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On a recent visit to Seoul, I was surprised to find that so many South Koreans, of all political views, appear reconciled to the continued presence of U.S. forces for the indefinite future. I repeatedly asked why this was so, and explained why I was surprised.

After all, I said, North Korea is no longer in a position to sustain a protracted invasion like the one in 1950. The Pentagon knows that, as emerging plans for force redeployments and reductions show. So why does the United States still want to stay in Korea if the North Korean threat is fading?

One reason, I suggested, is that the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency want to keep on spying on China with their secret electronic monitoring facilities in Korea. Another is that Air Force and Army units stationed in Korea might be useful in a war with China over Taiwan. These reasons suggest that U.S. and South Korean interests are diverging, I argued, since Seoul increasingly values close ties with Beijing.

Some conservatives replied promptly that North Korea is still unpredictable and that the presence of U.S. forces will, therefore, remain critical for security reasons for a long time.

A more common answer was that the U.S. alliance creates a climate of stability favorable for foreign investment and for the preferential economic treatment by international financial institutions exemplified by the 1997 International Monetary Fund bailout.

No one mentioned what I consider the real, unspoken, underlying reason why the prospect of an end to the U.S. alliance is unsettling to South Koreans: the U.S. military presence and the alliance commitment provide a massive economic subsidy to the South.

This subsidy enables South Koreans to postpone hard choices concerning how fast, and how far, to move toward reunification, and thus it postpones hard choices between civilian and military budgetary priorities.

The U.S. presence enables the South to minimize the sacrifices that would otherwise be necessary to maintain its existing high levels of defense spending. By the same token, the withdrawal of U.S. forces would force Seoul to decide whether it should seek the same level of security provided by the U.S. presence by upgrading defense expenditures--or whether, instead, the goal of accommodation and reunification with the North would be better served by negotiating a mutual reduction of forces with the North.

Lower-income groups in the South would benefit from a diversion of resources from military spending to social welfare programs. The South's upper and middle-income minority, by

contrast, has acquired a vested interest in the status quo. Without its U.S. subsidy, Seoul would have to double or triple its military budget if it wanted to replace the conventional forces now deployed for its defense by the United States--not to mention the much higher outlays that independent nuclear forces would require.

In addition to the direct costs of these forces in Korea, averaging \$2 billion per year, the United States spends more than \$40 billion annually to maintain the overall U.S. defense posture in East Asia and the western Pacific on which its capability to intervene in Korea depends. So long as Seoul regards this U.S. economic cushion as an entitlement, it will be under no compulsion to decide whether to move toward the confederation envisaged in the June, 2000, summit, as a prelude to eventual reunification.

A significant portion of the South Korean defense budget goes to a vast military-industrial complex. There are more than 80 defense contractors in the South producing some 350 categories of defense equipment in nearly 150 factories. This powerful interest group, allied with leaders of the armed forces, keeps up the pressure for rising defense expenditures, and President Roh Moo Hyun has played into their hands by talking too loosely about building self-reliant defense capabilities so that the U.S. presence can be reduced.

To be sure, there are certain aspects of the U.S. military presence that are particularly crucial to the defense of the South: sophisticated command and control and intelligence capabilities in particular. Seoul would be wise to upgrade these capabilities to prepare for a U.S. withdrawal, even at a high cost. Some spending on them is already underway and is justified. But that is very different from a broad-based, across-the-board expansion of the armed forces designed to replace the overall U.S. presence.

The South should respond to U.S. force withdrawals, in my view, by offering to resume the dialogue on mutual force reductions with the North agreed upon in the 1991 North-South Agreement. The Joint North-South Military Commission agreed upon in 1991 was never implemented after the nuclear crisis erupted but should now become a priority for President Roh. The 1991 agreement specifically provided for negotiations on mutual force reductions under the auspices of the Joint Commission.

Just as the military-industrial complex in the South opposes mutual force reductions, so there is also a military-industrial complex in the North, allied with hard-liners in the Worker's Party. Force reductions are not popular with this hard-line faction in Pyongyang. In the case of the North, however, economic factors have made it imperative to reduce defense spending, and Kim Jong Il is prepared to join in mutual force reductions if the South is ready to do so, I was told in Pyongyang in April. By contrast, since the South spends so much less of its GNP

on defense, the pressures for reductions are not as great as in the North. The South's rapid economic growth, together with the U.S. military presence, have enabled successive regimes to avoid increasing the proportion of GNP allocated to defense while, at the same time, steadily raising the actual level of defense expenditures.

President Roh deserves credit for promoting the Kaesong industrial park and military-to-military talks to avoid Yellow Sea clashes. But he has failed to seize the new opportunity for a rapid improvement in relations with the North presented by its historic May 6 announcement that it is ready to pursue a trilateral peace treaty ending the Korean War (South Korea, the United States and North Korea), in place of its past insistence on a treaty limited to the U.S. and North Korea.

Seoul should actively explore this offer in parallel talks with Pyongyang and Washington. This would accelerate progress in the nuclear negotiations and could be used as an inducement to get Kim Jong Il to come to a summit.

More important, it would set the stage for arms control talks now blocked by the continuance of a state of war. The Joint Military Commission could explore mutual force reductions. The United States, South Korea and North Korea could setup a new Mutual Security Commission, replacing the Military Armistice Commission, that could seek to negotiate North Korean pullbacks from the DMZ in return for changes in aspects of the U.S. and South Korean military posture regarded as threatening by Pyongyang.

President Roh appears afraid to pursue the peace treaty issue in the face of U.S. opposition. He knows that the U.S. fears a treaty would increase pressures for U.S. disengagement. Of course it would, as indeed it should, fifty years after the Korean War. But it should be remembered that the U.S. presence is governed by the ROK-US Mutual Security Treaty, which would remain in force after the peace treaty ended the Military Armistice Commission, the U.N. Command and other relics of the Korean War. Given the huge network of U.S. bases and facilities in Korea, it would take many years for a complete withdrawal even if the two sides agreed on one.

In a forthcoming book, *Korean Conundrum*, Ted Galen Carpenter and Doug Bandow of the conservative Cato Institute advocate a unilateral U.S. four-year pullout process. Once the pullout is announced, they concluded it would then be "up to the South Korean people to decide whether they feel sufficiently threatened to warrant spending more on defense, and whether they are willing to undertake the burden of doing so."

By Selig S. Harrison