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## Stopping the Security Spiral: The Importance of U.S. Disengagement in South Korea

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As of 2021, the United States had roughly 28,500 troops actively deployed in South Korea and 55,000 troops in Japan, both nations that have seen significant economic success and relative military peace over the last several decades. Unlike Japan, however, South Korea has a nuclear adversary and rival on its northern border, the primary reason the United States has claimed its presence in the country to be necessary to maintain global peace and pursue national interests. At the same time, South Korea is also notably one of the most militarily robust of U.S. allies, boasting a force more than sufficient to defend itself from its neighbor to the north.

Despite the claims that the U.S. presence acts as a vital stabilizing force in the Korean Peninsula, recent months have contradicted this assumption to a worrying degree. Especially since the election of President Yoon Suk-yeol in South Korea back in May of 2022, both the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) have been playing their part in an ever-increasing security spiral—with the U.S. serving unconditionally as the South's military partner. While Yoon calls on the United States to ramp up commitments to defending the region, it could not be more critical a time for Washington to reduce its military presence in the country, commit to diplomatic efforts to deescalate tensions, and end the decades-long excessive U.S. military presence in East Asia.

While it may have been reasonable one or two years prior to argue for a more gradual and mild approach to East Asia disengagement, the current climate necessitates immediate and significant action. The peaceful path forward for the United States is to commit to a “disengagement-for-diplomacy” approach in the Korean Peninsula, aiding in the facilitation of diplomatic talks between the ROK and DPRK while simultaneously reducing the U.S. troop presence and commitments in the South. The United States could then move into a more gradual disengagement approach, such as “reductions-for-peace,” to eventually reduce the troop presence to zero.

This immediate disengagement approach is not only feasible but necessary, as the ROK has more than enough military strength to keep the country secure under typical circumstances, and U.S. troops are a significant motivating factor in the DPRK's military buildup. With the United States out of the equation militarily, the South will feel less emboldened to take aggressive action and the North will have fewer incentives to continue its path of escalation. Disengagement-for-diplomacy has the potential to be the push both nations need to come to the

negotiating table and forge a peaceful path forward.

## **Why is the U.S. Military in South Korea?**

### **History of U.S.-ROK Relations**

The history of U.S. involvement in the Koreas ostensibly begins at the end of World War II, as the United States agreed to split control of the formerly Japan-held peninsula along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in 1945 with the Soviet Union—a temporary and conditional ally throughout the war. While U.S. troops occupied the area for several years, the eventual goal was to aid South Korea in setting up an anti-communist, U.S.-friendly government before withdrawing troops and returning resources to more vital U.S. interests. The ROK was established in 1948, along with the communist DPRK in the North, and U.S. troops ultimately left the country in 1949.

This disengagement from the region was short-lived, as greater conflict was on the horizon. From the initial split of the region, both Koreas claimed ownership over the entire peninsula, leading to minor conflicts breaking out immediately thereafter. Since early Cold War American strategists were highly invested in the concept of the domino theory (which held that if one nation fell to communism, countless more would follow in its path), Washington regarded the fate of the peninsula as a vital national interest. As scattered skirmishes transformed into war in June of 1950, the ROK quickly lost ground and was almost entirely conquered by northern forces, jolting Washington into action to prevent the domino from falling.

The fighting eventually cooled in 1953, though the result was a stalemate between ROK/U.S. troops and DPRK/Chinese troops. An armistice was agreed and the demilitarized zone (DMZ) was established along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. While this could have motivated the United States to gradually remove troops, the South's recent inability to defend itself from the DPRK—compounded with heavy losses from the war—led Washington to commit to a long-term presence. The Koreas were both poor countries at the time, and South Korea did not have much concretely to offer the United States, but it became representative of U.S. influence in East Asia and served as a bulwark against Japan also succumbing to communism and Soviet

influence.

Though many today are doubtful that the domino theory would have held water, it is at least true that the ROK would likely have fallen in the years following the Korean War without U.S. military aid. Given the security provided by the United States, South Korea solidified the legitimacy of its government and eventually moved into a period of vast economic growth. Today, South Korea has the 10<sup>th</sup> largest GDP in the world, is an active participant in numerous international bodies, and remains a strong and reliable U.S. ally.<sup>1</sup> Given the current value of South Korea's contributions to both the international system and the United States, U.S. military support immediately following the war was arguably warranted and worth the cost, but is this still the case?

### **South Korea is No Longer as Vulnerable**

The United States was able to be the vital security crutch for the ROK during its developmental period, but a lot has changed since then, and the nature of the U.S.-ROK alliance should reflect those changes. Regarding these shifts, first and foremost, the power balance in the Korean peninsula has entirely flipped since the 1950s, as the ROK now vastly outperforms the DPRK in economic capacity, technological development, and international standing.<sup>2</sup> While the DPRK attempts to retain legitimacy through military spending and nuclear flaunting, their ability to conduct conventional warfare is greatly limited and the costs of actual conflict escalation would likely cripple the autocratic regime.

Aside from economic and status shifts for the ROK, the nation also has been able to maintain a formidable military of its own. Unlike U.S.-allied nations in Europe or, arguably, Taiwan, U.S. military aid has not resulted in lackluster defense spending from the South Korean government. In 2020, the ROK had a defense budget of 50.15 trillion won (2.6% of GDP) and ultimately spent 51.16 trillion won (2.8% of GDP) on military expenditures.<sup>3</sup> This number continued to rise with the ROK's 2021, 2022, and 2023 defense budgets of 52.84, 54.61, and 57.1 trillion won respectively.<sup>4</sup> Compared to the most recently available data for DPRK military expenditures, the ROK's defense budget is magnitudes higher and signifies that South Korea has the resources and a formidable enough

defense infrastructure to defend itself against threats from the north.

As an advanced nation with a booming economy, vast industrial infrastructure, and a respectable military, South Korea is no longer the nation it was before or immediately after the Korean War. It is a developed, wealthy country perfectly capable of protecting itself from outside threats. On the U.S. side, with the Soviet Union long dissolved and the Red Scare more-or-less a stain on U.S. history, the initial motivations for U.S. military intervention in South Korea have entirely faded. So why are U.S. armed forces still there?

## **U.S. Interests in Korea are Vaguely Defined and Poorly Pursued**

### **Core U.S. Interests**

U.S. foreign policy is tasked with the protection of U.S. security, stability, and prosperity in both the short and long term. During the Cold War, U.S. security was threatened multilaterally by the Soviet Union and the perception of many at the time was that the spread of communism directly signified the spread of Soviet influence. These conditions meant that the defense of a weak South Korea against USSR-backed, communist North Korea was in the U.S. national interest, as limiting Soviet influence and power during the Cold War would better ensure future U.S. security.

Today, what threat to the current U.S. national interest is addressed by stationing American forces in South Korea?<sup>5</sup> The primary arguments can be summarized as follows:

1. **Limiting the influence of and balancing against the People's Republic of China (PRC)** – China is the most likely candidate to stand as a serious peer-competitor to the United States, and the rise of an adversarial regional hegemon amongst U.S. allies threatens U.S. influence and prosperity, as well as the security of those allies.
2. **Deterring aggression and nuclear development by the DPRK** – These acts by the DPRK can threaten U.S. homeland security, the security of U.S. allies (ROK and Japan), and global stability.
3. **Commitment to nuclear nonproliferation** –

Given the nuclear capabilities of the DPRK, many suggest that U.S. withdrawal from the region will cause Japan and South Korea to go nuclear. Many in the U.S. argue that the spread of nuclear weapons will threaten the security of the nation, limit the influence the U.S. can wield in international arms control negotiations, and undermine the international nonproliferation regime.

4. **Maintenance of regional stability and order in East Asia** – Given the interconnected nature of a highly globalized world, it is in the interest of the United States to ensure the security of its key trading partners, as major disruptions to any large region will negatively impact global stability and American prosperity.

Conceptually, the majority of these goals make sense and could reasonably guide policy proposals made by restrainers and primacists alike.<sup>6</sup> The concern, however, arises in the efficacy and consequences of the policies enacted to achieve these ends. If South Korea—a U.S. ally and key trading partner—was facing imminent military defeat, it would not be abnormal to suggest aid in the form of military intervention.<sup>7</sup> That being said, that is not the case, so how do U.S. troops stationed in South Korea achieve those ends? The answer is that, generally speaking, they don't. In fact, sometimes this military-first approach may even be directly counterproductive to U.S. interests.

### **Balancing Against China**

It is clear that the Biden Administration sees China as a top security priority.<sup>8</sup> It is indisputably the most formidable economic competitor to the United States, with a GDP that some economists predict could surpass the U.S. as early as 2030.<sup>9</sup> On the military front, China is a nuclear power that has been investing significant resources into expanding its capabilities in recent years, though it still lags behind the United States in this regard.<sup>10</sup> To directly reference the 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS), the most threatening element about the PRC is its, “coercive and increasingly aggressive endeavor to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences.” If both accurate and successful, such an effort could drastically reduce U.S. influence in international systems and minimize U.S. strategic leverage in the Indo-Pacific

region.

That all noted, there are some glaring gaps in this background that make it questionable to immediately jump to a U.S. military response. First and foremost, why has China been expanding its military capabilities with such rigor? Of course, if we could easily answer such a question, the security dilemma as we know it would be solved. Nevertheless, it is not beyond reason to assume that a large motivating factor for the Chinese government is the perceived threat from the United States. After all, the United States has the most formidable military and powerful economy in the world, and it has troops stationed in allied countries an ocean away from itself but less than 300 miles from the Chinese border. Were China to strike a deal to build a military base near Mexico City, the United States would undeniably view the act as a direct and unacceptable threat to U.S. security—so it is not unreasonable to see how China may perceive a military buildup as the safest way to ensure its own security.

Regarding China's potential interest in expansion, the truth is that its aims are likely limited and do not fundamentally threaten the security of the United States. At its most extreme, China has expressed its interest in several territorial disputes on the South China Sea and, most notably, Taiwan. That being said, the United States does not formally have a treaty to protect Taiwan in the case of Chinese invasion, and the U.S.'s not so ambiguous "strategic ambiguity" has left Taiwan and nearby allies complacent with their limited investments in deterrence and defense.<sup>11</sup> Even in a scenario where the United States unequivocally determines that Taiwanese autonomy is vital to U.S. interests, American troops stationed in South Korea and Japan would hardly be sufficient to neutralize a Chinese offensive. Additional troops would have to be directed to the conflict, the costs to the United States would be immense, and other regional powers will be far less incentivized to get involved if the burden is squarely taken on by the Americans.

The final vital factor to consider is the constraints China faces in outwardly aggressive action, even when the factor of nearby U.S. forces is absent. If the war in Ukraine has confirmed anything, it is that war is immensely costly and, even with distinct military superiority, decisive gains are far from guaranteed.<sup>12</sup>

The Taiwanese case is hardly a one-to-one with the aforementioned conflict, but a Chinese invasion of Taiwan without immediate U.S. intervention would likely still be a difficult and costly endeavor.<sup>13</sup> The less than 30,000 U.S. troops permanently in South Korea, not officially committed to defending Taiwan, do not sufficiently and favorably alter the calculations for the United States

Some argue that Taiwan could be the first domino to fall to Chinese expansion, but it cannot be understated that global stability is far more beneficial to Chinese security and prosperity than are modest territorial gains. Chinese soldiers are not on the brink of showing up at South Korea's door, and it is highly unlikely they ever will be. Even so, should China one day threaten the sovereignty of a U.S. ally such as the ROK, the United States can adjust its strategy accordingly.

## **Detering North Korea**

The most cited reasoning for the U.S. military presence in the ROK is that the erratic nuclear threat from the DPRK has the potential to compromise security in South Korea, the United States, and the rest of the world. The balance of power, as measured by economic performance and technological capabilities, has clearly swung in the favor of the South, but as North Korea maintains its nuclear wild card, it is impossible to disregard entirely. The world seems to acknowledge this, as North Korea has hardly a single international ally, yet it maintains a fair share of negotiation power.<sup>14</sup>

While a nuclear arsenal provides stable assurance that North Korea will not wake up one day with an invading army on its doorstep, it frankly does not do much for its stated intention of reunifying and overtaking South Korea. Regardless of if South Korea did or did not have its own nuclear arsenal, the North's use of its nuclear weapons on the ROK would mean the gain of a destroyed mass of land at best or, much more likely, retaliatory assured destruction at worst. Put simply, the DPRK hardly gains any offensive capabilities from its nuclear arsenal, as nuclear weapons serve best as tools for deterrence.<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that threat perceptions should overlook the nuclear issue, but often the likelihood of nuclear war is overblown and the erraticism of DPRK leadership is highly dra-

matized.<sup>16</sup>

Given the practical applications of a nuclear arsenal, any DPRK invasion force aiming to overtake the ROK would have to be conventional. At this conventional level, North Korea is a much more manageable threat. Despite the DPRK having more active-duty troops and spending a significantly greater proportion of its GDP on defense, the ROK's military capabilities are vastly technologically superior and its recent defense budget exceeded the DPRK's by a factor of ten, according to available data.<sup>17</sup> Even where ROK forces alone may be insufficient today, the country has the necessary economic and population capacity convertible into military power—given proper communication with the United States as its presence is reduced and eventually removed.<sup>18</sup>

Returning from the conventional sphere, the ROK is also predicted to have the capacity to develop its own nuclear weapons in the span of 1-2 years, though the U.S. could possibly prevent that outcome with the continued promise of protection under its own nuclear umbrella.<sup>19</sup> It is vital to look at why North Korea pours nearly all of its limited resources directly into nuclear weapons and conventional military power. The DPRK is a fragile, authoritarian state surrounded by far more secure and wealthy nations.<sup>20</sup> The country has little capital to contribute to the global market, limited legitimacy in international organizations, and a poor, starving citizenry.<sup>21</sup> Given this, the DPRK's ability to negotiate with outside powers and, most importantly, maintain territorial sovereignty primarily lies in strict authoritarian control and projection of military power. North Korea is predisposed to be insecure in light of its powerful neighbors, but insecurity and fear are bound to be amplified tenfold when accounting for the active troops just across the border, provided and operated by the most powerful nation in the world.

Desperation and nuclear warheads are an explosively toxic combination. After all, a mix of misinterpreted signals and desperation almost drove a Soviet official to launch a nuclear attack against U.S. forces in 1962, the narrowly avoided havoc we now call the Cuban Missile Crisis. More contemporarily, fears over Russia's nuclear threats in Ukraine often cite the influence of Putin's growing desperation.<sup>22</sup> While containment of an aggressive nuclear power is clearly important for global security and stability, overzealous provo-

cation of the DPRK may lead to desperation. Fragile states are already predisposed to higher rates of conflict, and the more fragile a state is, the more likely an outside threat may be perceived as existential.<sup>23</sup> As insecure as North Korea is in various realms, a nuclear attack is only truly viable when fear becomes desperation, and U.S. troops are more than capable of tipping the scale.

Any chance of cooling North Korean aggression is likely to fail as long as DPRK leadership feels existentially threatened. Since South Korea has the capability to maintain security without U.S. troops, the U.S. military presence in the country is, at best, superfluous. At worst, U.S. forces vastly raise DPRK threat perceptions, subsequently escalating tensions with a nuclear state and encouraging investment in militarization.

## **Nuclear Nonproliferation**

The United States has long espoused the importance of nuclear nonproliferation, advocating that global stability would be thrown into disarray with the spread of catastrophically powerful warheads.<sup>24</sup> Such a strong weapon in the hands of unstable adversaries would understandably threaten the United States, but questions arise when America practices indiscriminate intolerance of any nation acquiring a deterrent weapon largely lacking practical offensive utility. Perhaps this constraint provides the United States with some degree of increased international influence, but this immeasurable influence is hardly worth the costs it incurs by committing to the role of "primary defense force" for allies across the globe, including the ROK.

The general success of the NPT—even with nations not actively protected by U.S. ground troops—demonstrates that many states without sufficient existential threats lack the motivation to go nuclear. Contrastingly, states existentially threatened and determined to go nuclear, such as Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea, did so regardless of opposing U.S. efforts.<sup>25</sup> With a nuclear adversary on its northern border, South Korea has teetered back and forth on interest in nuclear weapons development over the years. Notable is that, despite consistent U.S. military support, the ROK has seen an increase in public enthusiasm to either go nuclear or, at the very least, get U.S. nukes into the country.<sup>26</sup> If U.S. threats prevent

successful nuclearization of adversaries, the North Korean case states otherwise; if substantial U.S. military support prevents allies from nuclearization, rising pressure in South Korea may eventually disprove the unilateral applicability of this concept.

As long as concerning North Korean threats persist, ROK calls to nuclearize are unlikely to fade. At the same time, as long as the DPRK feels sufficiently threatened, arms control negotiations are troubled and demands for complete disarmament are doomed. If the U.S. military presence in South Korea remains non-negotiable, the likelihood of the DPRK feeling secure enough to engage in nuclear disarmament is slim to none. Therefore, while many in the U.S. claim military engagement in South Korea prevents nuclear proliferation, the net effect may not be so clear.

Finally, to consider the case in which the aforementioned claims are correct, what would a nuclear South Korea mean for the United States? Likely, not much. South Korea is a highly stable, developed nation with a longstanding alliance with Washington. Even in the case that both South Korea and Japan determine nuclear weapons are necessary for their security, neither country would pose a direct threat to U.S. security by possessing weapons explicitly developed to deter a nearby nuclear power. Similarly, neither nuclearization in Pakistan nor in India has resulted in an existential threat to U.S. security in the 20-plus years since they emerged as nuclear powers.<sup>27</sup> If that is the case, why would the nuclearization of politically stable allies geographically distant from the United States be different? In fact, disentangling U.S. nuclear influence from the region would likely result in greater security for the United States, as incentives for the DPRK to threaten U.S. soil would diminish.

## **Maintaining Stability in East Asia**

When states are fragile or undergoing significant structural change, it is true that their broader region has an increased possibility of substantial disruptions in stability.<sup>28</sup> After World War II, most East Asian countries were structurally shifting or in the early stages of recovery from wartime devastation, so some amount of regional conflict was not particularly surprising. Charitably assessing U.S. military engagement in East Asia, it is possible that U.S. troops were responsible for maintaining regional stability during

critical periods of development for both the ROK and Japan. Nevertheless, the United States does not claim to have U.S. troops in South Korea because of the stability they provided in the 1960s. Rather, it claims that the U.S. military presence ensures regional stability today. Considering recent escalating Indo-Pacific tensions, this claim seems doubtful.

As covered in the previous two sections, militarization efforts in both the PRC and DPRK are likely in part due to U.S. military intervention throughout the region. Before its meteoric rise, China may have felt threatened by U.S. military presence in East Asia, but it did not have the economic or political capacity to meaningfully respond to such fears. In the current environment, the PRC and DPRK are both nuclear powers not allied with the United States, with the former possessing immense economic capital. If either nation perceives a threat from outside forces, they have the ability and will to ramp up aggression in response. With the nations playing host to U.S. troops as developed and prosperous as they are, their security is not inextricably dependent on the United States, meaning that current U.S. troop levels in East Asia are more destabilizing to regional security than a leaner alternative.

It is equally important to consider the impact of current American policy on the defense postures of U.S. allies like Japan and South Korea. East Asian security issues. Japan has minimized its own military development in favor of U.S. defense support, which does not likely have a uniquely notable impact on regional security or adversary response.<sup>29</sup> Contrastingly, South Korea has actively constructed a formidable national defense force, utilizing the United States for additional support and flexibility. With the confidence that U.S. military support will remain unwavering, the ROK has greater freedom to pursue aggressive political and military measures. This dynamic, known as reckless driving, has the potential to be destabilizing, as the ROK remains less incentivized to compromise and negotiate with the DPRK. Such a scenario has been bubbling over the last several years, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that the U.S. military has largely enabled the ongoing security spiral between the Koreans.<sup>30</sup>

The United States is invested in maintaining regional stability to ensure the security of its allies, sustain

relationships with and influence over said allies, and prevent economic and supply chain ripple effects from harming Americans. Given that the PRC does not share an interest in preserving U.S. influence in Japan, for example, its role and interest in overall regional security is frequently downplayed or outright dismissed. However, given immense increases in the costs of war over time, it is a rare case that military intervention is the preferable method of conflict resolution.

Regarding the Indo-Pacific context, in addition to China's interest in global economic stability for domestic prosperity, it has even greater motivations to maintain East Asia stability than the United States. For one, the PRC maintains highly intertwined trade relations with surrounding countries, amplifying the impact of economic damage that would occur with regional instability. Additionally, interstate conflict in the vicinity of China would pose a potential threat to PRC security. With the financial resources, formidable military capabilities, and overall regional influence wielded by the PRC, it has both the capacity and motivation to maintain regional stability. Other developed and powerful nations in the region are similarly positioned, though with a comparatively limited capacity for action. Nevertheless, the influence powers like Japan and South Korea could exercise on the regional balance of power are far from negligible and further support the assumption that regional security would persist without U.S. enforcement.

PRC motivations may differ from the United States when it comes to Indo-Pacific stability, but the fundamental outcomes are largely the same. Absent destabilizing conflict, U.S. allies remain secure, and global supply chains do not falter. Attempting to ensure this outcome through direct U.S. military engagement is a grossly inefficient and costly endeavor. As for the remaining goal, U.S. influence is not fundamentally preserved with regional stability, but that goal has numerous more efficient, non-military approaches that Washington can pursue.

## **Inertia in U.S. Foreign Policy**

While not included in the official reasoning for U.S. military engagement in Korea, it is not outrageous to suggest that inertia may play a significant role in long-term policy stasis. Consider, at what point did

the Korean power balance shift to greatly favor the ROK? A lurch may have occurred with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, but the change was still gradual and multi-faceted. It is not surprising, then, that decades of U.S. military entanglement with a country are unlikely to simply unwind without a sufficient initiating incident. Especially given that 1) the U.S. presidential administration changes every 4-8 years and 2) the political saliency of domestic issues and international crises consistently exceed other foreign policy initiatives, it is easier for the U.S. government to proceed with "business as usual" in international engagements. The fundamental reasoning behind certain behavior subsequently ends up forgotten or artificially constructed to rationalize the resistance to change.

## **Washington Should Be More Concerned with its Role in the Security Spiral**

### **Escalating Tensions on the Peninsula**

It is undeniable that tensions have been on the rise on the Korean Peninsula. The DPRK has launched more missiles for testing in 2022 than any other year on record.<sup>31</sup> While North Korea's nuclear threat has been a present concern since its acquisition of nuclear weapons, its exponential increase in missile testing demonstrates a greater threat perception and suggests more willingness to use force. Neither South Korea nor the United States should be held hostage by an erratic dictator with access to nuclear weapons, but a clear, extended display of increased aggression by such a leader over the course of a year should cause leaders to rethink their current strategies.

The DPRK is not the only participant in this dynamic of increasing tensions. In the ROK, President Yoon has been at the governmental helm for less than a year and has made his skepticism towards DPRK intentions extremely clear. Yoon has repeatedly pushed President Joe Biden to strengthen U.S./ROK deterrence efforts against the North, and there has been little pushback from the United States.<sup>32</sup> To this end, joint military drills with combined U.S./ROK forces have been on the rise and this pattern is bound to continue into 2023.<sup>33</sup> This pressure on the United States to escalate is, notably, perceived in alongside

the growth of the ROK's defense budget. While a diplomatic resolution is not entirely off the table, the ROK's trend towards demonstrations of military prowess as deterrence make future attempts at negotiations appear less and less likely.

It is self-evident, then, that these escalations are at least somewhat cyclical in nature. According to Eric Gomez of the Cato Institute, the DPRK has, "explicitly linked their activities to the U.S.-South Korea military exercises, stating 'acts of escalating the tension will only invite our greater reaction.'"<sup>34</sup> The United States does not have complete control over President Yoon and the ROK, but it does have a say in its amount of participation in this rivalry, and its current behavior is enabling the security spiral to further escalate.

### **The U.S.-ROK Relationship and "Reckless Driving"**

The primary goal of the United States in the Koreas should be to pursue conflict de-escalation, but an unwavering U.S. military presence on the peninsula is what enabled this recent escalation cycle in the first place. Defenders of current U.S. policy in the Koreas claim that the American military is a stabilizing force in the region, but even accepting this as truth post-1945, the dynamic has notably shifted to one of "reckless driving" from South Korea. Reckless driving, a term coined by renowned political scientist Barry Posen, describes a scenario where a small or middling power is enabled to make reckless political and military decisions, as their security is practically guaranteed by the support of an ally great power. In his book, Posen discusses the relationship between the U.S. and Israel as emblematic of this type of reckless escalation.<sup>35</sup> Looking at the situation with South Korea, there are many parallels, as South Korea's recent responses to DPRK aggression have come unilaterally in the form of joint retaliatory aggression with U.S. forces. Given that the ROK has sufficient resources to maintain its own security, this additional support from the United States acts as excess fuel to the fire. Without explicit U.S. backing on the ground, the ROK would still be secure but have more incentives to engage in diplomatic talks rather than escalate with the comfort of unquestioning U.S. support.

### **Disengagement for Diplomacy: Re-**

## **centering U.S. Strategy to Stabilize Korea**

### **How Would U.S. Troop Withdrawal Change the Immediate Equation?**

Paired with active efforts to facilitate ROK/DPRK diplomatic channels, a withdrawal of U.S. troops would accomplish two main objectives:

- Dampen aforementioned "reckless driving" behavior by the ROK
- Ease the immediate threat on the DPRK to prevent further reactionary buildup

To ensure the potential of de-escalation amidst the ongoing security spiral, these two elements are crucial. With the United States no longer acting as a military behemoth on the peninsula, North Korea will feel far more secure while still lacking the capability to wage a successful conventional war with the South. South Korea, on the other hand, will likely continue increasing its defense budget, but future acts of aggression will necessarily be more restrained, as they no longer have a degree of backing that warrants reckless behavior. Though not absolutely guaranteed, such an act would largely encourage a more restrained approach from both sides of the aisle.

Granted, should U.S. officials announce full retrenchment tomorrow with no prior warning to the ROK, some amount of destabilization would be all but guaranteed to follow. Insufficient communication breeds uncertainty, and the proposed changes are far too significant to occur overnight. However, given proper warning, a phased execution plan, and an enduring emphasis on facilitating diplomatic talks, South Korea should easily be able to manage the burden of providing for its own national security. Early-stage negotiations with the DPRK would also have much greater potential in combination with a U.S. "exit deal," as U.S. troop removal from the Korean Peninsula will assuredly dampen North Korea's threat perceptions to a more manageable level.

### **Long-Term Potential – Reallocating Resources and Revisiting Nuclear Proliferation**

The potential benefits to a drastic shift in U.S. military



engagement in the Koreas extend far beyond immediate conflict de-escalation—though the importance of that matter cannot be understated. According to a 2021 study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), from 2016 to 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense obligated \$13.4 billion towards the U.S. troop presence in South Korea. That is billions of dollars allocated over a mere four years to support the U.S. military presence in a highly developed ally nation during peacetime. Given broad U.S. retrenchment in the Koreas, those resources can be reallocated to other U.S. interests, potentially prioritizing funding for diplomatic branches of the U.S. government over the military. Further, should retrenchment in South Korea prove successful, the United States may have more viable avenues to approach retrenchment elsewhere in the world, providing even more economic flexibility to the nation to tackle numerous other concerns.

Returning to the specifics of the Korean case, it has long been accepted that the most threatening element of the DPRK to the United States is its nuclear capabilities. Though critiques to the validity of this claim have been explored in this analysis, it is undeniable that most international fears of North Korea stem from its nuclear arsenal. During the Trump Administration, diplomatic talks with the DPRK were making significant headway, but a hard line of complete denuclearization will always be too far for the DPRK with American troops stationed right across the border. Perhaps it is too optimistic to ever aim for complete denuclearization in North Korea, but it is far more likely to succeed if part of the U.S. military's exit deal. With distance from an adversarial great power comes increased security, and the only possible way to reasonably expect North Korea to break down its nuclear weapons program is to provide that distance.

## **The Consequences of Retrenchment Are Mild Compared to Alternatives**

Realistically, there is no chance that a policy shift of this magnitude will result in little to no consequences. Regardless of method, there will likely be resistance from the ROK, as the United States provides it with an enhanced sense of national security and freedom. Nevertheless, complacency in the ongoing security spiral has the potential to be far more damaging than any other option. The United States has a long,

enduring history of allyship and collaboration with South Korea, so the likelihood of fully tarnishing that relationship is far lower than the threat of existing aggressions escalating to war. Should the United States refuse to mobilize against the Korean security spiral, the likelihood of escalation grows greater by the day, and the chance the United States gets dragged into a full-scale war against a nuclear power subsequently grows.

## **Conclusion**

The current level of U.S. military engagement on the Korean Peninsula is not only excessive, but results in more harm than stability. Recent explanations for military engagement strategies in the region are largely centered on vague links to broad interests, an overreliance on military power for international influence, and pure policy inertia. This is both extremely costly and antithetical to American interests. To fix this discrepancy, the United States should recenter its policy aims in the region to target core national interests, notably the protection of homeland security and economic security. Such a recentering will free significant resources for the United States to tackle domestic matters and refocus its international efforts on a more restrained course.

U.S. military reductions in the Koreas will not only enhance the security of the U.S., but it is an absolutely critical act in halting the ongoing security spiral on the Korean peninsula—in part fueled by the U.S. military presence and complacency with recent escalatory acts. South Korea is a highly developed nation fully capable of ensuring its own national security, and with its current military infrastructure, it is the most likely case of U.S. allies to succeed in national defense efforts without the direct support of American troops on the ground. That given, U.S. retrenchment on the Korean Peninsula is most likely to succeed when compared to similar suggestions in other regions, and the results from such retrenchment can be used as a benchmark to facilitate greater restraint from the United States throughout the globe.

Ever since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the world has been forced to grapple with the ripple effects brought about by modern war. In such an interconnected world, conventional conflict devastates far more than the land it is conducted on and the people

its weapons destroy. With that in mind, the current behavior of the United States on the Korean Peninsula has enabled tensions to rise to a degree where the outbreak of war is an increasingly likely possibility. It is not too late to reverse this escalation, but the United States has instead opted to grit its teeth and persist with an invasive, militaristic status quo. The time to alter course is now, and the United States is fully capable of responsibly withdrawing its troops and ensuring a more secure, independent Korean Peninsula for years to come.

# Endnotes

1 According to the World Bank, South Korea's GDP in 2021 was just over 1.81 trillion USD, ranking 10<sup>th</sup> in the world.

The World Bank, "GDP (current US\$) – Korea, Rep." *World Bank Data*, Accessed December 20, 2022. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=KR>

2 International standing, while less tangible and concrete than raw economic or military prowess, is an important combination of factors that impact a nation's capacity to engage with other countries and influence international organizations/systems. Compared to the DPRK, the ROK is officially recognized in more prestigious international organizations. A concrete example of this higher standing is the fact that South Korea was tasked with hosting the 2010 OECD G20 Summit in Seoul.

3 51.16 trillion won is roughly 3.89 billion USD.

The World Bank, "Military expenditure (current LCU) – Korea, Rep." *World Bank Data*, Accessed December 20, 2022. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CN?locations=KR>; The World Bank, "Military expenditure (% of GDP) – Korea, Rep." *World Bank Data*, Accessed December 20, 2022. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=KR>; Yonhap. "S. Korea's 2020 Defense Budget Rises 7.4% to over 50tr Won." *The Korea Herald*, December 11, 2019. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20191211000099>.

4 This converts to roughly 4.01, 4.15, and 4.34 billion USD respectively.

Janes.com. "South Korea Finalises USD46.32 Billion Defence Budget for 2022." Accessed November 15, 2022. <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/south-korea-finalises-usd4632-billion-defence-budget-for-2022>; L. Yoon. "South Korea: National Defense Budget 2022." *Statista*, February 28, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/745747/south-korea-national-defense-expenditure/>.

5 General U.S. security interests highlight the U.S. concern over the PRC and mention the support of allies and partners. According to the 2022 Department of Defense National Defense Strategy (NDS), derived from Biden's National Security Strategy, the United

States' current defense priorities are:

1. Defending the homeland, paced to the growing multi-domain threat posed by the PRC;
2. Deterring strategic attacks against the United States, Allies, and partners;
3. Deterring aggression, while being prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary – prioritizing the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific region, then the Russia challenge in Europe, and;
4. Building a resilient Joint Force and defense ecosystem.

6 Out of the above points, the idea with mixed support amongst many restrainers is the importance of nuclear nonproliferation, but the other three are generally in line with the consensus view.

7 A convincing argument could be made that the United States needs to limit widespread military involvement even in such cases, but that is not the circumstance being discussed in this case.

8 U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, October 27, 2022. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>; The White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 12, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

9 Recent assessments by economists have casted doubt on the ability for China to overtake the U.S. in GDP, many pushing their time estimates back and others arguing that China will never secure the number one spot. Regardless of this debate, China is still the nation that provides the most substantial economic competition to the United States.

10 Even more liberal estimates put China's nuclear weapon stock at around 350, compared to over 3,700 in the United States. See: Hans Kristensen, Eliana Reynolds, and Matt Korda. "STRATCOM Says China Has More ICBM Launchers Than The United States – We Have Questions." *Federation Of American Scientists*, February 10, 2023. <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2023/02/stratcom-says-china-has-more-icbm-launchers-than-the-united-states/>.

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Ukraine War.” *The Hill*, November 30, 2022. <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3756097-real-costs-of-russias-ukraine-war/>.

13 Taiwan’s lack of land borders strategically make invasion far more complicated and increase the value of anti-ship missiles and air defense systems. Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. “Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia.” Accessed November 19, 2022. <https://quincyinst.org/report/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/>.

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On living with North Korea’s nuclear weapons: Doug Bandow, “Avoiding a Korean Calamity: Why Resolving the Dispute with Pyongyang Requires Keeping the Peace,” *Cato Institute*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/avoiding-korean-calamity-why-resolving-dispute-pyongyang-requires-keeping-peace>; Zack Beauchamp, “The case for letting North Korea keep its nukes,” *Vox*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/8/16256880/north-korea-nuclear-weapons-test-containment>; Robert A. Manning, “Reality Check #5: Learning to live with a nuclear North Korea,” *Atlantic Council*, April 26, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/reality-check/reality-check-5-learning-to-live-with-a-nuclear-north-korea/>.”

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18 To put the claim of ROK capacity in more concrete terms, forces in South Korea currently fall

under one of three commands: United States Forces Korea (USFK), Combined Forces Command (CFC), or United Nations Command (UNC). The primary command responsible for ROK security is the CFC, while the USFK provides additional support and training for CFC forces. The position and operation of the CFC is necessarily a bit more nuanced, and will be expanded upon in later sections, but the USFK is exclusively a U.S.-troop command based in South Korea with two explicit goals. The first aim of the USFK is to act as a deterrent, preventing DPRK aggression. The second is, in case of failed deterrence, to rapidly repel DPRK forces and minimize damages to the ROK—the reaction capability exemplified in their vision statement, “ready to Fight Tonight and win.”

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