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Edward A. Olsen

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# Security in Northeast Asia: A Trilateral Alternative

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Edward A. Olsen

**T**hanks to the TV comedy series *M\*A\*S\*H*, the US military presence in Korea is arguably the best known but least understood component of the United States' strategic presence in Asia. In the wake of the American debacle in Vietnam juxtaposed with the economic and other successes of the United States' South Korean protege, it comes as no surprise to Americans that Washington wants to keep US forces steadfastly committed in Korea—a place where they fought and, after a fashion, won. However, such thinking is based on some assumptions that will be questioned here as we examine what is committed to Korea, why the commitment exists, how long the status quo should continue, and what viable alternatives exist.

***US Forces: Size and Distribution.***<sup>1</sup> In the pre-Korean war period the numbers of US forces in Korea reflected the low level of interest Washington had in that peninsula. Before that war the Republic of Korea (ROK) was more or less a backwater of American foreign policy. During the conflict, however, the number of US forces in Korea escalated rapidly and stayed at a high level until hostilities ceased. Following the truce in July 1953, US force levels dropped off in proportion to the reduced threat and to the ROK's improved ability to fend for itself. The number of US forces quickly reached a plateau of about 60,000, where it remained static through the late 1950s and the 1960s. President Nixon reduced their size by about 20,000 in 1971 in keeping with his Guam doctrine of stressing self-reliance by Asian allies. Despite the efforts of the Carter administration to reduce further the number of US forces—for reasons to be evaluated below—the size of US forces in Korea has remained roughly the same since the Nixon years: roughly 40,000. President Reagan's November 1983 trip to Seoul caused some speculation that the American troop presence may be expanded slightly, but that remains to be seen.

US forces in Korea today have two basic functions: to deter a renewal of the stalemated war by being there as a visible expression of the United States'

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Professor Olsen is on the faculty of the US Naval Postgraduate School at Monterey, California, specializing in national security affairs and acting as coordinator of Asian studies.

commitment to South Korean defense, and to fight such a war should deterrence fail. To that end there are three large generic elements in the US strategic presence. The most visible and symbolic are the ground forces of the Second Infantry Division and associated units which hold the line against North Korean aggression in one of the most likely traditional avenues of approach to Seoul, should an attack be launched. This slot was originally designated an American chore because US forces were more reliable and better equipped than their ROK counterparts. That argument has lost its validity, but the so-called "tripwire" significance of American forces being among the first to die in any North Korean aggression has more than compensated for it. To the leaders of the ROK, American ground forces located in between the DMZ and Seoul are the best guarantee that the American people will not be fickle in their support of Washington as the United States tries to keep its oft-repeated commitments.

The other two elements are far less visible but no less important if the United States is to keep its commitments. First, there are the large Air Force contingent and sizable Army artillery units whose roles go beyond that of the Second Division "symbolic" frontline fighting forces. Unlike the forward infantry and armored elements, these forces are intended to take the action to the enemy's turf via their planes and missiles. Whether conventionally or nuclear armed, US Air Force units in the Western Pacific—but especially those actually stationed in South Korea—and Army artillery units in Korea are charged with being a deterring factor which, if used, would threaten to obliterate North Korea. In that sense these units go beyond symbolism and put enough teeth in the US commitment that the deadly implications of the tripwire thesis should not have to be tested.

Backing both the ground and air frontline elements is a congeries of widely scattered Army and Air Force logistical units which enable the line forces to function. Equally important the logistical support units in Korea represent the enormous capacities of the United States to reinforce and resupply all existing fighting forces in South Korea. As such they represent the end of a pipeline which stretches back to the states. Similarly, and perhaps of greater importance in a short conflict, the logistical pipeline also reaches the major skills and depots of Japan.

Thus, though the ROK is a small country, it hosts a major complement of American armed forces. The US Army and Air Force constitute most of these forces, with a handful of Navy and Marine Corps personnel playing primarily a coordinating role to assure efficient use of their main forces in nearby Japan and elsewhere in the Western Pacific should reinforcement be necessary.<sup>2</sup> United States forces are found in almost all areas of South Korea, but are concentrated north of Seoul and in comparatively rear areas. The bulk of the frontline duty today, especially on the ground, but also in the air, is done by

ROK forces which have matured since 1953 into some of the most professional and proficient armed forces anywhere in the world.

In addition to commanding US forces in Korea from the Korean War until October 1979, the senior US general on the scene also had operational control of the ROK forces. Since 1979, an integrated command structure—the Combined Forces Command (CFC)—has been in operational control. The CFC is led by the senior US general in Korea with a senior ROK general as his deputy. Beneath them are a variety of staff functions headed by US and ROK generals. Though this system was designed to facilitate cooperation, reduce frictions, and improve the image of the US-ROK decision making hierarchy, its ability to function smoothly remains problematical. Cultural differences and national pride tend to create obstacles to easy cooperation, even in peacetime. Renewed war could well aggravate frictions similar to those experienced between the United States and the Republic of Korea when then General Chun Du-hwan defied the CFC by using ROK forces in Seoul and Kwangju in the tumultuous six months from December 1979 to May 1980 to wage an intramilitary coup and subdue a local popular uprising. Though the CFC seems to be back to good working order, for some time its harmony was in considerable disrepair. Aggravating the possibility of a repeat of such frictions is the ill-concealed sense of superiority which characterizes the attitudes of ROK uniformed personnel toward their American counterparts—stemming partly from ROK individual proficiency levels, South Korean nationalism which chafes under an American-led command structure with the “leash” that implies, and often open derision for US style civil-military relations which appear to make the US armed forces a bit wimpish. None of these interacting factors help what is at best an awkward and unwieldy command structure.

***Why are US Forces There?*** If one looks at the reasons why American forces were originally committed to Korea and remain there today, a number of factors are evident. Most clearly visible are the oft-repeated rationales: to defend South Korea from communist aggression, to preserve South Korean freedom and democracy, to uphold the Asian sector of a global anti-Soviet containment effort, to prevent trouble in Korea from spilling over into Japan, to maximize US influence in the region, and to foster American national interests in all of the above. All of these reasons are more or less valid. They normally are cited as a package, with little or no attempt to assign a priority to them. Frequently Seoul puts its emphasis on the intrinsic importance of the ROK and its role as an anticommunist and anti-Soviet bulwark. Though this argument was thin in the 1950s, by the 1970s and 80s it began to gain credibility as the South Korean economy flourished. Seoul’s position was bolstered by its willingness to be the sort of cooperative ally in Asia that Washington hoped Japan would become. Though South Koreans long have recognized—albeit reluctantly—that the United States is preoccupied in

Northeast Asia with Japan's importance, it has been making an increasingly persuasive case that the US-ROK connection is becoming virtually as important.

The largest ripple in this evolution was the Carter troop cutback episode. Primarily as a result of the ROK's self-vaunted economic successes, President Carter correctly decided that South Korea had matured sufficiently to foot much more of the bill, thereby, permitting the United States to shift some of its troops away from Korea and put them to more productive use. According to that plan, announced in 1977, US forces in Korea would have been cut to 12,000 by 1982. That idea was officially scuttled in 1979 when it was revealed that US and ROK intelligence had uncovered new evidence that North Korean forces were considerably larger than had been thought. The idea was shelved by the Carter administration and abolished by the Reagan administration.<sup>3</sup> On the surface this reversal appeared logical. The danger posed by North Korea's large armed forces and Pyongyang's transparent desire to defeat the ROK supported Seoul's argument that it needed help a while longer, and that it was in the United States' interest to continue to meet this need. Moreover, there were behind the scene moves that doomed the Carter initiative. These included the appeals made by ROK officials to more conservative US legislators, some of whom had personal ties to Korea, primarily via military service but also via various economic channels. Just as important, if not more so, was the effective lobbying done by the Japanese through their executive branch, legislative branch and private sector connections—all of which stressed the dire consequences for Japan should the United States fail to keep its commitment in Korea. Lastly, a tremendous amount of bureaucratic infighting occurred in which the positions of Seoul and Tokyo were echoed by State and Defense Department old-Korea and old-Japan hands. Usually these arguments emphasized the logic expressed by Seoul and Tokyo about the danger to each's position, each's bilateral ties with the United States, and the potentially disastrous consequences for Northeast Asian peace and harmony. The protagonists in the cutback effort sensed a disproportionate amount of localitis and old-boy cronyism in all of this bureaucratic infighting, but seemed unable to devise any effective counter-arguments. The net result was the collapse of Carter's ideas on troop redeployment and human rights initiatives and a retrenchment into the *status quo ante*.

**Was the Carter Initiative Wrong?** Was President Carter wrong about wanting to reduce the number of US troops in Korea? Many will say *yes* and rejoice that the effort was halted. There is a widespread attitude today in South Korea and in Washington that the issue is resolved permanently—the US forces are in Korea for as long as South Korea needs them. This attitude is central to the strengthened perception of the ROK as a strong and vital ally

which is becoming ever stronger and more vital. However, this writer contends that a valid case can be made that the United States' strategic interests in Korea per se are not strategically, politically, or economically *vital* in the sense that a setback in or the loss of Korea would be devastating to the United States. Furthermore, important US interests in Korea are only made to seem "vital" by virtue of being derivative of truly vital US interests in Japan.<sup>4</sup> It is this set of interests which has since 1945 compelled the United States to involve itself deeply in Korea. Moreover, today the rapidly accelerating value of Japan as a potential strategic partner in Asia makes the Japanese connection far more important than it was in the past.<sup>5</sup> This approach directly contradicts the view of the ROK which holds that advances in South Korea now make US-ROK relations "reciprocal, mutually dependent, and inseparable."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it contradicts all those Americans who accept South Korea's position.

Clearly it is not popular today to suggest that Carter was right about the troop reduction idea, but I will say so in a modified way. The Carter administration's ideas were valid as far as they went. It was, and is, true that the ROK's economy enables it to better fend for itself and that it should do so. Moreover, South Korea (like its Japanese role model) is becoming an economic competitor that impinges upon some important sectors of the United States' economy. Certainly the ROK can bear much of the load for its own defense and (unlike Japan) it already does so. It is at this point that the Carter logic fell apart. If the ROK is already doing so much, how can it be expected to do more—particularly in the face of a stepped-up level of readiness in North Korea? This flaw in Carter's approach allowed the ROK to undermine the cutback idea. Since then it also has fostered an American willingness to bolster the ROK's preparedness and extend indefinitely the US commitment. An excellent example of such thinking was the Heritage Foundation's analysis of the ROK's security. It called for the United States to help by staying and by underwriting some of the strengthened defenses it prescribed.<sup>7</sup>

Where Carter failed was in not taking his argument to its logical conclusion by putting US-ROK relations where they belong—in the context of a much broader and more important setting of Washington's long-term goals in Asia. It is not enough to judge the utility of keeping American forces in Korea mainly on the basis of what they mean to Seoul or to long entrenched perceptions of what the United States has at stake in Korea. It is time to recognize that the American stake in Korea is changing as rapidly as its stake in Japan. Clearly, Washington has ample reason to want peace and stability in Northeast Asia. However, that desire should *never* exceed the desires of Tokyo and Seoul for the security of their region. Similarly, both allies today are vastly better able to provide for their own and the region's security than they were in the past. Consequently, there is no reason for the

United States to be *more* anxious than Japan or Korea and, then, end up bearing a disproportionate burden.

In this broad context and in light of the admitted need by South Korea for enhanced defense against the North Korean threat, why should the United States be the sole external power willing to assist? Washington has been pressing Tokyo for years to do more for its own defense. More recently that pressure has extended to a stretch of the sea lanes which are so vital to Japan's economic health. Since these SLOCs are more immediate and more important to Japan than to the United States, there is ample logic in such a US argument. However, virtually no pressure has been exerted on Tokyo or Seoul by Washington toward an expanded Japan-ROK defense relationship. The very same people who protested the Carter planned cutback regularly caution against pursuing this approach, citing the well known antipathy that Koreans and Japanese share toward one another. This attitude permitted Japan to discuss and lobby for a US troop presence in Korea in a contrived and discreet manner, thereby, enabling Tokyo to disclaim any responsibility for the ultimate decision. Against such a background Washington has persisted in its dual-track Northeast Asia policy, bolstering the ROK materially and psychologically while it tries separately to nudge Japan into a more forthright strategic posture.

There is a fundamental contradiction in what the United States is doing in Northeast Asia. It is true that the United States faces a strategic threat in the area which warrants an American commitment. However, that threat is of greater consequence to our allies than to us, or it would be if it were not for our excessive commitment. Given their ability to contribute to a joint effort and given the pressing needs of the United States elsewhere in the world, it is both reasonable and prudent that the United States press burden-sharing in Northeast Asia by doing less. Such an effort must be made with care and in consultation with our allies, but it cannot be dragged out interminably. Surely Japan must see the value for itself, the region and its relations with the United States by playing a more active security role in the greater Northwest Pacific basin.

It is time that the Carter troop proposal be taken off the shelf. But such a move should not be used to punish the ROK for the error of its ways in denying its people the full-fledged democracy they so evidently want and deserve. The struggle for human rights is important, but it should not be permitted to obfuscate broader strategic goals.<sup>8</sup> Reordering our regional strategic priorities must rank first, but it cannot be done without problems. After decades of assuring South Koreans that they can rely on the United States and acting as a buffer between Seoul and Tokyo, can Washington expect these two parties to play a cooperative role meeting the legitimate security needs of the area? I would expect that an immediate response of the majority of this readership would be no, but I believe that after careful consideration this same body would see the logic of the choice.

**P**recisely what Japan's role would be is a matter to be worked out trilaterally. It will be a difficult issue but it must be done if the United States' commitments to Korea and to Japan are to remain credible.<sup>9</sup> Given Japan's ability to do so much more for itself—doubling its financial commitment for defense is not an unreasonable expectation—an American rescue of the ROK while Japan remains a bystander would be subject to the most severe criticism. The American public would rightly ask, “why should Americans be so willing to do the job while the Japanese stand idly by?”

Might Japanese forces be called on to defend South Korea? Koreans, Japanese, and their American empathizers would recoil from the prospect. And ground forces almost certainly will be beyond the pale for a number of years, but naval and air support is not so unreasonable to contemplate—as would the sharing of intelligence, logistics, and planning functions. In the interim there should be a sharing of the bill for the sort of assistance the ROK would need to build the conventional forces it requires to forestall any North Korean aggression. A workable formula between South Korean manpower and Japanese and US subsidies for equipment and support would be both feasible and reasonable.

Such action should not be taken as a failure of the United States to shoulder its commitments to Northeast Asia. But rather, its purpose is to equitably share the security burden for the area and, further, to enable the United States to keep its commitments in the region without resorting to nuclear weapons. A “high-ranking U.S. government official” reporting on Secretary of State Shultz' talks with ROK Foreign Minister Yi Won-kyong during the Reagan visit in November 1983 said the United States would not exclude “nuclear retaliation” should the North attack the South.<sup>10</sup> ROK Defense Minister Yoon Sung-min subsequently implied that Seoul would sanction such a US action.<sup>11</sup> In the abstract such talk is not any more dangerous than the reassurances provided to the United States' Nato allies or Japan. However, in those situations the chances of really “nuking ‘em” are slim to none. In Korea, on the other hand, it is not quite so unthinkable. Should the United States be heavily engaged in hostilities elsewhere—the Middle East or Central America stand out as likely instances—it would be imperative that Washington maintain its guard on the European front. Thus tied down, an overcommitted United States would be very hard pressed to keep its commitments to the ROK using only conventional arms. It is quite conceivable that in dealing with a major offensive by the North, the United States would feel compelled to respond with nuclear weaponry despite the risks of escalation. Making such a decision less difficult is the deep enmity that exists between the US/ROK and North Korea. This rancor aggravated by such monstrous and irrational acts as the DMZ ax murders and the Rangoon terrorist bombing could also reduce the inhibitions of US launch authorities who might feel deterred by conventional events.



Such a scenario may not be on the horizon, but it exists. Its possibility is scary, but also portends some dire consequences far short of escalation to a US-Soviet war. Assuming that ultimate catastrophe could, in fact, be prevented; the United States would nevertheless confirm by its resolute action the suspicion of many friends and foes that it is unpredictable and (the only country which has used atomic weapons in war) dangerous. Such beliefs would damage the United States worldwide, not least in neighboring Japan where many of its citizens still hold memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Thus, while we would act to rescue South Korea and ultimately Japan, the impact on Japan is likely to be adverse.

Many of the gains made by the United States vis-à-vis Japan are likely to be swept away in the wake of Korean nuclear retaliation. Though North Korea would pay a terrible cost, the price of victory on behalf of South Korea would be incalculable. The ROK might have to live next door to what US strategists jokingly refer as the "North Korean parking lot" phenomenon for many generations. That would have damaging psychological, physiological, and economic effects throughout whatever remains in Korea. What could conceivably be won by winning in such a response? Even the less drastic possibility that nuclear retaliation could be restricted to surgical strikes would do severe damage to US-Japanese relations and world opinion.

The most promising alternative to this bleak prospect is to strengthen the conventional capabilities of the ROK to fend for itself. Certainly the United States can be of assistance, but so can Japan. If Tokyo wants to keep peace in its part of the world and wishes to prevent such scenarios from drifting toward reality, it too must contribute toward both the ROK's defense and toward the United States' ability to respond more flexibly worldwide. It is this latter concern that leads one to question the wisdom of semipermanently tying down sizable numbers of US forces in Korea.

We like to think those forces help counteract Soviet designs in Northeast Asia, but their static deployment tied to a long-term North Korean threat better serves Soviet purposes, by preventing their use where they could be more effectively employed. A sizable portion of US ground forces redeployed from Korea to more pressing duties would be replaced by ROK forces backed by the cooperative energies of the United States and Japan. As such, South Korea's security as well as the security of its key supporters will be enhanced. No longer would Seoul be the subject of gibes of other states about being an American "client." More important, a shift toward greater US-Japan-ROK interdependence would greatly aid the ROK by giving it a viable third leg on which to rely.

Even North Korea might be compelled to change its tune a bit. For example, the increased security provided by a strengthened trilateral defense arrangement would enable South Korea to face North Korea with increased confidence and self-reliance. Because such an arrangement could legiti-

mately entail some reduction—perhaps, the eventual removal—of American forces in Korea, Seoul would be in a much stronger position to address North Korea's routine demand that US forces be withdrawn from Korea as a precondition for unification. In effect, the trilateral measures proposed here constitute concrete confidence building steps within Korea and the region. Though they may initially aggravate tensions with North Korea which regularly denounces a nascent tripartite "plot," the consequent increase in allied strength produced by a trilateral alternative would compel Pyongyang to face the fact that it cannot defeat its adversaries and might as well adjust to reality in a pragmatic and peaceful manner.

What is being suggested here is qualitatively different from President Carter's proposal. Should the United States realign its Northeast Asian burdens in the manner suggested, all three partners would benefit. There is nothing inviolate about existing US commitments to either Japan or the ROK. If better ways can be devised to keep the United States committed to its interest in maintaining peace, they should be pursued. That pursuit will not be easy. Both Japan and South Korea will place obstacles in the way. Both prefer the existing arrangements which are easier and cheaper for Tokyo and Seoul. That should not deter the United States from striving for enhanced equality and reciprocity in its Northeast Asian relations. The ROK has signaled its cautious willingness to participate in a stronger trilateral arrangement so long as Washington retains firm leadership. One prominent South Korean leader recently called for US-ROK cooperation aimed at "harnessing" Japan.<sup>12</sup> Seoul's attitude in this regard constitutes a new variation of the old saw about well enforced military discipline: "you Americans get the Japanese to jump and we Koreans will tell them how high." Such views in Seoul or Washington are profoundly naive. When Japan is brought into the partnership it will be as a full-fledged member warranting complete equality as a decision making authority.

As they assume more mutual responsibilities for each other's and for the United States' interests in the area, both the ROK and Japan are certain to claim more authority and equality. This will require sophistication and finesse on the part of US leadership and of those US forces which will remain in Korea and Japan over the long haul. As but one example, in the future the CFC in Korea may well be run by a Korean officer. It probably will also contain Japanese liaison functions. Another possibility would be the equivalent of a trilateral US-Japan-ROK version of the CFC, perhaps with rotating command functions. There are many permutations of complex decision making for closer allied cooperation, all of which will require relatively fewer American uniformed personnel in Korea, but people who are capable of interacting with Koreans and Japanese on the basis of far greater interdependence and mutuality than has characterized US policy to

## Notes

1. For additional detail on the evolution of the US armed forces in the ROK, see: Ralph N. Clough, *Deterrence and Defense of Korea, The Role of U.S. Forces* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1976); C.I. Eugene Kim, "The Impact of U.S. Military Presence on the Republic of Korea" in Joe C. Dixon, ed., *The American Military and the Far East*, Proceedings of the Ninth Military History Symposium, US Air Force Academy, 1-3 October 1980, pp. 220-239; and William E. Berry, "The Influence of American Combat Forces in the Republic of Korea on the Attainment of U.S. Foreign Policy Goals in Northeast Asia," paper presented at the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society International Meeting, 21-23 October 1983, Chicago, Illinois.

2. Among that handful the admiral serving as commander of US naval forces in Korea also wears another hat: the crucial position of chief of the UN side at Military Armistice Commission dealings with North Korea.

3. For a succinct survey of that episode, see Claude A. Buss, *The United States and the Republic of Korea, Background for Policy* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), pp. 148-164.

4. The author advocated this controversial thesis before a gathering of conservative American and South Korean security specialists in his "U.S.-ROK Strategic Relations" presented at the Second Annual US-ROK Conference on Northeast Asian Security, sponsored by Pacific Forum and the Institute for Foreign Affairs and National Security (PF/IFANS), 1-3 November 1983, Seoul, Korea. It will appear in a forthcoming Pacific Forum publication.

5. The author explores other ramifications of that partnership and what it will require of both sides in a forthcoming book: *U.S.-Japan Strategic Reciprocity* (Hoover, 1984).

6. Editorials on the then upcoming Reagan visit in the government-influenced press emphasized this theme. See, for example, the virtually identical wording in *Yong-A Ilbo*, 20 October 1983, p. 2, and *Kyonghyang Shinmun*, 21 October 1983, p. 2.

7. "The Korean Peninsula Military Balance," *Asian Studies Center Background*, No. 2, Heritage Foundation, 11 July 1983.

8. Nevertheless, as those strategic goals are pursued, human rights must be integrated into them as a crucial portion of stability and security. The writer addressed this mix in "Human Rights and U.S. National Security Policy: Perspectives on Asia and a Reassessment of Stability" in *Ripon Forum*, July 1983.

9. The author has tried to make a case for such cooperation to Japanese and Korean audiences. See his "Bei ga nihon ni nozomu mono" (What the U.S. expects from Japan), *Sankei Shinbun*, 5 December 1981; "Amerika mo nihon no boei seisaku ni manabo" (America, too, let's learn from Japan's defense policy), *Shokun*, August 1982; "Nichi-bei-kan sogo aupo taisei o nozomu" (Desiring a Japan-US-Korea mutual defense system), *Chuo Koron*, February 1983; and "Mi-II/Mi-IIan ui iwonhwaboda Han-Mi-II sangakhyubryug haramjig" (ROK-US-Japan Triangular System More Desirable Than Two Systems of US-Japan, US-ROK), *Hanguk Ilbo*, 4 November 1983.

10. F.B.I.S., IV, 14 November 1983, p. E10.

11. *The Korea Herald* (U.S. edition) 20 November 1983, p. 1.

12. At the PF/IFANS conference cited previously.

