

The seventh withdrawal: has the US forces' journey back home from Korea begun?

Alon Levkowitz

*The International Relations Department, Hebrew University,
Jerusalem
Email: levko@smile.net.il*

Abstract

This article analyzes the reasons that led to the six United States forces withdrawals from South Korea between 1947 and 2008 and the Republic of Korea's responses to these policies. The article discusses the local and global aspects of these forces' functions and tasks and attempts to understand why Korea has not prepared itself for the withdrawal of the US forces throughout the years. The article will argue that there might be a seventh withdrawal of US forces from Korea in the near future, which South Korea and the USA should begin preparing for.

1 Introduction

More than 50 years after the Korean War, the significance of the presence of US forces in Korea is increasingly being challenged. Strategic considerations play an important role, but no less important are the internal debates concerning the issue in Korean society, and military and political spheres. For almost five decades this debate was conducted mainly behind closed doors or publicly expressed only by extremist groups. However, in the last 5 years this debate has become a public issue involving all sectors of society, mainly due to South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's remarks on the topic.

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Since the end of the Second World War, when the US forces liberated the southern part of the Korean Peninsula from Japanese occupation, the US military forces stationed in Korea have been playing a central role in assuring South Korea's security and are a main pillar in its defense policy. One way to determine the importance of the US forces to Korea's defense is by analyzing the reactions of the South Korean administrations throughout the years to American withdrawals or readjustment plans for the US forces. If Seoul supported Washington's plans to withdraw at least some of its forces from Korea, it could have gradually limited the US forces' role in the Republic of Korea's (ROK) defense. But in reality, Seoul panicked almost each of the six times, from 1945 until 2008, when Washington decided to withdraw/readjust its forces from or within Korea. These US attempts to change its tactical or strategic position in the Korean Peninsula were a source of tension and disagreement between the two capitals and presidents throughout the years, which influenced relations between the two countries.

This paper will analyze the logic that led different US administrations to withdraw or to plan the withdrawal of its forces from Korea several times since the end of Second World War and the unique and sometimes even surprising South Korean opposition to these decisions. It will also try and conclude from these past experiences how both sides will handle the next withdrawal proposal. The first part of the paper will discuss the functions of the US forces in Korea, the second part will describe the history of the six withdrawals from Korea between 1945 and 2008, and the third part will analyze the considerations that stood behind the USA and the ROK's reactions to these events throughout the years. The last part of the paper will raise the question of a pending seventh withdrawal and the probable reactions of both sides.

2 Functions of the US forces in Korea: American and Korean perspectives

It is important to differentiate between the roles the US forces stationed in Korea fulfilled before and after the Korean War.

2.1 Before the Korean War

The Americans' first task was to liberate Korea from the Japanese occupation. Once Korea was liberated they were responsible for maintaining law and order, assisting in building an independent Korean state in the southern part of the Peninsula (Oh, 2002) and training and equipping the new South Korean army (Brazinsky, 2007).

2.2 *Since the Korean War*

The forces had several functions, bilateral and regional:

1. Deterring North Korea and preventing a new Korean War – The US assumption immediately after the war and for the majority of the years since it ended, was that South Korea could not deter North Korea by itself and it needed the assistance of the US forces.¹
2. Demonstrating US commitment to Korea – The presence of US forces in Korea, especially by the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), as a ‘tripwire’ force that will ensure US involvement if any conflict broke out on the Korean Peninsula, symbolized the highest US commitment to Korea’s security. It also has an important psychological implication in assuring South Korean citizens that the Korean War will not reoccur (Hamm, 2004).
3. Supporting the Korean economy – The US forces (and the alliance) and the security ‘umbrella’ (conventional and nuclear) allowed South Korea to rebuild its economy after the Second World War and the Korean War and continue with its economic development ever since. It also gave political backup to South Korea’s initiatives throughout the years to ease tensions in the Korean Peninsula (Cho, 1982; Hart-Landsberg, 1998).
4. Regional tasks – From a regional, strategic point of view, the importance of the US forces is threefold: preventing any changes in the balance of power in the region (Cumings, 1983; Clark, 1992); acting as a regional pacifier by allowing the US to respond very quickly and prevent a conflict from escalating in case a conflict arises outside or within the Korean Peninsula; and signaling US commitment not only to Korea but also to Japan and other Asian US allies in the region (Lee, 1978, pp. 107–108, 1982, p. 102).
5. Safeguard – From Washington’s perspective, the presence of the US forces on Korean soil enabled them, mainly in President Rhee Syngman’s and President Park Chung-hee’s eras, to prevent South Korea from entrapping the US to participate in a war that is not in its best interests, by initiating a unilateral military act against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) (Walt, 1987; Hong, 2000, ch. 3).
6. Korea’s importance – From the South Korean perspective, in addition to all of the above, it seems that the presence of the US forces on their land serves as a constant reminder of how Seoul was right when they asked Washington not to withdraw its forces before the Korean War, and how strategically important the Korean conflict is to the USA.

1 One of the main points of contention between Seoul and Washington throughout the years was over how many US soldiers were needed to deter the DPRK and where they should be located in Korea (Clough, 1976; Kim, 1991; O’Hanlon, 1998).

3 US force withdrawal from Korea: 1945–2008

In order to understand the US troop withdrawals from Korea and its sensitivity to both sides, it is crucial to look back and analyze the six major withdrawals or withdrawal plans since 1945.

3.1 *The first withdrawal: the traumatic withdrawal*

Washington began considering the option of withdrawing its forces from Korea right after the US forces liberated the southern part of the Korean Peninsula from the Japanese occupation. On May 7th 1947, the US Under Secretary of War, Robert P. Patterson, raised the issue of withdrawing from Korea due to the cost and lack of interest. A short while after, on September 25th 1947, the Joint Chiefs supported the withdrawal as well. They were not the only supporters of the withdrawal from Korea in the US government (McGlothlen, 1989), but there were different views about the withdrawal (Hong, 2000, p. 166), especially concerning its timing.

According to the USA, there were several reasons supporting a complete withdrawal at this point of time (1947–1949):

Korea was not seen as strategically important or a vital interest for the United States; The Berlin Crisis 1947–48 and the Truman Doctrine increased the need to focus on the European arena, where the Cold War was allegedly being ‘fought’, and not on Asia; Japan was considered more important than Korea; The end of the Second World War led to the reduction in the number of US forces stationed in other places around the globe and the cost of keeping the forces in Korea (Kim, 1996, p. 10).

The withdrawal began at the end of 1947. The majority of forces left between the end of 1947, beginning of 1948, and by June 29th 1949 all 45,000 US military forces that were stationed in Korea after WWII withdrew from South Korea (Chay, 1990, p. 118; Kim, 1996, p. 11). Washington apparently estimated that the South Korean army was capable of preserving internal order and deterring the DPRK (Matray, 1983). Secretary of State Dean Acheson stated that South Korea would be able to defend itself with the assistance the USA provided (Schnabel, 1992, p. 30). It is important to stress, however, that in its formal documents concerning the withdrawal aftermath scenarios, both the NSC and CIA estimated a high probability of a future military attack by North Korea on the South (Chay, 1990, p. 124).

From the Korean perspective the first withdrawal left them with an unprepared military force to defend the ROK against a North Korean attack (Millett, 2000, pp. 62–101). President Rhee wrote to President Truman in August 1949:

American officers tell me we have sufficient ammunition for two months of combat; my own officers tell me it is only sufficient for two days (Schnabel, 1992, p. 30).

Seoul felt abandoned by Washington. It is also important to stress that the decision was not a bilateral one – it was mostly a pure military logistical decision, with some delays in its execution due to internal debates inside the American administration regarding timing. The South Korean government was not an important player in the decision-making process and, according to some writers, was intentionally kept in the dark by the USA (Chay, 1990, p. 124). In fact, an analysis of the balance of power between North and South Korea in 1950 shows that the North Korean army was much more powerful, and the South Korean army was not fit to halt any massive attack by the North (Lee, 2001, p. 44). But once the decision to withdraw the forces was made, Seoul had very little leverage over Washington and was unable to convince it from withdrawing.

The consequences of the first withdrawal made it the most traumatic one in the USA–ROK relations, to date. The apparent link between the withdrawal, combined with Secretary of States Dean Acheson's January 12, 1950 speech before the Press Club and the opening of the Korean War, paints the entire concept of future force withdrawal in inevitable black colors. The failure the South Korean military forces experienced when confronted with the North Korean attack showed that the USA did not prepare and equip the South Korean military forces in a satisfactory manner and that Seoul was justified in its complaints and fears (Hong, 2000, p. 28; Millett, 2005, p. 212). It seems that the war verified South Korea's assumption that Korea was abandoned by the USA in 1949. The feeling, that if the USA had not withdrawn all its forces from Korea, the DPRK would have never opened the war, influenced Korean policy towards the USA ever since and the fear that the USA might abandon it again influenced Seoul's policy towards any proposals Washington made throughout the years to withdraw a portion of its forces.

3.2 *The second withdrawal: 1954*

The end of the Korean War led to the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) (Lee, 1978, pp. 107–108, 1982, p. 102). The MDT had various goals: *First* and foremost to defend the ROK against the breakout of a new Korean War;² *Second*, to deter the communist bloc as part of the bilateral alliances that the USA signed with other Asian states (Japan and the Philippines, for example) (Press, 2003); *Third*, to prevent any attempts by Seoul to entrap Washington

2 The US forces stationed in Korea functioned as a 'tripwire' – a deterrence mechanism. If North Korea invades the South, it will have to fight against the US forces stationed there. By doing so, the Northern attack will be seen as an attack on the USA and will necessarily lead to the intervention of US forces in the war.

into a new war with the North. Washington was afraid that President Rhee Syngman, and later President Park Chung-hee, might drag the USA into a new war with the DPRK (Ok, 1990, pp. 11–16; Hong, 2000, ch. 3). The presence of the US forces on South Korean soil would allow Washington to halt any attempts by Seoul to escalate a war in the Korean Peninsula.

The end of the Korean War raised the question of whether there was a need to keep more than the 300,000 US soldiers who participated in the war, in South Korea. It was decided that there was no strategic logic in keeping that many soldiers in the region. Washington decided to withdraw the majority of the US soldiers from Korea – the second withdrawal since Korea's establishment. From the 320,000 US soldiers stationed in Korea after the war, only 70,000 were left after the 2nd withdrawal (Cavendish, 2004). Seoul was afraid, as it had been stating throughout the US withdrawals, that the DPRK might interpret this withdrawal as an invitation to attack again, due to the weakness of the South Korean forces (Hong, 2000, p. 66), although the USA left a credible deterrent force in Korea along with a public and strong commitment to the South Korean defense, not like the one in 1949.

3.3 The third withdrawal: 1971

The Vietnam War led to the third withdrawal of the US forces from Korea.

President Park Chung-hee sent a total of 300,000 South Korean soldiers to assist the USA in the Vietnam War throughout the years. From Park's point of view the assistance to the USA served Korea's interests; Strengthening the alliance (MDT) by demonstrating Korea's commitment to the USA as the USA assisted Korea in the past and would assist in the future; Obtaining foreign currency, paid by the USA for South Korea's assistance, which contributed to the development of the Korean economy; Participating in the battle against the communist threat wherever it existed; and a training opportunity for the South Korean army (Kim, 1970; Han, 1978a; Lee, 1994). President Park, who saw this mission as part of maintaining the alliance's needs, estimated that it would increase Washington's commitment to Seoul. He did not expect President Nixon's reaction to Korea's assistance to be a withdrawal of the US forces from Korea.

The increasing cost of the Vietnam War, the absence of peace or settlement in Vietnam, and the changing strategic balance vis-à-vis the Soviet Union were the main reasons that led to the initiation of the Nixon Doctrine (Nam, 1986, pp. 62–72). President Nixon declared the Guam Doctrine in Guam on July 25, 1969. It stated that the USA would keep its treaty commitments to its allies in Asia, but as far as internal security problems and military defense were concerned, excluding major wars 'the United States is going to accept that this problem will be increasingly handled by the Asian nations themselves' (Lee, 2006, p. 67). The Guam Doctrine included the withdrawal of some American soldiers from Asia by June 1971, including the reduction of

the US military forces in South Korea from 62,000 to 42,000 and the repositioning of the Second Infantry Division away from the DMZ (Hwang, 2006).

President Park saw the planned withdrawal of forces as an act of betrayal by the USA towards one of its main allies that assisted it in the Vietnam War (Oberdorfer, 1999, p. 13) and an indication of Washington's eroded commitment to Korea.³ The Blue House transmitted the message to Washington that they were disappointed with President Nixon's plan to withdraw the forces (Cha, 2000, p. 274). One could ask whether a withdrawal of part of the US forces from Korea under the Guam Doctrine diminished the US deterrence, since the 43,000 US soldiers still in Korea were able to serve as a deterrent force against the DPRK. It seems that the main issue at stake was the feeling in Seoul of Washington's decreased commitment to Korea and the psychological influence it had on the relations between the two capitals, rather than the US deterrence vs. the DPRK. Could Seoul have prevented it? Although President Park assisted in Vietnam, Seoul's leverage was very limited considering the major impact the Vietnam War had on Washington's decisions.

In order to moderate Korean criticism, President Nixon promised to provide financial and equipment assistance to the Korean military forces, as stated in the National Security Decision Memorandum 48 on March 20, 1970. In order to ease the tension that the Nixon Doctrine created between Seoul and Washington, President Gerald Ford, President Nixon's replacement, notified President Park that Washington did not intend on carrying out additional withdrawals from Korea (Lee, 2006, p. 77). Secretary of State Henry Kissinger stressed in 1975:

In South Korea there can be no ambiguity about our commitment because we have defense treaty ratified by the Congress. If we abandon this treaty, it would have drastic consequences in Japan and all over Asia because that would be interpreted as our final withdrawal from Asia and our final withdrawal from our postwar foreign policy. (Lee, 1982, p. 103)

The Guam Doctrine and the withdrawal of the US forces from Korea led President Park to seek an alternative guarantee that would allow Seoul to be less dependent on the USA for its own security (Kim, 2004, ch. 4). Attempts by President Park to build South Korea's deterrent force, which would increase Korea's independence, by developing extended missile technology (beyond 300 km) and purchasing nuclear technology, were blocked by Presidents Ford and Carter (Kim, 2004, pp. 193–199).

3 The early indication of a change in Washington's policy towards the Korean Peninsula was Washington's decision not to escalate the USS Pueblo crisis, when the DPRK took control of the American intelligence ship on January 23, 1968, fearing it might lead to an unintended war, which the US would not be able to have while fighting in Vietnam. This reaction raised doubts in Seoul about Washington's commitment towards Korea (Lerner, 2002).

3.4 *The fourth withdrawal: 1978*

President Jimmy Carter's initiative to withdraw the US military forces from Korea did not come as a surprise. Carter had already spoken about it in his presidential campaign (Lee, 2006, p. 81), but the Koreans were not alarmed by his position since they did not expect him to defeat President Ford and assessed that even if he did win, he would not implement his plan after the election. A short while after entering the White House, President Carter declared that he intended to withdraw all US ground forces from Korea.⁴ What was the logic and assessments on which President Carter based his withdrawal plan?

1. The military balance between South and North Korea allowed the USA to withdraw its ground forces and externally defend the ROK with its air and naval forces without undermining South Korea's security (Wood, 1994; Wood and Philip, 1996).
2. China and the Soviet Union would not escalate the conflict in the Korean Peninsula, and they would restrain the DPRK from provoking a new war (Clough, 1982).
3. The withdrawal of the US ground forces from South Korea would not undermine Washington's commitment to Korea, and would save American taxpayers money (Niksich, 1981, p. 326).
4. The Vietnam War influenced Carter's initiative as it had influenced the Nixon Doctrine. Washington did not want to have another war in Asia and did not want to be entrapped in any unwanted conflict. The withdrawal of the ground forces would decrease these chances (Rich, 1982, p. 5).
5. Washington changed its emphasis from Asia to Europe to face the Soviet Union in Europe.⁵
6. President Carter put more emphasis on human rights and moral issues and did not want to support Park's regime, which violated South Korean citizens' human rights, especially after the Yushin constitution (Lee, 2006, p. 81).

President Carter's withdrawal plan was criticized not only by Korea and Japan but also by politicians and military experts in Washington (Humphrey, 1978; Hayes, 1991) and created serious tension between the two capitals and presidents (Gleysteen, 1999). President Carter's withdrawal plan was a 'withdrawal shock' for Seoul. Park's administration attempted to halt it and protested against it (Han, 1978b, p. 45) because it was afraid that Korea would be left defenseless and with a lower US commitment to its defense (Saar, 1977).

4 On January 26, 1977 President Carter issued President Review Memorandum/NSC 13 to review US policy towards Korea by March 17. One of the issues that should be examined according to President Carter was: 'Section 3 (a). Reductions in the US conventional forces levels on the peninsula'. This included the withdrawal of the 2nd infantry division from Korea (Lee, 2006, p. 82).

5 The Soviet Union invasion to Afghanistan will bring Asia back (Rich, 1982, p. 5).

Seoul was concerned that Pyongyang might interpret this withdrawal as it had done before the Korean War.

President Carter eventually accomplished only part of his plan by withdrawing only one battalion (3,500 soldiers) in 1978. On July 20, 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's National Security Advisor declared that the President had given up his plans to withdraw all US forces from Korea (Niksich, 1981, p. 325). The main reason behind President Carter's decision to freeze his complete withdrawal plan was a new intelligence report stating that the North Korea military might was greater than what was previously estimated, thereby nullifying one of the basic assumptions of Carter's initiative (Holbrooke, 2002). When the US President Ronald W. Reagan and South Korean President Chun Doo-Hwan met in February 1981, President Reagan assured President Chun that Washington did not have any plans to withdraw its forces from Korea, as President Carter had.

3.5 The fifth withdrawal (adjustment): 1990–1992

The end of the Cold War raised the question of whether the USA could 'bring some of the boys back home', including Congressional demand from the Administration to reduce some of the forces stationed in Korea. In July 1989 the US Senate passed the Nunn–Warner Amendment, which defined the stages of the fifth withdrawal of the US forces from Korea. The withdrawal included a reduction of 6,987 soldiers from the ground and air forces from Korea, in three phases, by the end of 1991 (Lee, 2003, p. 80).

In addition, in September 1991 George Bush announced the worldwide withdrawal of US tactical nuclear weapons, including those from South Korea (Gurtov, 1996). Seoul's first reaction to the withdrawal plans was to reject the idea, fearing it might lead to tragic results in the region and to a misjudgment by the DPRK of the USA's commitment to Korea (2007, 2007, p. 60). Since the withdrawal was gradual and included only a small portion of the US soldiers in Korea and thanks to the eased tension in the Korean Peninsula, it was later partially accepted by President Roh Tae-woo without creating any tension between the two state leaders and was not interpreted as an erosion of the USA's commitment to Korea (Sterngold, 1991).

3.6 The sixth withdrawal (adjustment): 2002–2008

President Roh Moo-hyun raised the idea of a US forces withdrawal from Korea in his presidential election campaign⁶ and continued debating the idea

⁶ President Roh was blamed that he used anti-Americanism before the election as a means to boost his chances.

in public after his election in 2002. For the first time, a South Korean President raised the issue that was taboo for many years and used only as a slogan by students and left wing groups in Korea. He even instructed the army to begin preparing the Korean defense forces for the day the US forces might leave (Niksich, 2003). Concurrently, the second Gulf War, the war in Afghanistan, and the rising sophistication in military technology led Washington to consider the reduction of more US forces from bases around the world (Garamone, 2004; Jung, 2006) including from Korea. As part of the Global Posture plan, in June 2004 Washington raised the issue of withdrawing 12,500 soldiers from Korea by 2005 (Roehrig, 2007, p. 3), hoping that Seoul would support its plan. Washington thought that if President Roh spoke about the withdrawal of the US forces from Korea in his campaign and even after his election, then the plan to withdraw some of the forces from Korea would receive Seoul's support. Although the withdrawal of the forces from Korea was supposed to include only one-third of the force, South Korea did not initially support any change in the US deployment in Korea, in such a short time frame (Kim, 2005, pp. 22–23).

Seoul was initially shocked by this plan and responded by requesting Washington to postpone it. In order to prevent public fears that the USA was abandoning Korea, and for political purposes to demonstrate that South Korea would not be dictated by the USA, the Korean government presented this issue as one that could be solved by negotiation and not cause instability in the region. Later on, after lengthy discussions, Seoul accepted Washington's plan to withdraw a portion of the forces and to relocate some of the remaining forces but in a lengthier and more gradual process in order to allow Korea to prepare itself (Fifield, 2004). The sixth withdrawal will be accomplished by 2008 and not by 2005, as Washington originally wanted.

All along, the American officials stated that the realignment in Korea would not affect the USA's commitment to South Korean security, nor would it have any consequences on the level of deterrence. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld commented on August 17, 2004 about the realignment in Korea:

'We obviously wouldn't have done it if there was any risk of a weakening in the deterrent up there' (Garamone, 2004).

A US Department of Defense source said on August 18, 2004:

'Any troop realignment in South Korea won't degrade the deterrence capability against possible aggression by North Korea' (Garamone, 2004).

All these comments were intended to reduce fears in Korea that Washington planned to undermine its commitment to Korea's security or withdraw all its forces from Korea.

4 The US and ROK perspectives on withdrawal throughout the years

There is a combination of geostrategic, internal, and Korean Peninsula-related considerations behind Washington's decisions to withdraw or readjust its forces from or within South Korea throughout the years.

The global posture of US forces around the world and American geostrategic considerations were always the main factors behind Washington's decision on this matter. As a global power, the United States had to calculate the constraints on its forces and refrain from overextending them, while taking into account the different strategic threats and how foes and allies alike will interpret a withdrawal of its forces. Examples for this would be: The unimportance of the Korean Peninsula to US global interests prior to the Korean War influenced the decision to withdraw all of the forces in 1949; The constant struggle over importance and centrality between Europe and Asia during the Cold War, with the latter usually 'losing the battle'; Other wars, like the Vietnam War, focused the USA's attention on a different place in Asia.

The improvement in the mobility of forces, such as rapid deployment forces for example, and the development of sophisticated weapons also stood behind the change in US global strategy and the decreased number of bases and soldiers worldwide. In some cases, the fear of being entrapped into another war led the US government to decrease the chances of an ally initiating a new war, by reducing the number of soldiers in the region, mainly in Korea.

Washington's decisions to withdraw or relocate a portion of its forces from or within South Korea were also influenced by Korean Peninsula-related considerations, particularly the military balance between South and North Korea. When the gap between North and South Korea grew in favor of the DPRK, the incentives to withdraw decreased. Periods of reduced tension between the two Koreas were behind some of the reasons that led to a readjustment of the US forces.

On the other hand, the traumatic results of the first withdrawal, the fear that the DPRK would perceive any withdrawal as a sign of weakness, and the crisis that every withdrawal proposal inflicted on the relations with South Korea are noteworthy as constant obstacles to any US decisions concerning its forces in Korea. It should also be mentioned that the US did not hesitate to occasionally exploit the ROK's sensitivity to the issue by pressuring it to send its forces to assist the USA in other global crises; the consequence of non-cooperation was to withstand another troop withdrawal.

The relocation of forces within Korea was also a result of other factors: a change in US military strategy and tactics, South Korean political considerations, the rising costs of maintaining the bases, and the need to find alternative and larger bases.

Internal American considerations, especially value differences between the two capitals during President Jimmy Carter's and President Park Chung-hee's periods, also influenced Washington's decision-making regarding its troops. The fact that President Ronald Reagan and President Chun Dae-hwan shared the same values helped tremendously in repairing the damaged relations between the countries. Internal politics, including budget considerations coupled with the political balance of power between the President, the army and the Congress, was an important factor as well.

Seoul's negative reaction to the majority of USA's withdrawal plans throughout the years was mainly affected by USA–ROK alliance related considerations and the potential North Korean interpretation of the withdrawal. The fear of being abandoned again was always the main reason behind Seoul's alarmed reaction to USA's most withdrawal plans. The traumatic withdrawal of 1949 and the automatic link between withdrawal of forces and lack of US commitment to South Korea's security were crucial in determining decision-makers' reactions and public opinion. These fears also manifested over the relocation of the US forces within Korea, since the positioning of the US forces adjacent to the DMZ symbolized Washington's highest commitment to South Korea's security. Seoul interpreted every withdrawal proposal as a sign of South Korea's declining importance as a major US ally.

Another important factor is South Korea's constant assessment that they could not confront the threats facing them alone. South Korea assessed that without the presence of the US forces, it would not be able to deter North Korea and the fear that the North would misinterpret a withdrawal as a sign of weakness and an opportunity for an attack always prevailed. In addition to direct statements South Korea made on this subject, we can look at the lack of independent ROK air force and intelligence capabilities as an indication of their unwillingness to become completely independent, to date.⁷

Internal political considerations also had an important effect on South Korea's reactions. In the past, the presence of US forces in Korea was an important source of legitimization for the regime in Seoul and a focal point of national agreement between the army and the President. However, it was not so consensual for the public, partly due to manipulation from the other side of the DMZ, with North Korea stating for decades that Korean national interests call for the US force withdrawal from the South, as Pyongyang stated numerous times: *'To get the U.S. imperialist aggression forces withdrawn from South Korea is the most urgent task that the Korean nation should carry out to accomplish the historic cause of national reunification'*. (KCNA, 2007)

7 An example of this can be seen in the debate over the transfer of wartime command from USA to South Korean hands during the last 5 years.

The economic benefits of hosting the forces, in terms of defense budget sharing with the USA and internal economic considerations were obvious, although throughout the years South Korean participation in financing the forces' presence grew significantly due to increased American pressure.

5 The seventh withdrawal?

Are there any signs of a pending seventh withdrawal? Is it possible to detect a potential change in one side's point of view? Will Seoul and Washington react differently when the next withdrawal plan is proposed, and what kind of withdrawal will it be?

The continued wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and possibly the eruption of a new conflict might stretch the capabilities of the US army and lead to an additional withdrawal plan for at least some, if not all, of the remaining US forces in Korea. The geostrategic situation in North-East Asia and in the Korean Peninsula also reinforces the possibility that another withdrawal plan is imminent. The normalization of diplomatic and economic relations between South Korea and Russia and China, veteran allies of North Korea, significantly reduced the tension in the region and actually nullifies the possibility of a surprise North Korean attack, backed by its major allies. The deep and important changes in the inter-Korean relations stemming from the Sunshine Policy will probably continue during President Lee Myung-bak's term, although in a much more conservative manner, i.e. more critical of North Korean behavior and based more on demand for DPRK reciprocity. These local considerations will affect U.S. global plans – regardless of who will be occupying the White House after the next presidential elections.

A complete withdrawal, however, must take into account its impact on the North-East Asian arena and the US forces in Japan. If the US forces withdraw from Korea, it might lead to increased internal pressure on the government in Tokyo to evacuate the American forces from Japan, backed by political groups in Washington DC who will link the withdrawal from Korea to the need to withdraw from Japan as well. This will have serious implications on the USA–Japan alliance, which USA will have to thoroughly consider before deciding on a complete withdrawal from Korea.

One should also consider the implications of a withdrawal on the triangular relations between the USA and ROK and China. The election of President Lee Myung-bak will probably ameliorate relations between the ROK and the USA, which were tense and problematic during the last few years. However, an American decision to withdraw from Korea should always take into account a possible rapprochement between Seoul and Beijing, based on the already improving relations between the two.

It seems that South Korean reactions will be more crucial than ever in deciding what kind of dynamics will evolve around the next withdrawal proposal. For now, judging from its reaction to the sixth withdrawal plan, South Korea has not overcome the same traditional obstacles that caused it to resist all previous withdrawals. More than five decades after the Korean War, Seoul was still afraid that a gradual and partial withdrawal necessarily means the beginning of a complete withdrawal, with all its psychological impact and interpretation as a quick, thoughtless, and risky abandonment. The military balance considerations and fears have not changed either. Seoul is still concerned that Pyongyang will misinterpret the 'security gap' that a quick withdrawal will create between the two Koreas. This was potentially the best time for the ROK to seize the moment and increase its independence as President Roh suggested, but its reaction to the sixth withdrawal demonstrates that South Korea, particularly its military establishment, does not yet believe in its independence ability.

Is this a justified reaction? Can the South Korean military forces defend the ROK without the presence of the US forces? Scholars like Doug Bandow, Robin Lim, and others have often raised the question of whether the presence of US forces in Korea is still necessary (Bandow, 1989; Lim, 2005). There is no official open debate on this subject, as South Korean Foreign Minister Song Min-Soon said at the beginning of 2007:

The U.S. forces in Korea will maintain their presence on the Korean Peninsula even after a peace regime is established, and continue to carry out a role that would serve new security needs in Northeast Asia. (AFP, 2007)

Since it is based on deterrence, it is impossible to state with certainty that the DPRK would have definitely launched a second Korean War without the constant presence of a significant US force in South Korea since the end of the Korean War. On the other hand, we can say that the ongoing strong alliance between the ROK and the United States and the lack of Russian and Chinese support of the DPRK significantly decreases the probability of North Korea initiating a war, even without a US military presence in Korea, particularly since the end of the Cold War.

The analysis of South Korean reactions to past US troop withdrawals indicates that it is not based merely on objective military balance calculations but on the dependency mentality that some of the South Korean security institutions developed throughout the years (Hamm, 2004) and public fears based on historical memories. These 'dependent elements' were the main critics of President Roh when he raised the issue of attaining more militarily independence and behind the criticism directed at him by the new President's conservative camp and by some retired generals, stating that Korea is not yet ready for his initiative to transfer wartime command to Korean hands (Bush, 2006).

We should not ignore the incremental independence process that the South Korean army has undergone in the last two decades, including upgrading its intelligence capabilities (Willingham, 2000). But this basic and deep-rooted self-restraint and dependent attitude is probably one of the main reasons why Korea did not prepare its military for complete independence, until now. It must be stressed, however, that it is also due to the US interests throughout the years, in preserving Seoul's security dependence on Washington.

6 Conclusion

Looking back on the last six withdrawals of the US forces from Korea, we can see that although both sides agreed on the forces' importance to Korea's security, both Seoul and Washington could not agree over the number of forces that should remain in Korea. However, both would undoubtedly agree that the first withdrawal was the most traumatic and has left a permanent mark on USA–South Korean relations. After reviewing the issues that troubled the ROK throughout the years regarding the US troop withdrawals, we can say that the internal legitimacy and economic issues were resolved over time, but the fear of being abandoned by the USA and the concerns over the DPRK's interpretation of these withdrawals still remained unresolved.

The US strategic interests were and always will be the most decisive factors that will lead to another withdrawal and influence its scope and timing. If the regional (improved relations between the two Koreas) and global changes (the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the continued war on terror) continue, then we can estimate that the chances of another withdrawal are very high. The main role of the US forces in Korea as a deterrent has not changed over time. The improving relations between South and North Korea raise the question of whether these deterrent forces in Korea are still necessary. This is why both sides should build mechanisms that will enable another withdrawal without the fears and mistrust involved in the previous ones. In this respect, Lee Myung-bak, the newly elected South Korean president and the new future US president will have an important role in this process.

The public debate initiated by President Roh is crucial in deciding the ROK's future reaction to the next US withdrawal proposal. This public debate began preparing the public and the security and political institutions for the next withdrawal. The new South Korean President will have to decide whether to continue preparing the public and the defense forces for a more independent South Korean military role in the region and upgrade the relations with the USA that will enable Korea to consent to and even support the next withdrawal. The other option would be to continue its dependency on Washington and fear future abandonment. Washington will also have to decide whether it

is willing to accept a more independent Korea or prefer that Korea continues its historical dependency on the USA.

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