The Peace-keeping Role of the American troops in South Korea

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Abstract

The American troops in South Korea are a contested issue in inter-Korean relations. While the opinion of South Korea and the United States is that they are essential for the South’s defence, North Korea’s view is that they hinder re-unification.

The South Korea-United States alliance was formed during the Korean War (1950-1953) and is analyzed on the basis of alliance theory. The alliance was strengthened by the signing of a Mutual Defence Treaty in 1953 that is the legal basis for the American troops’ presence. The United States prevented South Korea to retaliate against North Korea following assassination attempts of South Korean presidents in 1968 and 1983. Troop reductions in 1970-1971, 1990-1992 and 2004-2008 caused tensions. Tensions reached a peak due to President Jimmy Carter’s (1977-1981) troop withdrawal policy but it was cancelled owing to strong opposition and an underestimation of North Korea’s armed forces. The American troops have contributed to maintain peace by establishing joint South Korean-American fighting power, by providing superior intelligence power and by serving as a force that both countries regard to be of the utmost importance for the South’s defence.

Key words: American troops, South Korea-United States alliance, peace-keeping

Introduction

The American troops in South Korea are a long-time contested issue in inter-Korean relations. While North Korea has consistently urged a withdrawal, South Korea and the United States have regarded the troops as essential for the defence of the South. Nonetheless, the American forces constitute one factor that has to be analyzed in order to explain how peace has been maintained on the Korean peninsula since the end of the Korean War.

The purpose of this study is to on the basis of alliance theory and qualitative method investigate how the American troops’ have contributed to maintain peace, partly in relation to a few other factors such as rearmaments. The study aims to differ from available studies by to the extent possible raising the troops’ concrete contributions to securing peace and assessing the significance of the contributions. It first briefly presents alliance theory. Since the peace-keeping role of the American forces cannot be properly illuminated without providing a background to the stationing of the troops, the origins of the South Korea-United States alliance are then analyzed.

The following section gives an account of major developments of the alliance since 1953. Rarrarmaments, incidents that have involved the American troops and contested issues such as troop reductions in the 1970s, 1990s and the 2000s are included. Special attention is devoted to the controversies caused by President Jimmy Carter’s (1977-1981) troop withdrawal policy. Opinions in the literature on the troops’ peace-keeping role are assessed, including the role they played during some crises in inter-Korean relations. Finally, specific contributions by the American troops to preserve peace that are more difficult to analyze chronologically are investigated, assessed and compared. The section includes data on military exercises that are less frequently recorded than other criteria of evaluation such as rearmaments.
**Alliance theory**

The South Korean scholar Kim Woosang\(^1\) (2009) quotes the American scholar Stephen Walt, according to whom “an alliance is a formal or an informal agreement between two independent countries for security cooperation. This means a formal alliance by signing an alliance treaty and an informal alliance relation through tacit agreement between the parties or military exercises etc.” Military alliances are depending on their purpose divided into a) capability aggregation and b) autonomy-security trade-off. In the former case, alliance partners gather their strength to jointly cope with the enemy’s threat or acquire power to deter war. Support from an allied nation is very important to raise national power. Such alliances are formed between parties of equal strength and are therefore also referred to as “symmetric alliances.”

In contrast, in the latter case alliance partners’ strength tends to be unequal. The purpose to form an alliance, also called “asymmetric alliance”, between a weak and a strong country is that the former wants military support from the latter to raise national power. Such an alliance is normally disadvantageous for the strong power since it does not receive military support from the weak partner and may against its will become involved in a conflict. On the other hand, it is possible to exert influence on the weaker nation’s policies. The weak nation can strengthen its defence but it also loses some of its autonomy by having to adjust to the stronger nation’s wishes and it may also have to offer military bases. Since such alliances are formed when both parties assess them to be necessary, they tend to last for a long time.\(^2\)

Regarding the impact of alliances on national security, Stephen Walt (1997) writes: “The formation and cohesion on international alliances can have profound effects on the security of individual states and help determine both the probability and likely outcome of war.” On the persistence of some alliances, he writes: “An alliance may persist despite drastic external changes because its members are still better off in the alliance than they would be outside it.” Another opinion is: “An obvious source of alliance durability is the exercise of hegemonic power by a strong alliance leader.” He also points out the symbolic significance of alliances: “Alliances are more likely to persist if they have become symbols of credibility or resolve.”

Finally, concerning alliance formation the American scholar Glenn H. Snyder writes (1984) that it is one method for states to accumulate power in addition to armaments and territorial aggrandizement. He analyzes another important issue in alliance politics: the security dilemma. According to the theory, even when no state has any wish to attack others none can be sure that others’ intentions are peaceful, or will remain so. Consequently, each must accumulate power for defence. Since no state can know whether the power accumulation of others is only due to defence motivations or not, each must assume that it might be intended for attack. Consequently, each party’s power increments are matched by the other. Eventually, there is no more security than when the vicious circle began.\(^3\)

Central concepts such as capability aggregation, autonomy-security trade-off and security dilemma are tested in the following sections. The impact of alliances on national security in relation to rearmaments is also assessed.

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\(^1\) Korean names are written according to the author’s own preferences when known. Otherwise, the McCune-Reischauer system is followed. Names of presidents follow standard spelling.


Formation of the South Korea-United States Alliance

In 1953, South Korea opposed the signing of the Armistice Agreement. However, since President Syngman Rhee (1948-1960) regarded a conclusion inevitable, in a letter to President Dwight Eisenhower (1953-1961) he requested a Mutual Defence Treaty to be signed immediately after the armistice had been enforced. The treaty would be similar to the treaties signed between the United States and the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand.

President Rhee, who had advocated re-unification by advancing northwards, continued to oppose the signing of the Armistice Agreement until the United States had promised to sign a Mutual Defence Treaty and provide military assistance. Since the United States following South Korea’s release of 27,388 ‘anti-Communist prisoners’ from prisoner-of-war camps on June 18, 1953, believed that it was impossible to sign and implement the Armistice Agreement without the consent of the South Korean government, it dispatched an envoy from the State Department to negotiate. At this time, President Rhee aimed for the signing of a Mutual Defence Treaty, long-term economic assistance for reconstruction, reinforcement of the Korean armed forces and separate American-Korean talks on plans for unification, unless political talks with the Communists showed progress within 90 days. The United States accepted the demands. Immediately prior to the signing of the Armistice Agreement on July 27, 1953, South Korea and the United States agreed that the size of the Army would not exceed 655,000 men. The Navy and the Air Force would be limited to 24,000 men altogether. The quality of the latter forces would be somewhat raised.4

Although South Korea refused to sign the Armistice Agreement by arguing that it would perpetuate national division, the country declared following strong pressure from the United States that it would consent to the agreement and observe it on condition of signing a Mutual Defence Treaty and the provision of economic and military assistance. Eventually, a Mutual Defence Treaty was signed on October 1, 1953. The parties agreed to a) resolve international conflicts they may be involved in peacefully, b) to consult each other in the case of an external attack, c) to recognize military attacks on their territories as threats to peace and security and to respond to joint threats on the basis of the constitution, d) to station American military forces in the Republic of Korea, e) to ratify the agreement on the basis of the constitution and, finally, f) to, if one party wishes to cancel the treaty that has no time limit do so one year after the notification. The first, third, fifth and sixth articles are similar to Article 1, 3, 4, 7 and 8 in the 1951 United States-Philippines Mutual Defence Treaty. The same articles are similar to Article 1, 4, 9 and 10 in the 1951 Australia, New Zealand and the United States Security Treaty (ratified in 1952).

The Mutual Defence Treaty became following ratification by both countries’ parliaments in January effective on November 17, 1954. It has since remained unaltered confirming that an alliance formed when both parties assess it to be necessary tend to last for a long time. Exchanges of ratifications had been delayed by the United States that wanted to restrain President Rhee from ordering a march to the north. The Mutual Defence Treaty became the beginning of the South Korea-United States alliance and is the legal framework for stationing American troops in the country as well as a pillar of the South’s national defence policy. Weapons and equipment were brought in afterwards.5 In order to prevent attacks from North


5 The South Korean scholar Park Myông-nim argues that the treaty from a legal point of view is an armistice violation since the Armistice Agreement, Paragraph 13(c) prohibits troop enforcements and Paragraph 13(d) prohibits rearmaments and the treaty’s Paragraph 2 states “The parties will independently or jointly or on the
Korea, the troops have always been concentrated to the western front north of Seoul. Meanwhile, in March 1954 withdrawal of troops who had remained in South Korea after the end of the war commenced (equipment was handed over to the South Korean military). In 1955, there were 85,500 American soldiers in the country, against 325,000 in 1953 and 223,000 in 1954.\(^6\)

### Development of the South Korea-United States Alliance

American military assistance had begun already during the Korean War, when the South Korean army had expanded from 100,000 men to almost 600,000. On July 24, 1950, the United Nations Command (UNC) was founded on the basis of the July 7 Security Council resolution to integrate the combat units into one organization. The UNC established its headquarter in Tokyo on July 24 but it was moved to Seoul on July 1, 1957, to be able to implement its tasks more efficiently. The UNC is represented in the Military Armistice Commission (MAC) that is responsible for implementing the Armistice Agreement and settling armistice violations. An indisputable sign of the huge importance the United States has attached to support South Korea is that from 1950-1988 military assistance altogether reached almost $ 15 billion. The United States from the beginning actively supported education and training of military officers by, for instance, establishing training institutes.

On June 21, 1957, at the 75th MAC plenary meeting the UNC declared Paragraph 13(d) of the Armistice Agreement prohibiting introduction of weapons from abroad to the Korean peninsula to be invalid since the North had previously ignored the paragraph by rearming. However, the South Korean scholar Choi Cheol-Young (2004) points out that both sides had thoroughly neglected Paragraph 13(d).\(^7\) The perceived level of security could have been raised through capability aggregation. On the other hand, in accordance with the security dilemma there was possibly no more security than when the vicious circle began but rearmaments could have reduced the risk for war. Subsequently, modernization of the American troops began. In 1957, atomic weapons were for the first time brought into South Korea as the central part of the modernization of the forces. Also new jet planes capable to carry nuclear weapons were brought in from Okinawa. On January 28, 1958, the UNC confirmed that 280 mm atomic cannons and air-to-air Honest John missiles had been introduced. In 1959, also nuclear weapons for the Air Force were stationed in South Korea. Matador missiles capable to carry nuclear weapons 1,100 kilometres away, that is into North Korea, China and the Soviet Union, were brought in.

In 1961, Mace missiles that could shoot 1,800 kilometres away were introduced. In order to prevent an attack from North Korea, from 1964-66 atomic demolition munitions ("atomic

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\(^7\) Choi, Cheol-Young, “Nambuk kunsajôk habûi-wa Han’guk chôngjôn hyŏpchông-ûi hyoryôk,” *Sônggyungwan pôphak*, 16, no. 2 (2004), p. 495.
mines”) were brought in. The Infantry Unit Nike Hercules equipped with nuclear warheads was also stationed at this time to suggest that, if war would break out, nuclear weapons would immediately be used. In 1973-74, large-scale field artillery was placed in the front areas south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) to be ready for an attack against North Korea. Although this forward defence strategy put less emphasis on nuclear weapons than previous operational plans did, nuclear weapons that in 1975 were moved from the front areas to the rear areas remained stored just 55-80 kilometres from the DMZ. In case of war, the weapons would along with the American troops north of Seoul play the role as a trip-wire to guarantee an automatic intervention.8

While rearmaments took place, following the withdrawal of Chinese troops from North Korea in 1958 the main issue within the MAC became the withdrawal of American troops in South Korea. Already at the 77th MAC meeting convened on July 28, 1957, the Korean People’s Army/Chinese People’s Army (KPA/CPV) had requested a withdrawal.9 The KPA/CPV regarded the troops as the major obstacle for re-unification.

In 1958, a troop withdrawal was requested six times, in 1959 seven times and in 1960-1961 five times. At the 93rd MAC meeting held on January 3, 1959, the North asserted that the American troops obstructed re-unification. The argument was repeated at three meetings held in 1960 and one convened in 1968. The South rejected a troop withdrawal at the 81st MAC meeting held on February 25, 1958, by claiming that it was not an issue for discussion in the Commission. The argument was repeated at two meetings held in 1960 and two convened in 1961. At the 88th meeting held on October 27, 1958, the South argued that a troop withdrawal should be discussed at a high-level political conference. When the 103rd meeting was held on June 10, 1959, the South repeated its claim and argued that the MAC did not have the authority to discuss the issue. It was clarified that the troops were stationed to defend South Korea and would remain as long as there was an invasion threat. The former argument was repeated once each in 1961 and 1969 while the latter was repeated once each in 1962 and 1969.10

During the 1960s, the number of armistice violations rose. The UNC recorded 88 provocations from the North against the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) in 1965 and 80 in 1966 but 784 in 1967 and 985 in 1968. Most of these incidents occurred along the part of the MDL controlled by the United States Army. Altogether 81 American soldiers were killed during the 1960s. However, North Korea’s policy to force a withdrawal of the American troops failed. Instead, it strengthened South Korea’s and the United States’ will to defend the South. Notably, the former advisor to the UNC/MAC, James Munhang Lee (2004) argues that the main reason for North Korea’s failure to achieve national re-unification by taking over South Korea, either militarily or politically, was the presence of the American forces. It is virtually impossible to determine whether Lee’s opinion is correct or not, but the American forces were a very important factor by contributing to capability aggregation.

While most incidents did not create fear for war a few did, in particular North Korea’s seizure of the intelligence vessel USS Pueblo on January 23, 1968. The United States government chose to handle the Pueblo incident through negotiations rather than military retaliation, not least since the country was involved in the Vietnam War which it could not expect to win. Also the assassination attempt of South Korean President Park Chung Hee

9 The KPA/CPV had originally three North Korean and two Chinese officers but since late 1954 there were four North Korean officers and one Chinese officer. From Jonsson, ibid., p. 21. Considering that China and the United States were opponents during the Korean War, it is likely that the opinion to an equal extent reflected the opinions of North Korea and China.
10 Jonsson, ibid., pp. 95, 103, 104, 105-106, 130-131, 583, 584, 585, 586, 598, 602.

The above autonomy-security trade-off derived from the asymmetrical alliance became apparent in this case but that American pressure prevented South Korea from retaliating after the Blue House raid must in retrospect be regarded as very fortunate since retaliation would inevitably have raised tension. Additionally, as James Munhang Lee (1971) points out, war did not break out since the signatory powers of the 1953 Armistice Agreement wanted to maintain status quo, not start a new war. Considering the great risks that renewal of warfare would inevitably have caused, the wish for maintaining status quo can be regarded as more important to maintain peace than the presence of the American forces in this case. There can be no doubt that rearmaments had caused mutual fears for each other causing restraint but it is, as was the case during the first post-war years, plausible that there in accordance with the security dilemma was no more security than when the vicious circle began.

In the late 1960s, the United States suffered from hardships due to opposition against the Vietnam War that had increasingly become a problem, inflation due to the huge war expenditure and the weakening of the American dollar. In order to overcome the difficulties, on July 25, 1969, President Richard Nixon (1969-1974) launched the Nixon doctrine that would make Asian countries more responsible for their own defence. Henceforth, American support would be selective and limited. For South Korea, the autonomy-security trade-off reappeared. In 1970-1971, the Seventh Infantry Division and three Air Force airplane battalions were in spite of passionate opposition from South Korea withdrawn, that is 20,000 men. The number of troops fell from 63,000 men in 1969 to 43,000 in 1971. One reason for the South’s opposition was that the Mutual Defence Treaty does not guarantee automatic American commitment but just prescribes that the United States government "would act to meet the danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.” The average number of troops from 1956-1968 had been around 60,000 men.

In 1971, President Park had claimed in his New Year’s address that the reduction of American troops made it necessary to emphasize self-reliance in national defence. Consequently, whereas previously economic reconstruction was ahead of national defence, the two targets now became pursued simultaneously. Since President Nixon already in 1969 at a meeting with President Park had emphasized the need for South Korean self-reliance, the announcement should have been carefully considered in advance. It was followed by the establishment of a defence tax in 1975. While rearmaments took place also outside the South Korea-United States alliance, from 1971-77 the US provided $ 1.5 billion in assistance to modernize the South Korean armed forces.

The American troops issue strongly affected the first inter-Korean dialogue held from 1971-73. Following the announcement of the July 4 Joint Communiqué in 1972 which expressed the belief that national re-unification should take place without external interference and peacefully, transcending differences in ideas, ideologies and systems, North Korea argued that since the two Koreas had agreed to re-unify peacefully without foreign

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intervention, there was no excuse in the American troops to remain. Instead, they should withdraw immediately. However, since South Korea rejected the demand to withdraw the American forces, which in the South was a taboo issue, North Korea broke off the plenary session of the South-North Coordinating Committee that had begun in October 1972 at the sixth meeting to be held on August 28, 1973, but the Korean Central Intelligence’s abduction of opposition leader Kim Dae Jung in Tokyo was the excuse.\(^{12}\)

The KPA/CPV continued to raise the American troops issue at MAC meetings. In 1970, 1971 and 1972, the North on one occasion each requested a troop withdrawal. In 1973, the demand was made three times and then once each in 1981, 1982 and 1983. At the 305th MAC meeting held on September 8, 1970, the North again claimed that owing to the presence of American forces, re-unification had not been accomplished: if the troops had been withdrawn, Korea would already have re-unified. At the 332nd MAC meeting held on September 7, 1972, and the 340th meeting convened on June 28, 1973, the South again argued that a troop withdrawal was not an issue to raise in the Commission.

The issue that has caused most concerns since the formation of the South Korea-United States alliance was the policy pursued by President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) to withdraw the American troops. According to the American scholars William J. Taylor Jr., Jennifer A. Smith and Michael J. Mazarr (1990), the troop reduction plan was "the result of his desire to avoid a loss of control over the extent of US [United States] involvement in another Asian conflict and to reflect public opinion about US troops in Korea, even to the detriment of prudent defence planning in Northeast Asia." Previously, on August 21, 1976, the UNC had made a massive demonstration of military strength by bringing more than 100 soldiers and engineers in 23 American and South Korean vehicles into Panmunjom when a disputed tree in the area was cut except for a three meter stump. Air support was provided by 27 helicopters. The operation took place following the North’s killing of two American soldiers on August 18 ("axe-murder") but did not face any North Korean reaction, indicating that the American forces had hindered a dangerous situation from escalating further.

On March 9, 1977, President Carter promised a complete withdrawal of the troops from 1978-1982. At this time, the American withdrawal from Vietnam and the communization of Vietnam in 1975 had already caused security concerns for the South Korean government. A plan to withdraw the troops from 1978-1982 was proclaimed on May 5. The Korean government was officially informed on July 26 at the tenth Security Consultative Meeting but had not been consulted in advance. Taylor, Smith and Mazarr (1990) claim that the Carter administration publicly gave two main reasons for the troop withdrawal. First, administration officials thought that it was not in the interest of China or the Soviet Union to "encourage or support actions which would raise the risk of war on the Korean peninsula.” Second, South Korea was both economically and militarily capable to assume more responsibility for its own defence.\(^{13}\)

Nonetheless, due to the South Korean government’s strong opposition as well as fierce domestic resistance in the United States, including high-ranking officials, the plan was not implemented. However, the main reason for the cancellation was the report by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) claiming that North Korea’s military force was much stronger than expected. In July 1978, President Carter announced that the withdrawal would be held in

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abeyance after it had become known from intelligence work that North Korea had many more tanks and pieces of artillery than previously known and ground forces had reached 680,000 man, up from 485,000. North Korea had a two-to-one advantage in the former case and had for the first time more men than South Korea under arms.

On February 9, 1979, President Carter stated that the withdrawal would be temporarily deferred. Later, on July 20, he officially declared that the withdrawal plan had been suspended until 1981. Besides the CIA report, the president claimed that tensions on the Korean peninsula would have to be reduced before stability could be assured with a reduction of American troops and pointed to the expansion of Soviet military power in Asia and the need to reassure allies of the United States regarding its commitment to the region as a whole. In 1978, only 3,000 soldiers had left. The number of nuclear weapons had fallen from more than 700 to around 250. The average number of troops in the 1970s was 42,200 men and in the 1980s 41,600 men.14

As was the case after the 1968 assassination attempt on President Park, the autonomy-security trade-off became apparent when the United States restrained South Korea from retaliatory actions also following the Rangoon Bombing on October 9, 1983, that aimed to assassinate President Chun Doo Hwan (1981-88) but killed four South Korean cabinet ministers and 13 other high-ranking dignitaries. At the 422nd MAC meeting held on October 31, the North Koreans complained that South Korean forces were put on alert and the South Koreans openly talked about retaliation. According to the American scholar C. Kenneth Quinones (2001), South Koreans, including President Chun, were ready to risk war to get revenge. The United States restrained the president from taking action by reminding him that it controlled the ammunition, bombs and fuel needed for such an action and said that the United States-Republic of Korea Mutual Defence Treaty which only obligated support in the case of an external attack would not apply. Again, it must be regarded as very fortunate that retaliation did not take place since in such a case tensions would inevitably have risen.

Troop reductions re-emerged as a contested issue in the 1990s making the autonomy-security trade-off re-appearing. After the Congress in the late 1980s at a time when the Cold War had ended aimed to re-adjust military power and curtail military expenditure, it adopted the July 1989 Nunn-Warner amendment to amend the budget by reducing the number of troops in East Asia. In accordance with the Nunn-Warner amendment, in April 1990 the Department of Defence established “The East Asia Strategic Initiative” that aimed to reduce the number of American troops in South Korea during ten years while maintaining regional stability (also Japan and the Philippines were included). Within one to three years, 7,000 troops would be withdrawn. Depending on the outcome, the second stage would be implemented within three to five years. The final stage would be implemented within five to ten years on the condition that regional stability should not be broken. The American troops’ role would be transformed from a leading to a supportive. Subsequently, in March 1991 a South Korean general was appointed Senior Member in the MAC. In 1994, the operational command over the armed forces in peace-time was transferred to South Korea.

The East Asia Strategic Initiative faced strong opposition from the South Korean government that was uncertain of North Korea’s defence capabilities. However, in contrast to when President Carter’s plan to withdraw the troops was announced, South Korean officials had been consulted from the beginning. Subsequently, from 1990-1992 7,000 troops were withdrawn as a measure for the United States to cut its budget deficit but rising tensions over North Korea’s nuclear programme delayed a further reduction. Already in November 1991, the Korean and American ministers of defence had in a clear sign of a more symmetrical relation than previously agreed to “delay the second phase of the Nunn-Warner USFK [United

States Forces in Korea] troop withdrawals until the uncertainty and threat of North Korea’s nuclear development disappears, and our national security is absolutely safeguarded.” In July 1992, the American Department of Defence decided to postpone the second phase of troop reductions. In 1992, the number of troops was 36,450 men. During the 1990s, the average number of troops was 37,700 men.\footnote{Jonsson, ibid., p. 347; Kim, ibid., 2003(b), pp. 91: table 2-2, 102-104; Kukpangbu, ibid., pp. 42-3; C. Kenneth Quinones, “South Korea’s Approaches to North Korea” in Park, Kyung-Ae and Kim, Dalchoong (eds), Korean Security Dynamics in Transition (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 31; Scott Snyder, Pursuing a Comprehensive Vision for the U.S.-South Korea Alliance (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2009), p. 4; Suh, Jae-Jung, “Transforming the US-ROK Alliance: Changes in Strategy, Military and Bases,” Pacific Focus, vol. XXIV, no. 1 (April 2009), pp. 62-3; Taylor, Smith and Mazarr, ibid., pp. 279, 281. Original quotation marks.}

In February 1995, the United States announced “The East Asia Strategic Report” that suggested a freeze of the reduction of its troops stationed in Asia to 100,000 men due to the North Korean nuclear threat. The American wish to remain in the region was more clearly expressed than in the East Asia Strategic Initiative the report replaced.

Later, on October 6, 2004, South Korea and the United States simultaneously announced that the original plan from July the same year to reduce the 37,500 American troops by 12,500 soldiers until late 2005 was extended to September 2008 in accordance with the wishes of the South. However, the Ta'yônjang Rocket Forces and equipment of the Second Army Division would remain to protect the capital region. At this time, the United States was working to relocate troops abroad but again in a clear sign of a more symmetric alliance relation than previously the plan was established in cooperation with South Korea which had been informed in June 2004. Among the troops in South Korea, 3,600 soldiers had in August 2004 been dispatched to Iraq in line with President George Bush’s (2001-2009) concept “strategic flexibility” to dispatch forces in Korea elsewhere but altogether 5,000 men were planned to be withdrawn during 2004. The concept caused serious disagreement since the Koreans feared that they might get involved in other regional conflicts, such as over the Taiwan Strait. Eventually, it was agreed that South Korea would respect the necessity for strategic flexibility of the American forces whereas the United States would respect the South Korean position that it shall not get involved in a regional conflict against the will of the Korean people.

In 2005, another 3,000 soldiers would be withdrawn and 2,000 men during 2006, followed by 2,500 in the third stage from 2007-2008. In the end, the number of troops was scheduled to be 25,000 men from 2009. However, since in April 2008 at the summit meeting between Presidents George Bush and Lee Myung Bak the two countries decided to freeze the reduction of troops by 3,500 men, the number of soldiers at this time was 28,500.\footnote{The author has found no explicit explanation why the two countries decided to freeze the reduction of troops. However, President Lee Myung Bak referred in his April 19, 2008, joint press conference with President George W. Bush to a “twenty-first century strategic alliance.” At Camp David, the two presidents announced the establishment of a “strategic alliance for the twenty-first century” (original quotation marks). From Snyder, ibid., 2009, pp. 2, 7.} Considering that the plan in 2004 was to strengthen the remaining troops’ fighting power by reorganizing the Second Army Division and investing $11 billion until 2006 to elevate fighting power, it is hard to believe that the reduction in any way affected the ability to deter an attack from North Korea. Unsurprisingly, North Korea still regarded the American troops as the main obstacle to unification on its own terms and wanted to sign a bilateral peace treaty with the United States to force a troop withdrawal. Meanwhile, in 2007, 77 percent of South Koreans supported the stationing of American forces.\footnote{Jonsson, op. cit., pp. 400, 414, 467; Kim, op. cit., 2003(b), pp. 91: table 2-2, 104: “Hanbando-ûi ‘kin p’yônghwâ’-wa Hanmi tongmaeng: [Samwilch’ê+1] kujo-ûi hyôngsông-gwa pyônhwa kûrigo chônmang,” Kukpang chôngch’aek yôn’igu 24, no. 3 (Fall 2008), p. 34; Kukpang Chônlô, “Chuhanmigun 3tan’gye kamch’uk
Peace-keeping role of the American forces

The above account gives credibility to the view expressed by the Ministry of Defence (2002) that the American troops have contributed to prevent war by establishing joint South Korean-American fighting power and playing the role as a strategic "stabilizer" and "balancing power" in Northeast Asia. The opinion on their role is in accordance with both capability aggregation and the significance of alliances in terms of symbols of credibility or resolve. In addition, in terms of intelligence power necessary to detect a North Korean attack in advance, the troops played a decisive role in raising national security. Reconnaissance satellites and U-2 reconnaissance planes supervised the skies around the Korean peninsula 24 hours a day. In 2003, intelligence gathering on North Korea was made by the local CIA section and a supportive agency under the South Korean Ministry of Defence that through intelligence satellites supervised the North’s military movements and took photos of them. The American troops investigated intelligence through their ground bases. An Air Force reconnaissance unit worked through U-2 planes. The joint Combined Intelligence Operations Centre operated by the Joint Intelligence Staff Unit was the core of American-South Korean intelligence work that analyzed the moves by the North Korean armed forces. The mere fact that North Korea was aware of the American intelligence capacity contributed to prevent war.

On the other hand, the South Korean scholar Cho Seung-Ryoul (2003) argues that the Korean military was too dependent upon the American forces’ early warning functions and intelligence assets. In terms of Human Intelligence and Public Intelligence the military was self-reliant but in the case of such scientific areas as Signal Intelligence and Imagery Intelligence it was highly dependent on the American forces. All strategic intelligence, 99 percent of signal intelligence, 98 percent of imagery intelligence and 70 percent of tactical intelligence from North Korea was provided by the American forces. Especially intelligence satellites, U-2 reconnaissance planes and equipment for investigating intelligence were valuable strengths that could not be purchased. In the case of imagery intelligence, the South Korean Air Force’s reconnaissance plane RF-4C was only capable to photograph and supervise rear areas located at a certain distance from the Military Demarcation Line. In 2006, the situation had no changed at all. The South Korean journalist Kim P’il-chae then wrote that the Korean military relied upon the American forces for all strategic intelligence, more than 70 percent of tactical intelligence, 99 percent of signal intelligence and 98 percent of imagery intelligence.

According to the South Korean journalist Park Pong-hyôn (2004), as long as the 37,500 American troops remain they fill the loopholes of the Korean Air Force and Navy through their superior intelligence and reconnaissance capacity through U-2 reconnaissance planes and satellites. Consequently, the contributions to provide stability on the Korean peninsula through their intelligence capacity should not be underestimated. The American forces had a plan enabling them to on the basis of intelligence work confirm signs of war four to 48 hours in advance that helped to prevent war. Finally, in accordance with the above account, the South Korean scholar Kim Woosang (2009) writes that while military support from the United States has strengthened national security self-determination has to a certain extent been sacrificed in the asymmetric relation.\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^\text{18}\) Cho, Seong-Ryoul, "Chuhan migun-ûi anbojôk yôk’hal-gwa yônhap pangwi t’aese” in Kim and Cho, Chuhan migun: Yôksa, chaengchôm, chônmang (Seoul: Hanul, 2003), pp. 183-4, 191; Kim, "Chuhanmigun ch’ôlsu-nunn imi stjaktoego itta: ch’ômdan changbi, pyôngnyôk sarajigo chaejông pudam-gwa Pukhan wiwhyôm-man nûrô\)
In the case of military equipment, Cho (2003) records that the American Eighth Army was equipped with more than 140 brand-new M1 tanks and 170 Bradley armoured vehicles as well as over 70 AH-64 helicopters equipped with 30 independent 155 mm howitzers and 30 rockets and guided missiles etc. Consequently, it was capable to successfully implement its tasks under whatever circumstances. The American Air Force possessed more than 100 planes, including 70 brand-new fighters such as F-16 and more than 20 A-10 anti-tank planes and U-2:s which enabled operations regardless of weather conditions. In 2003, the Ministry of Defence estimated the price of the American troops’ combat equipment and the costs for their maintenance to $14 billion. The price of the ground troops’ equipment was around $17.5 billion.

Although Park (2004) emphasizes the great importance of the American forces, he also argues that South Korea had the capacity to fill the gap in terms of national defence if the troops would leave. Since South Korea was superior to North Korea militarily and had an economy that was about 30 times larger, the American troops were not needed as a trip-wire. Their role as a deterrent against the North Korean threat did no longer exist. In contrast, the American scholars Catherine Boye, Mike Bosack and Russ Gottwald argue (2010), that “…it would be prohibitively expensive for Korea on its own to maintain a military capable of deterring North Korea.”¹⁹ In brief, the American troops have contributed to maintain peace through capability aggregation by establishing joint South Korean-American fighting power, by providing superior intelligence power augmenting fighting power and by serving as a force that both countries regard to be of the utmost importance for the South’s defence.

Finally, it should be noted that the Ministry of Defence (2002) writes that exercises such as Ulchi Focus Lens (UFL) and Reception, Staging, Onward Movement and Integration (RSOI) have given the South Korean military opportunities to learn advanced technologies that would have been difficult to acquire by themselves. The purpose of the UFL that has been implemented annually since 1976 is to improve the ability to lead and pursue war and to master the procedure to pursue war. The purpose of the RSOI that has been held annually since 1994 is to train coordination of American and South Korean troops in a war-case scenario. In 2006, the exercise involved more than 100,000 men. Another exercise is Foal Eagle that has been conducted annually since 1961 in order to display determination and complete preparedness for joint action to prevent war. Other exercises conducted include “Team Spirit” which in 1980 involved altogether 160,000 soldiers. In 1981, the exercise involved more than 61,500 American and 170,000 South Korean troops. In 1982, 1983, 1984 and 1986, the figures exceeded 160,000, 188,000 and, on the last two occasions, 200,000 men. In 1987, the figure was 200,000. The figures indicate that a significant portion of the South Korean armed forces should have acquired new military skills through the RSOI and Team Spirit.

A similar opinion as that of the Ministry of Defence was expressed in 2001 by General Thomas A. Schwartz, at the time Commander-in-Chief of the UNC and the United States Forces Korea, who wrote: “Each of these annual exercises is critical to achieve war-fighting readiness.” He regards the exercises as “world-class exercises.” The exercises integrated forces on the Korean peninsula with deploying active and reserve forces. A major objective of each exercise was to incorporate logistics at the strategic and operational levels. The exercises maximized simulation technology along with air, sea and ground maneuvers to allow optimal

evaluation of war plans. Since peace has been maintained, the opinions expressed by Schwartz are reasonable.

Conclusions

The American troops in South Korea have actively contributed to maintain peace in three mutually reinforcing ways: the establishment of joint South Korean-American fighting power, the provision of superior intelligence power and their role as a force that both countries regard to be of the utmost importance for the South’s defence. Firstly, the legal basis for the American troops in South Korea is the Mutual Defense Treaty from 1953. The troops have contributed to capability aggregation which has made troop reductions a contested issue. The American troops are also a long-time contested issue in inter-Korean relations. While the opinion of South Korea and the United States is that the troops are essential for the South’s defence, North Korea’s view is that they hinder re-unification.

Troop reductions implemented in 1970-1971, 1990-1992 and 2004-2008 created tensions but on the two latter occasions reductions reflected a more symmetrical relation, indicating that South Korea’s bargaining power against the United States had become stronger. President Jimmy Carter’s (1977-1981) policy to withdraw the troops caused most concerns ever but it was cancelled owing to strong opposition in both countries and an underestimation of North Korea’s armed forces. Regarding the autonomy-security trade-off, the United States prevented South Korea to retaliate against North Korea following assassination attempts of South Korean presidents in 1968 and 1983. That military power was mobilized when a disputed tree was cut in Panmunjom in 1976 also hindered a dangerous situation from aggravating.

Secondly, although the dependence on the United States in terms of intelligence power has been excessive, this contribution to maintain peace cannot be overestimated.

Thirdly, whereas rearmaments have violated the Armistice Agreement, Paragraph 13(d) they have strengthened South Korea’s defence and created mutual fears for the consequences of renewing warfare. The symbols of credibility or resolve should not be underestimated. On the other hand, given the security dilemma it is not clear whether security actually has been enhanced but the perceived level of security has apparently risen.

References


Mutual Defence Treaty (U.S.-Phillipines).