

Testimony of Peter T.R. Brookes

Before

The Committee on Armed Services

U.S. House of Representatives

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, it is an honor and privilege to appear before you today to discuss the decision of the United States to draw down forces from the Korean peninsula.

I want to commend you for holding this very timely hearing as there are many questions being asked on both sides of the Pacific that should be addressed in an open forum.

I am testifying here today as an individual and my views do not necessarily reflect the views of The Heritage Foundation.

The United States-Republic of Korea (ROK) defense relationship took a major step into the 21st century this month with the announcement that Washington would withdraw one-third of its 37,000 troops from the Republic of Korea by the end of 2005.

The news, not completely unexpected in light of the United States' decision in May of this year to send 3,600 combat troops from South Korea to Iraq, still has observers nervous on both sides of the Pacific.

It is my view that they need not be.

Even though this is the largest drawdown of American forces from Korea since the end of the Korean War—and the most significant since 1992, when 7,000 troops left—the reduction in 12,500 U.S. soldiers from the Korean peninsula is, in my estimation, a win-win situation for the United States and the Republic of Korea.

First, in a general sense, the number of troops does not completely determine the military capability of any force. And the 37,000 American troops currently stationed in the Republic of Korea is only a small portion of the U.S. troops that would actually be needed in the event of a Korean peninsula contingency.

In fact, despite the upcoming decrease in American soldiers in the Republic of Korea, according to the Pentagon, U.S. firepower will actually increase due to expected improvements in American force structure over the next several years.

Although technology cannot replace soldiers in some missions, today's hi-tech equipment can provide significant firepower advantages over the common foot soldier.

Therefore, the United States can withdraw some of its Korean-based troops for other soldier-intensive missions, such as Iraq, Afghanistan and the war on terrorism, while actually improving the lethality and deterrence of its forces in the ROK.

Improving the defense capability of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) can be accomplished by bringing to bear such systems as Patriot PAC-3 surface-to-air missiles for air defense, the Army's new Stryker brigade, the Navy's High-Speed Vessel, and the forward-deployment of additional air and naval assets to Hawaii and Guam.

Washington is also planning an \$11 billion investment in some additional 150 military capabilities over the next four years that will enhance defense against any North Korean attack, according to the Department of Defense.

Secondly, it is useful for both Seoul and Washington to reduce the visibility and "footprint" (that is, the size and number of bases) of U.S. forces because of trends in South Korean public opinion, which has been mixed—at best-- about USFK's presence.

Moving the American army out of Seoul, drawing down troop levels and consolidating bases will reduce pressures from some sectors of Korean society for all U.S. troops to leave.

Returning valuable land to the city of Seoul is an important gesture and it makes no sense to have U.S. military forces operating in the midst of a metropolitan area, which is home to 12 million people.

Shifting U.S. troops away from the DMZ and south of the Han River will improve the maneuverability and flexibility of our forces, increasing their deterrent effect and war fighting capability.

Next, South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun stated his belief early on in his tenure that the Republic of Korea should do more for its own defense. As the world's 11th largest economy, the ROK can spend more on its own defense—and should.

It is already doing so with the procurement of the power projection systems such as the F-15K fighters, Multiple Launch Rocket Systems, P-3 anti-submarine aircraft and KDX-II/III destroyers with Aegis. In addition, it has requested an 13 percent increase in its defense spending for next year from the National Assembly. Despite these positive developments, the ROK can still do more.

Moreover, the reduction in U.S. forces will provide the Roh government an opportunity to do more for the Republic of Korea's national security as promised.

This supports both Washington's need for more flexibility in deploying its forces to global hotspots and Seoul's desire for a bigger role in its national defense.

Lastly, though unlikely, there is a sliver of a chance—perhaps less- that the reduction of U.S. forces could help reduce North-South Korean tensions. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) long has demanded that U.S. troops leave the peninsula.

This reduction could be seen as a gesture of goodwill to the DPRK that just might lead to some additional political openings between Seoul and Pyongyang in addressing issues of national reconciliation or even North Korea's nuclear program.

But because no one is naïve regarding North Korean intentions or petulance, the U.S. force reduction will be matched by an increase in USFK's military capabilities.

The bottom line is that despite these changes, America's commitment to the ROK's defense is as strong as ever. The United States' obligation to the security of the South against the North is a moral one in the defense of a fellow democracy, not to mention codified in the 1953 U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty.

Moreover, the real "tripwire" is the Mutual Defense Treaty, not the number of U.S. troops in the Republic of Korea. The tripwire analogy is a false concept and anachronistic. The troop reduction should not be viewed as a weakening of America's resolve.

A military confrontation between North and South Korea would invariably result in the demise of the regime in Pyongyang. Fortunately, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il understands this.

The U.S.-ROK alliance is a partnership forged in blood and valor. It is strengthened by the shared values of freedom, democracy, open markets and the millions of Koreans who have come to America's shores as immigrants.

The alliance has successfully deterred North Korean aggression, provided for peace and stability in Northeast Asia, and fostered the growth of freedom and prosperity in the ROK for over 50 years. It should do so for as long as needed because it continues to be in America's interest to do so.

Adjusting the U.S.-ROK partnership for the 21st century makes ultimate sense.

The future of the alliance will be better for this, making the relationship ready for challenges on the Korean peninsula-- and beyond.