the way for the North's denuclearization. In Pyongyang's eyes, the U.S. will remain an existential threat as long as it maintain nuclear hegemony.

More importantly, given the fact that anti-American sentiment is one of the main pillars legitimizing the Kim regime's rule, finding a different source of so-called "external threat" (i.e., a new bulling "target") will be almost impossible for the North. Furthermore, as long as Seoul remains superior in terms of conventional weaponry, North Korea will hold onto its nuclear arsenal in order to offset the existing – in not the widening – imbalance.

In sum, the evidence against the withdrawal of U.S. troops is overwhelming. Pulling U.S. troops out will have only a minimal impact – if any- on Washington's overall defense budget and nuclear negotiation with North Korea.

At the same time, it could threaten U.S. economic security by destabilizing the entire East Asian region. Most of all, amid an intensifying rivalry between Washington and Beijing, the U.S. will lose one of its most important geopolitical anchors.

According to Mr. Bandow, the U.S. – South Korea alliance is obsolete. However, he has to realize that the alliance no longer focuses on just deterring Pyongyang; instead, it has evolved to become more of a values-based coalition that has long gone beyond the Korean Peninsula.