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PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE: THE ROLE OF U.S. FORCES IN NORTHEAST ASIAN SECURITY

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There has been a sea change in the political landscape in Northeast Asia, particularly on the Korean peninsula. In South Korea, the success of multiparty democracy is changing how the United States interacts with its ally.[1] President Kim Dae-Jung must deal with voters who increasingly question the size and duration of America's military presence. The summit between North and South Korea in mid-June increased the calls across the peninsula for the withdrawal of the U.S. troops at a time when the Republic of Korea and the United States are about to renegotiate the Status of Forces Agreement on U.S. forces in Korea. Meanwhile, popular support for America's presence in Japan is falling.[2] But removing America's military presence from either ally would significantly alter Asia's security landscape, with potentially serious consequences.

Regrettably, in the midst of this heightened focus on America's military presence, the Clinton Administration has failed to meet this challenge; specifically, it has not worked with America's allies to maintain the effective security architecture that has long protected this volatile and important region.[3] The United States should now work closely with political leaders in both Korea and Japan to define a public strategy that explains to the voters of these countries why a U.S. presence is still desirable and necessary, and that supports their own national sovereignty and independence.

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1. Long-serving U.S. government civil servants, senior military leaders, and foreign service officers, who have been accustomed to dealing with counterparts that did not necessarily have to respond to an electorate, may have to make the greatest adjustment to the changes in political relations with the Republic of Korea. Public policy today in Korea has to respond to public opinion. See Kim Yong-bom, "Lawmakers Voice Concern Over Post-Summit Tensions Among Neighboring Countries, Anti-US Sentiment," *The Korea Times*, July 13, 2000, p. 2.
2. Terence Hunt, "Anti-U.S. Protest Greets G–8 Leaders as Summit Opens," *The Washington Times*, July 21, 2000, p. 1.

AMERICA'S INTERESTS AND CHANGING REGIONAL NEEDS

America's primary security interests in the region concern stability in Northeast Asia, an area plagued by war for most of the past century.[4] Since the end of World War II, America's presence in this region has provided the glue for a security arrangement that offered protection to its allies and reassurances that helped avert an arms race by historical enemies or rivals. At the same time, because the United States acts as an honest broker with no territorial designs for hegemony, its military presence is perceived as a benign counterbalance to the mistrust that followed recent war experiences in the region.

America's bilateral relationships with Japan and South Korea ensure that its military, political, and economic interests are protected. The extended nuclear deterrence the United States offers to its ally and the presence of U.S. forces in Japan permit it to maintain its peace constitution, to eschew the development of an offensive military force, and to feel secure in a nuclear age without an arsenal of nuclear weapons. For the Republic of Korea, the presence of U.S. combat forces and equipment created the conditions that have permitted its democracy and market economy to flourish.

However, the balance of official and public opinion in Northeast Asia is shifting, as the recent summit between North and South Korea demonstrates. The willingness of the United States to reward Pyongyang for small steps with economic incentives demonstrates that shift as well. If there are marked changes in behavior and policy in North Korea, not just rhetoric and promises, public pressure in South Korea and Japan to change the nature of the U.S. military presence in the region would naturally increase.

Officials in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo should seriously consider the future when responding to these calls. In Europe, because of mutual insecurity (and mistrust) and a desire to avoid an arms race, the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) welcomed the continued U.S. presence after the fall of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany.[5] For the same reasons, it makes good sense to continue to keep a forward-based U.S. presence in Northeast Asia.

Should the United States isolate itself and withdraw militarily from Asia, or be asked to withdraw by its allies,[6] the consequences—both for the stability of the region and for U.S. national security interests—would be disastrous. A robust U.S. military presence in Asia creates the conditions for economic and strategic stability. The absence of the United States in this region would create a major void in the strategic architecture of the Asia–Pacific that would lead to a serious arms race (among China, Korea, Japan, and the Southeast Asian nations), competition for control of the

3. President Clinton's speech at the peace monument on Okinawa on July 21, 2000, made all the right points, but it came on the heels of a series of missteps that left politicians and voters in Japan confused about the strength of America's commitment to the alliance. In 1998, President Clinton ignored Japan and did not visit there when he went to China and announced that the United States and China were working toward a "strategic partnership." His delay in attending the G–8 Summit in Japan so that he could act as a Middle East peace negotiator caused leaders in Japan to question the Administration's priorities. Calvin Sims, "Sun-Drenched Okinawa Is an Uneasy Place to Meet," *The New York Times,* July 21, 2000, p. A8; Marc Lacey, "Clinton Tries to Erase Anger at U.S. Troops in Okinawa," *The New York Times,* July 21, 2000, p. A8.
4. This is not to say that the critical straits and sea lines of communication in Southeast Asia are unimportant; rather, the locus of vital security concerns is in the North.
5. Robert H. Scales, Jr., and Larry M. Wortzel, *The Future U.S. Military Presence in Asia: Landpower and the Geostrategy of American Commitment* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, 1999), pp. 3–6.
6. It is important to remember that the United States is not an occupying power but an invited presence. If asked to withdraw its forces, the U.S. will withdraw. There can be costs to this decision, however; consider that after U.S. military forces withdrew from the bases in the Republic of the Philippines in 1991 at the request of the Philippine Senate, the Chinese Navy increased its aggressive actions in the South China Sea, seizing Mischief Reef.

Korean peninsula, and competition for control of sea and air lanes of communication in the Western Pacific, and perhaps even fuel a nuclear weapons race. After all, if U.S. air, sea, and land forces are no longer present in South Korea and Japan, extended deterrence and the assurance of security disappear as well.

MAINTAINING THE BALANCE OF POWER

The balance of power in Northeast Asia was established after World War II, when the United States occupied both Japan and South Korea. The outbreak of the Korean War, the first hot conflict of the Cold War, merely solidified that balance. North Korea, a communist aggressor backed by China, provided the threat that justified the U.S. military presence. Since the end of the Cold War, both China and North Korea have adamantly resisted the call of democracy, choosing instead to develop and proliferate weapons of mass destruction.[7]

Under a 1994 accord, North Korea agreed to halt its nuclear energy and weapons development in exchange for an aid package that included a nuclear generator as an alternative source of power generation. However, international apprehensions re-ignited after a series of suspicious incidents that included the construction of a huge underground facility near an earlier nuclear research site and the 1998 launch of a two-stage ballistic missile over Japan.

Yet the progress in diplomatic relations on the Korean peninsula, highlighted by the June summit between Kim Dae-Jung and Kim Jung-Il of North Korea, has dramatically shifted the focus from containment of the communist North to market engagement.[8] A week after the summit, the United States virtually ended its decades-long economic embargo and lifted restrictions on commercial goods, raw materials, and financial transfers. If North Korea's assimilation into the world trading system leads to reunification with the South, the security dynamic between the two states will change radically; so too will public opinion.

The optimism that the recent inter-Korea summit generated has heightened calls for the eventual withdrawal of the 100,000 U.S. troops stationed in Asia, beginning with the 37,000 stationed along the Korean demilitarized zone.[9] However, this action presupposes the successful resolution of historical disputes in the region—for example, between the two Koreas or between China and Taiwan. It also assumes that these conflicts, once resolved, would never spark up again. A more prudent policy would be to reevaluate the nature of the U.S. military presence in the region to meet the demands of the changing security environment.[10]

Any effort at restructuring the security forces should proceed from a careful consideration of America's responsibilities to its allies and as a major regional power. Thus, a review of its forces and their roles in the region should be undertaken in the near term, in consultation with America's allies.[11] This review should focus on the purpose and the capabilities of the troops. Here, opponents of America's presence in the region—like the People's Republic of China—who hope to restructure

7. Senator Charles Schumer, "Proliferation Is Top Threat," *Defense News,* October 11, 1999, p. 21; Shirley A. Kan, "Chinese Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction: Current Policy Issues," Congressional Research Service, CRS IB92056, February 18, 1999.
8. "South–North Summit: A Monumental Step Forward," *Korea Now,* June 17, 2000, pp. 12–13.
9. David Shambaugh, "Time for Serious Sino–U.S. Dialogue on Security," *The Asian Wall Street Journal Interactive Edition,* July 13, 2000, at *http://interactive.wsj.com*.
10. Editorial, "Start of SOFA Negotiation," *The Korea Times,* July 13, 2000, p. 6; Agence France-Press, "Cohen: U.S. Might Review Size of Military Contingent in Korea," *The Korea Times,* July 3, 2000, p. 1.
11. Hints that the U.S. troop presence could be modified came in the 1990 and 1992 strategic reviews by the Office of the Secretary of Defense. See Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, *A Strategic Framework for the Asian Pacific Rim: Report to the Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1990 and 1992).

the security architecture should not be given a vote or veto power.

Changes in the organization and deployment of U.S. troops should include consideration of their greater ability to perform non-combat operations—which has become a growing requirement. Clearly, the presence of U.S. forces must be acceptable to the people of the host countries. And these forces must be prepared to undertake a variety of tasks, including traditional exercises with allies and other forms of military contact as well as disaster relief missions, non-combat evacuation operations (helping remove American and allied citizens from threatening situations), removal of mines, peace enforcement and short-term peacekeeping that has a well-defined exit strategy, and addressing such problems as smuggling and the drug trade.

More specific efforts to restructure the U.S. presence should include:

- **Assuring** the capability of U.S forces to exercise traditional maneuver warfare with a strategically placed, forward-based land power (requiring at least a U.S. Army combat brigade and part of a Marine Expeditionary Force);
- **Funding** adequate air and naval transport for these forces, including protection from hostile aircraft and missiles;
- **Providing** air domination at potential points of conflict and a naval force capable of controlling sea lanes of communication;
- **Providing** logistical facilities to supply all of the armed services present;
- **Providing** an Army engineer brigade, a medical brigade, military police, and information warfare support for all forms of operations, including potential disaster relief missions;
- **Assuring** intelligence support, including intelligence collection platforms, analytical organizations, and a military intelligence brigade;
- **Continuing** major command-and-control headquarters in the region.

A review of this level of commitment should persuade Washington and the Department of Defense that—from this point on—the military focus in Asia should be on strategic capabilities rather than sheer numbers of troops.[12] This is not to say that the United States should not have a credible and balanced contingency force of air, naval, and ground forces. The U.S. force, regardless of structure, must be mobile, ready to act quickly in a time of crisis, and capable of responding to the different needs across the region that arise from changing political, economic, and cultural circumstances.

Washington should aim for a long-term presence in the region and formulate a leadership doctrine that will strengthen America's relationships with Japan and South Korea. The existing security agreements should be expanded to include stronger political cooperation and repeated diplomatic exchanges and visits. Elected legislators in Seoul and Tokyo are seeking ways to interact with their counterparts in the U.S. Congress to promote a strong, long-term American presence in their countries. Congress should take advantage of these overtures to form coalitions of the willing and like-minded.

Washington should not confuse the few economic and international political interests it shares with China with the real alliances and partnerships with South Korea or Japan that support shared democratic values and principles. Moreover, it should continue to reexamine its justification for taking military action, being always aware that its presence in Northeast Asia is based solely on the assent of the people it would protect.

CONCLUSION

It is in America's interest to maintain the balance of power in Asia, to act as the pivot for a security

12. In a certain sense, concentrating on numbers instead of capabilities reduces the flexibility of the United States to work with its allies on ways to maintain a credible presence that has real "strategic weight." New technology or capabilities may provide opportunities to reduce the total numbers of military forces in Japan or South Korea—a goal sought by some of the public there—without reducing combat capability.

structure that includes Japan and South Korea, and to provide leadership to encourage stable and profitable democracies to develop. The need for security must be balanced with the unique needs of the allies, just as the traditional needs of warfare should be balanced with preventive defense capabilities for the changing strategic environment. Fulfilling its readiness requirements for these needs will ensure that America's interests in Northeast Asia are protected and its bilateral relations are buttressed by improved regional security, a spirit of cooperation, and further democratic progress.

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