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Paving the Way for Peace: U.S. Restraint on the Korean Peninsula

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The US military presence in South Korea has outlasted its historical mission and strategic purpose. In the 70 years since the beginning of the Korean War, South Korea has transformed itself from one of the poorest countries on Earth to a \$1.5 trillion economic powerhouse. South Korea is a stable democracy where civilian politicians are in control of a professional, technologically advanced military. At this point, policymakers should declare the US mission in South Korea a success and withdraw.

Current US obligations such as the US-South Korea Combined Forces Command are an outdated legacy of the mid-20th century. The South's massive, technologically advanced economy is more than fifty times larger than North Korea's economy. The North's military is more of a deterrent against an invasion than a force with serious offensive capabilities. The US-South Korea alliance's combined efforts would be the most effective if negotiations with Pyongyang primarily involve bilateral, Inter-Korean negotiations and the US facilitates and enables Seoul's diplomatic efforts. US efforts to achieve a massive, grand bargain have not made progress towards denuclearization, but South Korean efforts to reduce tensions have achieved concrete progress like the destruction of landmines and guard posts in the De-Militarized Zone.

Total denuclearization and reunification are extremely unlikely in the short to medium term. However, US support for South Korean diplomacy can achieve a lasting reduction of tensions, marked by a formal end to the Korean War. Increased communication between the two Koreas reduces the possibility of a crisis escalating to another hot conflict. In this security environment diplomatic efforts can eliminate the North's ability to produce additional nuclear warheads through the destruction of the Yongbyon enrichment facility, and pave the way for a denuclearized, peaceful Korean Peninsula.

U.S. Obligations on the Korean Peninsula

There are sizable opportunity costs to the continued US presence in South Korea, also known as the Republic of Korea (ROK), both in terms of defense spending and active duty US troops. US Forces Korea costs around two billion dollars per year, including the maintenance of US Army Garrison Humphreys, America's largest overseas base.¹ Occupying more than 3,000 acres, the recently constructed facility is a small city built to accommodate up to 45,000 people. The facility's \$11 billion-dollar price tag, largely paid for by South Korea, is more than \$10 billion dollars not spent on South Korean equipment, training, etc.

The current US presence, around 28,000 troops, while below its Cold War levels, still represents a disproportionate number of US troops relative to South Korea's defense needs.² These troops could be more effectively deployed to other hotspots like the Persian Gulf and the Baltic States, or simply sent back to the United States. It is highly unlikely that the United States will fight a primarily land-based conflict in the region in the foreseeable future, and a substantial US Army presence on the Asian mainland serves an unclear purpose. The withdrawal of US forces from Korea would provide an opportunity to shift the US force posture in the region towards sea and air power. In the event of a crisis, US facilities in Guam and Okinawa would still provide rapid access to the Korean peninsula for US troops and equipment.

The Legal Origins of the US-South Korea Alliance

The US-South Korean Alliance is built on two major International Agreements: the 1953 Agreement which ended the Korean War, and the US-South Korean Mutual Defense Treaty. US Troops currently in South Korea include those serving as part of a United Nations Mission to monitor compliance with the Armistice Agreement that ended the fighting in Korea, and those troops hosted on the basis of a bilateral agreement with South Korea.

The 1953 Korean War Armistice

The Armistice, a purely military agreement, suspended open hostilities, established the boundaries of the DMZ, and established a Military Armistice Commission (MAC) to police adherence to the agreement. The agreement was signed by three parties: United Nations Command, which includes the United States and other members of the United Nations Coalition such as the United Kingdom and Australia, the North Korean Army, and the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, with the notable exception of South Korea's Armed Forces. South Korea's first leader, Syngman Rhee, refused to sign the agreement, and publicly proclaimed his willingness to attack the North after hostilities ended.³ China officially ended hostilities with South Korea when the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1992,⁴ and withdrew from the Armistice Commission shortly afterward in 1994.⁵ This leaves North Korea and the UN Coalition as the only remaining parties in the Armistice Commission.

US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty

The 1953 US-South Korea Mutual Defense Treaty remains the basis of the alliance more than 60 years later. The agreement grants the US the right to station naval, air and land-based forces in South Korea. The language of the treaty is similar to other US mutual defense treaties with Japan, the Philippines, and Australia signed in the 1950s and 1960s. Both parties of the US-South Korea Treaty agree to cooperate in deterring an attack by a third country and "act to meet the common danger" in the case of an armed attack "in the Pacific area" against either party's territory.⁶ Maintaining this mutual defense treaty's provisions about acting to meet "a common danger" is a sufficient legal basis for the future of the US-South Korea alliance.

US-ROK Combined Forces Command: Retiring a Cold War Relic

The most unusual aspect of the US-South Korea Mutual Defense Treaty is the US-Korea Combined Forces Command. This provision means that, in the event of renewed inter-Korean hostilities, a US

General would be in command of both US Forces and South Korea's military, with a command structure that integrates both South Korean and US officers. This provision was a necessary safeguard against South Korean adventurism in the mid-20th century. In the early Cold War period, South Korea was a "rogue ally" which refused to sign the 1953 Armistice, was eager to re-open the Korean conflict, and lacked the resources necessary to build up a cutting-edge military force. All three of these US concerns are no longer an issue for the US-South Korea alliance. It is extremely implausible that South Korea's current political class would attempt to reunify the peninsula by invading the North. South Korea is now a stable democracy with a highly professional, well equipped military. The country is capable of fulfilling the responsibilities of a sovereign country that include providing for its own national defense and commanding its own military.

The US Has Already Completed a Major Drawdown of its Forces in South Korea

Between 1958 and 1991,⁷ America's conventional presence in South Korea was also bolstered by several hundred nuclear warheads. This nuclear deterrent, far more substantial than the conventional US presence in Korea that most policymakers believe necessary, did not prevent North Korean provocations like the 1968 Capture of the USS Pueblo or the 1976 Axe Murder of two US soldiers on the DMZ. There is no clear pattern between incidents like these and the 2010 sinking of the ROKS Cheonan, and the size of the US presence in South Korea. President H. W. Bush's decision to withdraw US nuclear weapons did not embolden North Korean acts of aggression, and a withdrawal of conventional forces will lead to a similar lack of disaster. A withdrawal of US conventional forces from the peninsula is just as unlikely to increase the chances of a North Korean attack or provocation as the withdrawal of US nuclear warheads was.

US Interests in Korea

Why Did the US Fight the Korean War?

A modern history of US interests in Korea begins with the early Cold War and the US defense of South Korea. The United States, shocked by the result of the Chinese Civil War, and still exhausted by WW2, focused on fulfilling its commitments to its East Asian allies Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan and avoiding another conflict. To this end, US policymakers did not make "offensive" weapons like tanks available to South Korea's military in an attempt to avoid provoking a North Korean Attack or enabling a South Korean attempt at conquering the North.

In spite of these measures, North Korea attacked across the DMZ in June 1950, and the United States was able to preserve its strategic goals of containing communist expansion, upholding its commitments to its allies, and avoiding a broader global war. If the United States had simply accepted the conquest of South Korea as a *fait accompli* in the summer of 1950, the communist bloc could have posed a much larger threat to other US positions in the first island chain. A US security commitment would appear to be worthless, and could have sparked a much broader conflict by emboldening Mao to conquer Taiwan and officially end the Chinese Civil War. In the era before the Sino-Soviet Split, there appeared to be a united communist world in control of most of Eurasia and planning to conquer the rest, a terrifying prospect to US policymakers.

US Interests Shift to Regional Stability and Prosperity in the Post-Cold War Era

US interests on the peninsula have shifted away from their overwhelming emphasis on security issues. In the post-Cold War era, a *de jure* communist power attempting to export its system by conquest is no longer a concern, and East Asia is dramatically more important to the world economy today than it was in the 1950s. The US's main interests in Korea today are regional peace, non-proliferation, and economic prosperity.

Maintaining peace on the peninsula is the primary strategic concern of US policymakers. Another war could quickly escalate to the use of weapons of mass destruction, and spark a broader regional conflict that draws in the US and China on the side of their respective Korean allies. The damage would extend far beyond the material devastation in the Korean Peninsula itself to East Asia and the broader world economy. Some argue that a US withdrawal, or any major reduction in US troop numbers would embolden North Korean aggression. However, there has been no clear relationship between North Korean provocations like the 1976 DMZ Axe Murder Incident, the 2009 sinking of the *Cheonan*, and the North's various nuclear and missile tests, and the steady decline in the number of US troops stationed on the Korean Peninsula since 1953.



The ROK Army's 5th Artillery conducts a live fire exercise on October 23rd 2019. No changes were made to this photo.

Changing Capabilities and Interests

In the early Cold War period, a US troop presence was crucial to help South Korea defend itself against North Korea, the Soviet Union, and China. This is no longer necessary because of South Korea's enhanced capabilities and the improvement of South Korea's relations with Russia and China. The decline in the number of US troops on the peninsula has been compensated by an increase in the ROK's military's capabilities, due to rapid economic growth that has enabled Seoul to both pay for a larger defense budget and provide for a larger portion of its military's needs from its domestic industry.

Russia and China no longer perceive East Asia in terms of ideological competition between the communist world and the United States' liberal capitalist

alliance system. Both Russia and China normalized relations with South Korea in the early 1990s and enjoy a thriving bilateral economic relationship with South Korea. Russian or Chinese support for North Korean aggression against South Korea is practically unthinkable in the post-Cold War era. The Kim Dynasty was especially angered by Moscow's decision to end sales of military equipment to the DPRK and begin selling weapons to South Korea.⁸

Non-proliferation

Non-proliferation is crucial to US interests in the Korean peninsula, as well as in the broader Asia-Pacific region and international system. This goal includes the eventual denuclearization of North Korea, as well as preventing neighboring states such as South Korea and Japan from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Would South Korea be vulnerable to coercion by its nuclear-armed neighbor?

On first examination, a country without weapons of mass destruction would be vulnerable to a nuclear-armed neighbor's attempts at coercion backed by its nuclear arsenal. What if North Korea used its atomic arsenal to try and blackmail South Korea into removing a missile defense system or reducing troop numbers at the DMZ? However, an empirical analysis of around 200 cases shows that nuclear weapons are extremely ineffective in nuclear-armed states' attempts to change a non-nuclear state's policies or extract concessions through nuclear saber-rattling.⁹ During the leadup to the 1991 Gulf War, US threats to use military force against Iraq were not able to compel an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait without a war, even though Saddam Hussein thought US nuclear strikes against Iraq were possible. In the early 1980s Falkland Islands dispute, the United Kingdom's nuclear arsenal did not improve its leverage over Argentina.

The threat to use nuclear weapons, even against non-nuclear states, carries a major credibility problem, and the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty virtually guarantees a response in kind. Nuclear weapons main effectiveness is in deterring an attack by another

power. It is highly unlikely that South Korea would seek out an independent nuclear deterrent without US troops on its territory. In the mid 1970s,¹⁰ South Korean leader Park Chung-hee's clandestine nuclear program was discovered by US intelligence and abandoned under heavy diplomatic pressure. Nonproliferation is a common interest of the United States and other nuclear powers such as Russia and China. A South Korean attempt to build a nuclear arsenal would quickly earn the ire of the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council, and lead to punitive sanctions on South Korea's export-dependent economy.

Stationing US Troops in South Korea inflates North Korea's Strategic Value for China

Throughout East Asia's history, the Korean peninsula has often posed a major threat to China's security and territory integrity. During the 1590s Imjin War,¹¹ Japan nearly overran Korea's Joseon Dynasty, and the Ming Dynasty intervened to prevent the collapse of its Korean ally and a Japanese threat to Northeastern China. In the first half of the twentieth century, Japanese colonial rule in Korea brought the Japanese war machine to China's northeastern border and enabled an overland invasion of China during the 1930s and 1940s. During the Korean War, China sacrificed almost 1 million lives, including Mao's eldest son, to prevent a hostile power from controlling the entire Korean peninsula.¹²

China continues to keep the North Korean economy on life support so it can avoid a refugee crisis from millions of hungry North Koreans flooding into China and a sudden reunification on US and South Korean terms, possibly involving US troops near Korea's border with China on the Yalu river. Progress towards peaceful reunification would involve a re-evaluation of Seoul's traditionally pro-American foreign policy, and require a lack of Chinese opposition, if not active support for the reunification process.

Eliminating the North's nuclear threat to the United States, as well as a hot-spot that could spark a US-China conflict, would still be a net benefit to America's security if the United States no longer had

troops in South Korea, and a unified Korea was more neutral in terms of US-China strategic competition. In the early 1990s, the US closed its major naval facility at Subic Bay in the Philippines and did not suffer from a major deterioration of its strategic position in East Asia. Similarly, a withdrawal of US troops from South Korea would not harm America's security.

The Cold War in Europe provides a comparable situation of this strategic rationale. During the Cold War, the United States' agreement with the Soviet Union to create a united, neutral Austria served US interests by creating a partial buffer between the US and Soviet blocs that helped to reduce tensions.

Human Rights in North Korea

Although human rights are not America's primary interest in Northeast Asia, the humanitarian situation of North Korea's populace can be greatly improved as a result of these policy recommendations. Drawing back US troops and a focus on South Korean-led negotiations to reduce tensions on the peninsula would allow for economic exchange between the two Koreas and raise the average North Korean's standard of living.

Failure of the Current Approach

Over the past three administrations, US efforts to achieve a stable, denuclearized Korean peninsula have included brinkmanship, economic sanctions, and diplomacy. The massive costs of a new Korean War create credibility issues that make US brinkmanship and diplomatic coercion backed by the threat of military force ineffective. Economic sanctions will not force Pyongyang to the negotiating table: the North Korean elite has demonstrated a willingness to tolerate massive economic hardship while prioritizing regime survival. Diplomacy has shown some effectiveness, but thus far has been hampered by a lack of coordination between Washington and Seoul, as well as Washington's efforts to achieve total denuclearization in a single grand bargain.

Strategic Patience

The Obama administration's policy of Strategic Patience has simply preserved the status quo's

chance of conflict, and did not prevent an expansion of North Korea's missile and nuclear programs. The regime did not only survive the "Arduous March" of the 1990s, a time of severe economic hardship, including a famine that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, but strengthened its prospects for survival by acquiring a nuclear deterrent.¹³ Given this track record, it is unrealistic to abandon diplomatic efforts on the assumption that US policymakers can simply wait for the regime to collapse, or to give up its arsenal in return for humanitarian aid in the event of a major famine or economic crisis. North's Korea's nuclear arsenal will continue to grow if its current trajectory continues, and its arsenal will pose a larger threat to the United States. Time is not on the side of US security interests. Diplomatic engagement is key to slowing the growth of this nuclear threat. US diplomatic efforts which lead to a sustained reduction in tensions on the Korean peninsula open space for reductions in the North's nuclear arsenal. Contrary to popular media coverage, Kim Jong Un and the North Korean leadership are rational actors who respond to incentives. In a scenario where there is officially peace on the Korean peninsula and the military threat to the North's existence appears to be much lower, the minimum level of nuclear deterrence Pyongyang deems necessary to deter an invasion would also decrease.

Lack of Coordination Limits the Effectiveness of Negotiations

In the past two decades, the US-ROK alliance's approach to North Korea has generally been limited by differing, and often contradictory approaches. Korean progressives such as former President Kim Dae-Jung (1998-2003) and current president Moon Jae-in have pursued a less confrontational, more diplomatic approach at odds with more hawkish policies of the Bush and Trump administrations.

The Kim administration pursued a policy of détente and reconciliation with the North, nicknamed the "Sunshine Policy", that expanded economic exchange between the two Koreas and led to the opening of the Kaesong Industrial Park, a Special Economic Zone in North Korea open to South Korean investment. At the same time, however, the Bush

Administration ramped up its rhetoric against North Korea by naming it as part of an "Axis of Evil", along with Iraq and Iran in a 2002 speech, and attempted to coerce North Korea into abandoning its nuclear program through the threat of US military force.¹⁴ The linkage of North Korea to Iraq had disastrous unintended consequences: a US regime change war against North Korea would carry far greater risks to the security of the US and its allies than an invasion of Iraq, and thus was far less credible. US efforts to coerce the North harmed South Korea's attempt to achieve detente with Pyongyang, and neither strategy was pursued in an effective manner.

The Peril of "Grand Bargain" Diplomacy

Korean summitry during the Trump Administration has yielded modest success from bilateral diplomacy between Seoul and Pyongyang, in spite of the impasse in US-North Korean denuclearization negotiations.¹⁵ Under President Moon, South Korea's diplomatic initiatives and confidence-building measures have yielded a modest degree of success. A series of Three Inter-Korean Summits, the first such meetings in a decade, produced an agreement to begin removing landmines from the Demilitarized Zone.¹⁶ Both sides have also begun demolishing guard posts in and around the Demilitarized Zone.¹⁷ This agreement's primary value comes from the confidence-building, reciprocity, and increased communication used to achieve it, not the terms in and of themselves. The more North and South Korea communicate, each country gains a better understanding of the other's state's intentions and positions on a variety of issues. This makes a conflict or crisis caused by miscommunication or a miscalculation of the other country's intentions less likely.

The US, on the other hand, has taken an all or nothing approach, and walked away with no deal rather than a small deal. At the 2019 US-North Korea Summit in Hanoi, Kim Jong Un proposed the destruction of North Korea's Yongbyon enrichment facility.¹⁸ However, the Trump administration was not willing to offer concessions in return for what amounts to a partial denuclearization, and both parties left with

no agreement. It is unlikely that Kim Jong Un would agree to give up the country's entire nuclear program at once: he believes this is crucial to secure his regime's survival. However, an agreement to destroy the Yongbyon facility would significantly reduce the North's ability to produce more nuclear weapons and keep the North Korean nuclear arsenal from becoming a larger threat to the US and its allies. Additionally, the US approach of holding out on sanctions relief in the expectation of the North giving up its nuclear program all at once is a significant constraint on South Korean détente with North Korea. Close coordination of South Korean diplomatic efforts with US-led sanctions can maximize the effectiveness of Inter-Korean confidence building measures and reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula. Reciprocity would be a crucial part of this approach: if Pyongyang faces the prospect of more international sanctions cutting off trade with countries other than China, it will be incentivized to comply with the terms of Inter-Korean Disarmament Agreements and abstain from military provocations.



US and ROK commanders speak in the Joint Security Area in the Korean Demilitarized Zone on November 10th 2018. No changes were made to this photo.

Goals of US Engagement

Recognizing Facts

A lasting reduction of tensions on the Korean peninsula involves a recognition of each Korea's territorial integrity, and a commitment to resolving disputes through peaceful means. The 1975 Helsinki Accord, which helped to lower Cold War tensions in Europe, is a model in this regard. In concrete terms, this means that the two Koreas would both abandon

their claims to be the sole, legitimate Korean government, and acknowledge the post-Armistice reality of coexisting with another Korean state. A formal end to the Korean War would most likely involve the recognition of the Demilitarized Zone established by the Armistice as the international border between the two Koreas. This does not necessarily require any material costs like the cession of territory or limitations on the size of one party's military. Closing the legal and diplomatic gap between official stances rooted in the 1950s and the Korean peninsula in 2020 provides common ground which can be the foundation of further diplomatic contact and de-escalation. The two Koreas are technically still at war, and each government lacks the other's formal diplomatic recognition. Reunification has an extremely low possibility in the short term. Instead, the US should aim for an official end to the Korean War less tenuous than the 1953 armistice. South Korea, now a stable democracy with no ambitions to reopen the Korean war, would not present a similar obstacle to negotiations as Syngman Rhee did at the close of the Korean War.

North Korea's overriding goal is regime survival. Disarmament becomes possible if Pyongyang sees this as an effective means toward this end. This means that South Korea and the United States can reduce the threat of an all-out regime change effort, North Korea's nightmare scenario, and by doing so extract concessions from Pyongyang. Negotiations can achieve a reduction in North Korean troops and artillery stationed near the DMZ, limits on the growth of the North Korean arsenal, and a freeze on missile testing. In return, the United States could publicly distance itself from rhetoric like considering the "Libyan model" for North Korean denuclearization, and offer limited sanctions relief.¹⁹ Kim Jong-Un's 2018 pronouncement that the North Korean nuclear arsenal is "complete" indicates a possible shift in North Korea's goals from building up its arsenal to gaining international legitimacy as a nuclear-armed state and diplomatic prestige, possibly in the form of official diplomatic recognition from its key adversaries like the United States.²⁰

The Juche ideology presents a formidable obstacle to peaceful coexistence. To a Juche believ-

er, North Korea is the “true” Korea with a “purer” culture than the South which has been corrupted by American influence. North Korean propaganda generally takes the form of anti-American and anti-Japanese nationalism. The South Korean government is generally depicted as an American client state, with the “American imperialists” pulling the strings of the government in Seoul. For this reason, the North has often preferred to negotiate directly with the United States. Pyongyang craves a sense of status and legitimacy from the notion that North Korea is powerful enough to deal directly with the United States, and the Kim dynasty is important enough to meet directly with the US President.

Increasing the amount of bilateral diplomacy between the two Koreas would involve a major shift away from Pyongyang’s Cold War-era preference for disregarding Seoul and negotiating solely with the United States, which is rooted in the Juche worldview that sees South Korea as an American puppet. This amounts to an implicit North Korean recognition of South Korea as an independent entity, and also reduces the need for direct US diplomatic involvement managing Korean crises in light of South Korea’s increased capabilities. Maximizing the portion of negotiations and confidence-building measures between North Korea and the South Korea-US Alliance is crucial to working towards peaceful coexistence on the peninsula.

The Primary Role of South Korea

When the US-South Korea alliance began in 1953, the United States had three main goals: help South Korea defend itself against North Korean aggression, prevent South Korea from attacking its neighbor, enable South Korea to develop its economy and build democratic political institutions. The United States’ unqualified successes at achieving the latter two goals call for a redefinition of the alliance in recognition of the shift from Cold War patronage to post-Cold War partnership.

South Korea: America’s Cold War Rogue Ally

In the 1950s, American policymakers had to contain both allied and enemy governments in Asia. South Korean leader Syngman Rhee steadfastly refused to acknowledge the futility of trying to conquer North Korea, and refused to participate in the negotiations to end the fighting. As mentioned previously, South Korea did not sign the 1953 Armistice, and Rhee also sabotaged the negotiations by unilaterally releasing North Korean POWs.

Until the late 1970s, time seemed to be on the side of North Korea. In spite of having half of South Korea’s population, its economy was larger than or comparable to South Korea’s economy, and it had extensive economic and diplomatic support from the rest of the communist world. North Korea appeared to be a model communist state under Kim Il-Sung’s stable, decades-long leadership; a stark contrast with South Korea’s erratic changes of power through coups and assassinations.

Kim-Il Sung was on close personal terms with other communist leaders like East Germany’s Erich Honecker and Romania’s Nicolae Ceausescu. Park Chung-hee, South Korea’s authoritarian leader from his 1960 seizure of power up until his 1979 assassination, earned the ire of his American alliance partners through a crackdown on pro-democracy, civil rights activists and bribes given to two US congressmen.

In light of these human rights and corruption issues, President Jimmy Carter’s promise to remove troops and nuclear weapons from South Korea captured the national mood of post-Vietnam exhaustion with America’s endless military commitments. Carter’s plan involved the withdrawal of 40,000 active-duty US troops and about 700 nuclear warheads, saving \$2 billion without harming the balance of forces on the peninsula.²¹ The Carter administration’s attempt failed due to a drawn-out withdrawal scheme that ended well beyond a single presidential term, as well as opposition from Congress, the military, and the intelligence community.

South Korea's Capability to Ensure Regional Peace and Prosperity

In recent decades, South Korea's growing economic and military capabilities have made a US troop presence less and less necessary for US and South Korean security needs. South Korea is more than capable of protecting its territory and deterring North Korean aggression on its own thanks to its demographic, economic, and technological advantages.

According to 2019 GDP estimates, South Korea's economy is about 53 times larger than North Korea's.²² North Korea's military budget, about \$4 billion according to recent estimates, is the equivalent of around ¼ of North Korea's GDP. South Korea's \$43 billion defense budget, far more modest in GDP terms, is around 10 times larger than North Korea's military budget, and comparable to the size of the entire North Korean economy. Even though South Korea's population is twice the size of North Korea's population, North Korea has around 1 million active duty troops, and South Korea has roughly 630,000.²³ What the South may lack in quantity, it more than makes up for in quality. The typical North Korean soldier is equipped with vintage, 1960s era Soviet and Chinese-made weapons. Chronic fuel shortages limit the average Korean pilot's flight time to 20 hours per year: planes and tanks are generally about 50 years old, in contrast to the South's modern tanks, planes, and armored personnel carriers.²⁴

North Korea's Nuclear Arsenal Can be Limited in Size, but Not Eliminated in the Foreseeable Future

North Korea's first, if not only priority, is regime survival. North Korea has prioritized its military over its people's living standards even in extreme scenarios like the famine years of the mid-1990s, when massive spending on conventional arms and nuclear research continued while massive numbers of North Koreans starved. In the past two decades, Kim Jong-Un and the North Korean elite have witnessed the downfall of other dictators like Saddam Hussein and Moammar Qaddafi who either did not have nuclear weapons, or abandoned their nuclear programs. It is highly implausible that the Kim Regime would accept

any American diplomatic or security guarantee in return for total denuclearization.

In a security environment with much lower tensions, marked by a formal peace treaty between the Koreans, and more extensive inter-Korean economic and diplomatic contact, the number of warheads Pyongyang sees as necessary for a credible deterrent against a US-South Korean strike would slowly decrease. Concerted diplomatic efforts led by South Korea could at least end the growth of the number of warheads, if not start to reduce the total, in exchange for economic incentives such as sanctions relief or increased investment in the North.

How would the US and South Korea fight a new Korean War?

It's unlikely that the US will need to fight a land war in the Asia-Pacific region in the foreseeable future. In the event of renewed conflict South Korea's economic and technological capabilities are more than capable of defending against the North's technologically backwards army, which is heavily reliant upon 20th century Soviet equipment. The US would largely support South Korea through its sea and air power based in nearby Guam and Okinawa and focus on neutralizing the threat from the North Korean Air Force and Navy. The effectiveness of North Korea's surface fleet and air force would be severely constrained by issues like technological backwardness and major shortages of fuel. However, North Korea's nuclear threat is also posed by these portions of its military. US forces would need to account for the possibility of a North Korean nuclear warhead delivered via submarines, bomber airplanes, or ballistic missiles. Focusing on air and naval power allows the U.S. to prioritize defending against direct threats to its territory without harming the security of allies.

Also, a lack of US ground forces would help limit, or at least slow down the escalation of such a conflict and the involvement of other great powers. China would be far more concerned about US troops crossing the DMZ, and potentially advancing to the Chinese border, than by South Korean forces defending their own country's territory. This slight difference buys more time for US and Chinese communication

in the event of such a crisis, and makes a direct confrontation between US and Chinese forces less likely.

Paving the Way to Reunification?

A peaceful reunification of the Koreas is an unlikely prospect in the short to medium term. The North Korean regime does not appear to face domestic opposition capable of overthrowing the Kim regime, and the country's nuclear arsenal makes the cost of a US-led regime change effort too high to consider in terms of risks to the safety of US, South Korean, and Japanese civilians. However, a South Korea in command of its own military without US troops and a focus on inter-Korean negotiations to end the Korean War can make reunification less unthinkable than it is today. In the process of German reunification, détente and diplomatic contact between the two states in the early 1970s was an important pre-requisite for a peaceful reunification process.

The lessons of the Iraq War should also inform contingency planning for Korean reunification or a sudden collapse of the North Korean state. In a scenario where the North Korean state no longer exists, local-level cooperation with civilians will be crucial to establishing the legitimacy of the transition and preventing a counter-insurgency from starting up. The US and South Korea would quickly lose control of the situation if institutions were immediately disbanded with no civil society to replace them, similar to the failed De-Ba'athification Policy in post-2003 Iraq.²⁵

Endnotes

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