

Bring Our Troops Home (from Korea)

By John Feffer | June 21, 2004

The vortex of Korean politics can make even Donald Rumsfeld sound like the most radical Korean peace activist. “After the cold war,” he declared on June 3, “U.S. forces have been stationed in South Korea for too long.” The occasion was the announcement of the largest U.S. troop reductions from the Korean peninsula since the Korean War armistice, which took place 51 years ago this month. The Pentagon is withdrawing one-third of its forces from South Korea and sending a portion of them to Iraq.

Since this announcement comes at a time not of relative tranquility but rather of heightened tensions between the United States and North Korea, some critics have charged the Bush administration with sacrificing security in East Asia on the altar of its Iraq policy. “Scavenging troops from South Korea,” writes Jon Wolfstahl in the *International Herald Tribune*, “sends exactly the wrong signal at the wrong time to U.S. allies and adversaries alike.” These critics are missing the point. American troops are no longer needed on the Korean peninsula. The Bush administration’s only mistake is in not going far enough. An even more dramatic withdrawal of U.S. troops would not compromise security and could even help unknot the ongoing negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang.

The Pentagon announcement comes just before a third round of Six-Party Talks that bring together the United States, North and South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia. The previous two rounds went nowhere and expectations for this third round are low. The United States is insisting on CVID or the complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantling of North Korea’s nuclear programs – before any substantive compromise can be hammered out. Having declared North Korea beyond the pale, the Bush administration is stuck in a theological hole: any form of negotiations looks suspiciously like “supping with the Devil.” North Korea, meanwhile, has broached various scenarios whereby they freeze and then dismantle their programs in exchange for energy, economic

incentives, security guarantees, or a mixture of the three.

It might seem strange that the United States is reducing its military footprint on the Korean peninsula at this juncture. The Pentagon points out that the current plan has been on the drawing board since the end of the Cold War. Troops in fixed positions with slow-moving tanks, according to the Pentagon, fight yesterday’s wars. Today’s conflicts require rapid response units that can move quickly and over long distances. U.S. military presence in Korea – as well as in Japan – is being refashioned for the instantaneous demands of the virtual age and to intervene in areas further south as part of the “war on terrorism.”

This restructuring was first delayed in the early 1990s during the first nuclear crisis between the United States and North Korea. Why, during a second and potentially more serious crisis, is the restructuring moving forward? Certainly the immediate need for troops in the Iraq occupation is one reason.

The deeper issue, however, is the declining utility of American troops on the Korean peninsula. North Korea’s conventional forces have deteriorated in strength over the last twenty years, even as Pyongyang has directed large portions of its stagnant government budget toward the military. South Korea’s armed forces, which include 690,000 troops, have meanwhile steadily improved its capability. Because of the high cost of fuel and the lack of critical spare parts, North Korean military pilots train 13 hours a year, which is what an American pilot easily clocks in a month. Or to give another example of the growing disparity of forces, South Korea has the luxury to spend between ten and one hundred times more per soldier for their equipment and other needs.

Given the dramatic reversal of comparative strength between North and South, the tiny U.S. contingent – around 5 percent of South Korean troop strength – does not bring much to the table. The U.S. decision



Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)

www.fpi.org
A Think Tank Without Walls

in 2003 to redeploy U.S. forces away from the DMZ has eliminated their function as a tripwire, the first line of defense against a North Korean invasion.

Military boosters emphasize the symbolic value of U.S. troops in demonstrating the unwavering commitment of the United States to its alliance with South Korea and to deter any North Korean attack on the South. But even this symbolism has become drained of meaning. South Korea under Roh Moo-Hyun wants more equality in its relations with the United States, which translates into greater control over military affairs. Younger South Koreans now see the United States – or, to be more precise, the trigger-happy unilateralism of the Bush administration – as more dangerous than North Korea.

U.S. deterrent capacity, meanwhile, now resides in firepower based largely outside the peninsula, such as the Fifth Air Force and the Seventh Fleet, both based in Japan. As it did fifty years ago, U.S. airpower can reduce North Korea to rubble. North Korean leaders recognize that any attack they might launch across the DMZ would thus be suicidal. The presence of the remaining 25,000 U.S. troops does not alter this calculus.

Although they have only a minor military function and declining symbolic value, the remaining U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula can play a vital new role: bargaining chip.

North Korea has argued that it is under threat of U.S. attack and considers U.S. troops in South Korea a longstanding provocation. So let's try something new by putting U.S. troop presence on the negotiating table. With the advice and consent of our South Korean allies, the Bush administration should offer a timetable for the removal of all U.S. troops from the peninsula. A Democrat would be hard pressed to offer such a deal. When Jimmy Carter tried to withdraw U.S. troops from the peninsula, he hit major resistance from Washington insiders. Only the hawks in Washington have the political capital to push through a complete withdrawal.

The complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Korea would certainly have its drawbacks. South Korea is spending more now on its defense than ever before and the Defense Ministry has called for an additional 13 percent increase in the military budget

to compensate for the disappearing U.S. troops. The peace movement in Japan and Okinawa also want to bid farewell to U.S. troops, so the shifting of U.S. forces eastward, while a boon for the Korean peace movement, would not necessarily be a plus for the region as a whole. Still, U.S. troop withdrawal from the Korean peninsula would be such an enormous step toward resolving inter-Korean tensions that the benefits outweigh the costs.

Beset on all sides for its Iraq policy, the Bush administration needs a foreign policy victory. It needs to demonstrate that it isn't ignoring the Korean peninsula. And it needs to show the world that the United States, if only after 51 years, does eventually bring home its troops.

John Feffer (www.johnfeffer.com) is a regular contributor to Foreign Policy In Focus (www.fpif.org) and the author, most recently, of North Korea, South Korea: U.S. Policy at a Time of Crisis (Seven Stories).

FOR MORE ANALYSIS FROM FOREIGN POLICY IN FOCUS:

It's Our Party (and We'll Cheer If We Want To)

By John Feffer (April 30, 2004)

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0404ourparty.html>

Between Kim Jong Il and a Hard Place

By John Feffer (March 1, 2004)

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0402kimjongil.html>

Hexagonal Headache

By John Feffer (September 4, 2003)

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0309nk.html>

Six Countries in Search of a Solution

By John Feffer (August 26, 2003)

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0308korea.html>

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2004. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to "making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner." For more information, visit www.fpif.org.

Recommended citation:

John Feffer, "Bring Our Troops Home (from Korea)," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, June 21, 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0406troopsout.html>

Production Information:

Writer: John Feffer

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

p. 3

www.fpif.org

A Think Tank Without Walls

