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South Korean Defense and the U.S. Tripwire

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In “Is the U.S.-South Korea Alliance Worth It?” (op-ed, June 5), Michael O’Hanlon raises some important questions related to the U.S. military alliance with South Korea, but his analysis doesn’t take South Korean military capabilities into account. This is an important omission because Seoul’s military capabilities are quite robust and present significant roadblocks for both North Korean and Chinese aggression independent of the U.S. alliance. A reduction of U.S. troops on the peninsula wouldn’t necessarily be as costly or dangerous as supporters of the U.S.-South Korea alliance assume.

South Korea is no pushover. While Seoul cannot match Pyongyang’s large conscript armies, its advanced economy and strong defense industry allow it to offset North Korea’s numbers with qualitatively superior weapons systems. Recent examples of indigenously produced capabilities include the Hyunmoo family of conventional ballistic missiles, a mobile counter-artillery radar system and amphibious assault ships. South Korea makes extensive use of U.S. military hardware and faces some shortcomings, but generally speaking it has grown more confident about self-defense and less dependent on U.S. military support over time.

Seoul’s conventional military power isn’t well-suited for countering North Korea’s nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, but it can deter, or if need be defeat, everything from a North Korean invasion to low-level provocations. As these capabilities improve, the strategic value of the U.S. troop presence in South Korea will become more narrowly focused on preserving the credibility of extended U.S. nuclear commitments.

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