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World Print Edition

A declining presence

Gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea strains alliance as North's nuke threat looms

BY JEREMY KIRK
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

May 1, 2005

SEOUL, South Korea - As the United States rethinks the best positioning of its military forces around the world, cracks in its alliance with South Korea are showing in the midst of an ongoing nuclear threat from communist North Korea.

The cause of the strain: Washington is trying to revamp what it considers its outdated, Cold War-minded military system while keeping its 52-year commitment to this region, and South Korea wants to take charge of its own defense. The two countries are bogged down by how to fund changes.

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Since Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. military has faced severe manpower challenges, and Washington has questioned having relatively idle troops in Korea, presiding over an armistice of the Korean War. As a result, Washington is cutting its troops in South Korea and moving the remaining ones away from camps that are within mortar range of North Korea and the razor-sharp fencing of the Demilitarized Zone. About 5,000 troops were pulled out last year, with some dispatched directly to Iraq. An additional 3,000 will depart by the end of this year, leaving troop strength at a record low of 29,500. By 2008, 4,500 more are to leave.

New outlook on defense

In the late 1970s, Congress criticized then-President Jimmy Carter for proposing a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops. Now, Seoul agrees it should take a larger role in its

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own defense even though it means a greater financial

burden. At the same time, it realizes it still needs the military intelligence and advanced combat equipment provided by Washington, said Rodger Baker, director of geopolitical analysis for Stratfor, a think tank based in Austin, Texas.

"South Korea seeks to establish itself as a more independent nation, one whose interests are diverging from those of the United States but one that it is not ready to cut and run," he said.

For several years, U.S. defense planners have pursued not just a regional role for U.S. forces, in which they would respond to a conflict nearby, but also a global one, where they could be spun off to another region altogether, said Peter Brookes, former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific affairs and senior fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank in Washington. "Obviously, the Koreans are focused on the Korean peninsula, but the United States has regional and global responsibilities," Brookes said.

The two countries plan to sign a deal soon to reduce South Korea's financial contribution to the maintaining of U.S. forces for the next two years. In a rift played out earlier this month, U.S. military officials said the \$60-million cut would affect their combat equipment and impact readiness. The Koreans indicated they would not budge.

Seoul contributed about \$622 million last year for war supplies, military construction and salaries for Korean civilians who work on U.S. bases. The United States spends \$1.2 billion annually to maintain its force in South Korea.

"I want to state up front that we will attempt to minimize the practical impact on readiness of these cost-avoidance and cost-cutting measures," said Lt. Gen. Charles Campbell, who heads the 8th U.S. Army, which is assigned to South Korea. "However, we will be required to make tough but necessary decisions."

South Korean Defense Minister Yoon Kwang-ung has said that if the funding becomes a problem, "the U.S. government can renegotiate the amount two years from now."

Boosting weapons system

The American flag already has been lowered on more than a half-dozen deteriorating encampments for U.S. soldiers, who have kept an armed vigil for decades near the DMZ. The potential for conflict still looms: North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles program seeks to fortify its military, already the world's fifth largest, the U.S. military says. Multilateral talks have been unsuccessful in persuading North Korea to give up its nuclear program.

The White House is hoping that improvements in weapons technology would mean the quick and efficient movement of U.S. troops to a combat zone from anywhere. "I would say that proximity to the DMZ is not as important as it used to be, given the long reach of weapons systems and the fact that the U.S. likes to fight a mobile operation," said Joseph Bermudez Jr., author of several books on North Korean military capabilities. The United States has pledged to spend \$11 billion more through the end of this year on 150 systems to enhance its force in South Korea. Those investments will include rotation of the Army's Stryker vehicles, upgrades to Patriot anti-missile systems and use of unmanned aerial vehicles.

Economic repercussions

South Korea has depended heavily on the United States for its defense, said Nick Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute in Washington and author of "The End of North Korea." Seoul has estimated it would have to double defense spending to have an all-South Korean military match the strength of U.S. troops, he said.

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A U.S. pullout also could affect foreign investment in South Korea. In 2004, U.S. banking giant Citigroup invested \$2.6 billion and General Motors invested \$1.2 billion. The United States has been quick to cite its presence as a stabilizer, allowing for the growth that has made South Korea's economy the world's 12th largest.

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