Déjà Vu in South Korea? Lessons from the 1992 Philippines Withdrawal

On November 24, 1992, the American flag was lowered for the last time at the Subic Bay naval base, ending 94 years of US military presence in the Philippines. One year earlier, the Philippines’ Senate had refused to extend the base’s lease forcing Washington to evacuate the 262 square mile facility at a cost of billions of dollars and dislocating almost 6,000 officers and enlisted personnel, as well as their 5,000–6,000 dependents. It also left Washington with no immediate replacement for the base’s remarkable size, deep-water port, sheltered anchorage, and geostrategic location. The closing of America’s then-largest overseas military installation—just a year removed from the shutdown of nearby Clark Air Base following Mount Pinatubo’s eruption in June 1991—was triggered by a perfect storm: the convergence of declining threat perceptions, assertive Philippine nationalism, and Washington’s impatience with a seemingly uncooperative ally.

Fast forward almost three decades, and an eerie sequel is unfolding in US-South Korea relations. The Moon Jae-in government’s rapprochement with Pyongyang has reduced the allies concerns over the North Korean threat—the single most important factor holding together their decades-old security partnership. President Moon’s penchant for assertive nationalism and his decisions undermining military readiness, including the recent cancellation of South

© 2019 The Elliott School of International Affairs
The Washington Quarterly • 42:4 pp. 107–130
https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1694292
Korea’s intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan (GSOMIA), are often at odds with his US ally. Seoul’s new uncooperative, even unwelcoming, attitude risks the ire of the US president, who has often described the South Korean alliance as far too expensive.

Nearly thirty years ago, a misleading, short-term decline in threat perception, impulsive nationalism, and diminished mutual accommodation rendered the long-standing US-Philippines partnership vulnerable to a sudden break to the detriment of both countries. The United States and South Korea must pay attention to the similarities, risks, and lessons from the US-Philippines case if they are to remain what US Ambassador to Korea, Harry Harris, labeled “a linchpin” for Northeast Asian security and stability.3

Alliances Forged

For a good part of the twentieth century, the United States enjoyed long and productive security relations with both the Philippines and South Korea. Although America’s occupation of the Philippines (1898–1942) following the Spanish-American War was marred by bouts of nationalist rebellion, their bilateral relationship was reset after WWII when the United States liberated the Philippines from Japanese imperialism. Liberation and independence facilitated Manilla’s entry into Washington’s Cold War alliance. With the 1947 Military Base Agreement and 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, the Philippines became America’s Gibraltar in Southeast Asia, serving as a platform for its power projection in the region.

Deep into the 1980s, Subic naval base stood, as it had for more than 80 years, as a fixture in US and later allied military strategy. However, the bilateral relationship eroded at an alarming pace just prior to the base’s 1992 closure, eventually resulting in the alliance’s broader de facto unraveling. A change in threat perception was key to this erosion. The Cold War had ended by September 1991, when the Philippine Senate voted down the facility’s new lease. In fact, three months after the vote, the Soviet Union disintegrated on December 31st. The Philippines had no reason to consider China a threat so long as Beijing remained committed to its economic growth and “peaceful development” policy in the post-Tiananmen period. Against this background, Philippine nationalists, especially those in the Senate, more boldly expressed anti-Americanism. Their opposition centered primarily on the large US military
presence in their country. This state of affairs, along with Washington’s unwillingness to offer more money and the Manilla government’s seemingly lukewarm commitment to the base, undercut the alliance.

The United States and South Korea share a similar story. America helped liberate Korea from Japanese imperialism, ending the 36-year colonization and paving the way for the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, the United States, under the UN flag, intervened to defend South Korea’s territorial and political independence at a cost of 34,000 American lives. During the Vietnam War, South Korea fulfilled its reciprocal alliance obligation by deploying over 300,000 troops from 1964 to 1973, incurring nearly 5,000 deaths. Through these two wars, the so-called “blood alliance” was forged.

For over 65 years, this “blood alliance” weathered numerous challenges. But if the once rock-solid US-Philippines security tie could abruptly breakdown. After 40 years of solidarity, so can the US-South Korea partnership. Underneath the façade of cordiality, Washington-Seoul relations are fraught with similar tensions caused by declining and sometimes incompatible threat perceptions; increased South Korean nationalism, often tinged with anti-Americanism; and a growing uncertainty over Korea’s alliance commitment. The parallels should not be ignored.

### Declining Threat Perceptions

The US-Philippines alliance wilted as the Cold War warmed in the late 1980s. Manilla’s 1990 base analysis concluded that “The Philippines faced no external enemies or threats.” Washington’s threat perception was also changing. Neither the new Russia nor a domestically focused China seemed likely to challenge America’s global dominance any time soon. By 1991, the United States was debating the extent of its military’s forward presence where the Philippines was considered important but not indispensable.

Similarly, the recent Seoul-Pyongyang rapprochement has diminished the perception of North Korea as a threat—the single-most important modus operandi for the US-South Korea alliance to date. The turning point came when Pyongyang decided to attend the Pyeongchang Olympics in February 2018, effectively ending the war of words between President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un throughout 2017. Olympic diplomacy and the subsequent flurry of inter-Korean
dialogue led Trump to accommodate Moon’s overt rapprochement with the North. Trump’s policy change may have been partially influenced by his March 8, 2018 meeting with South Korea’s National Security Advisor, Chung Eui-yong, and National Intelligence Service Director, Suh Hoon, who conveyed Kim Jong-un’s commitment to “denuclearize” and “refrain from any further nuclear or missile tests” and his “eagerness to meet President Trump as soon as possible.”

The peace mood reached new heights when Moon and Kim met for the first time in Panmunjom on April 27, 2018. In their Panmunjom Declaration, they agreed to “establish a permanent and solid peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.” They would “cease all hostile acts… in every domain,” and “bring forward… reunification led by Koreans,” and “affirm… that the destiny of our nation is determined by [Koreans’] own accord.” The 1953 armistice, which ended the Korean War, would be replaced by a peace treaty. Moon proudly declared in Panmunjom, “There will be no more war on the Korean peninsula.”

Despite the lack of progress on denuclearization or even conventional arms control, President Moon remained buoyant, as he still is at the end of 2019, about prospects for his peace regime. In a September 2018 UN General Assembly speech, he described the progress as nothing short of “miraculous,” and assured the international community that “North Korea officially ended its policy of nuclear development.” Almost two months later, Moon told the Korean people that his summit diplomacy had “completely eliminated the risk of inter-Korean military clashes.” Following a brief second inter-Korean summit meeting held again in Panmunjom on May 26, 2018, the leaders met for the third time on September 19, 2018 during Moon’s three-day Pyongyang visit. Their Pyongyang Joint Declaration promised to cease all live-fire artillery drills and training exercises near the Military Demarcation Line (MDL or Armistice Line) on land and around the Northern Limit Line (NLL) at sea.

This new peninsular security paradigm has affected Washington’s threat perception as well. Trump once labeled Kim Jung-un a maniac and threatened North Korea with “fire and fury.” He has since praised the chairman as “smart” and “talented,” endorsed his “unwavering commitment” to denuclearization, and gloated over how they “fell in love.” Following the June 2018 Singapore summit, Trump declared, “There is no longer a nuclear threat from North Korea.” He promptly suspended scheduled military drills with the South, calling them provocative and expensive. He stopped using the term “maximum pressure” when describing sanctions against the North, delayed some additional sanctions, and slowed some enforcement. After leaving the second summit (February 2019) with Kim in Hanoi empty-handed, Trump remained open to a third meeting, a wish he fulfilled on June 30 with an impromptu meeting in Panmunjom.
Neither Moon nor Trump seem phased by North Korea’s twelve ballistic/quasi-ballistic missile tests since May 2019, including a first-ever submarine-launched ballistic missile.\(^{18}\) Trump continues to claim a good relationship with Kim, and after the North’s July tests, he quipped, “[Kim] likes testing missiles.”\(^ {19}\) Ominously for the alliance, Trump is now openly distinguishing threats to South Korea from those to the United States. He emphasizes that the North is testing only short-range missiles,\(^ {20}\) and, after Kim announced that the July tests were a “solemn warning” to the South, Trump remarked that “he didn’t send a warning to the United States.”\(^ {21}\) In the same vein, Trump has openly shared with Kim the view that US-South Korea joint military exercises—or “wargames”—are “ridiculous and expensive.”\(^ {22}\)

Meanwhile, Moon’s belief that peace has arrived continues to be unshakable. During his August 15, 2019 Liberation Day speech celebrating the end of Japanese occupation, South Korea’s president insisted that his peace regime will “complete our liberation through the unification of the peninsula.”\(^ {23}\) In his September 24th speech to the UN General Assembly, he referred to the two Koreas as a single entity—the “Korean Peninsula”—which is committed to peace.\(^ {24}\)

This is not just talk. All weapons, landmines, guard posts, and armed personnel have been removed from the Joint Security Area (JSA) in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), turning the area into a tourist attraction. Above the MDL, no-fly zones were designated for all aircraft types. Meanwhile, Seoul and Washington have downgraded or postponed major joint military exercises. In 2018, the Foal Eagle drill, conducted annually to support the Mutual Defense Treaty, was shortened and did not include strategic assets such as nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and strategic bombers. The annual US-ROK air exercise, Max Thunder, took place without the participation of B-52 bombers in May 2018, ahead of the June 12 US-North Korea Singapore summit. Ulji Freedom Guardian, the world’s largest computerized command and control exercise, which focused on responding to a North Korean attack, was outright cancelled in August, and a second major airforce exercise, Vigilent Ace, scheduled in November to enhance interoperability, was postponed. Vigilant Ace marked the sixth allied exercise cancellation in 2018.\(^ {25}\) Such steps prompted General Robert B. Abrams, ahead of his appointment as the new US Forces Korea (USFK) commander in 2018, to warn that suspending joint military exercises has undermined combat readiness.\(^ {26}\)

The narrative of declining threats plays to President Moon’s steadfast commitment to his “peace regime.” But, under those conditions, what place is there for the more than 28,000 US soldiers, sailors, and marines stationed in South Korea, especially if their presence conflicts with his vision of inter-Korean cooperation and peace? Moon’s version of peace may very well foreshadow a high price tag for the US-South Korea alliance.
The Alliance Price for Peace with North Korea

The 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and South Korea commits the two countries to provide mutual aid if either is attacked. But if a peace regime is established, it obviates the *raison d’être* for the presence of US forces, rendering obsolete their missions to support the United Nations Command (UNC) as well as the Combined Forces Command (CFC). President Moon’s Special Advisor for Foreign Affairs and National Security, Moon Chung-in, opined in an April 2018 article that a peace agreement between the two Koreas would make it difficult to justify the continued presence of the USFK. It is safe to assume that, as a special advisor, his thoughts reflect the president’s. Predictably, North Korea and China are all-in on the prospect of a Philippines scenario in South Korea. In a July 2018 meeting, Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping reportedly agreed to call for a US withdrawal when a peace agreement is signed.

The new paradigm is already under way. Moon is committed to transferring the CFC’s wartime operational control (OPCON) from the United States to South Korea before his presidency ends in May 2022. For the left-leaning nationalists in Korea, this transfer is a litmus test of South Korea’s true sovereignty. That said, placing US strategic assets, such as aircraft carriers and bombers, under South Korea’s command is implausible. OPCON’s future also relates to Moon’s bid, from the outset of his presidency in 2017, to relocate the CFC from the Yongsan Garrison to the ROK Ministry of Defense complex in Seoul. CFC Commanding General Abrams, believing the move to that location would compromise operational efficiency, changed the location to Camp Humphreys, 70 kilometers south of Seoul, where both the UN and USFK commands are located. To the Moon government, the OPCON transfer and the CFC relocation represent an important part of South Korea’s new operational paradigm toward the North. The substance of this plan is in the 2018 Defense Reform 2.0, which calls for downsizing South Korea’s armed forces, reinforcing civilian control of the military, reducing the duration of mandatory military service for the Army and Marines, and regaining wartime operational control.

The UNC may be yet another casualty of peace. Established at the outbreak of the Korean War to implement the Security Council’s resolution to defend South Korea and restore peace, the UNC was charged at the war’s end with supervising the Korean Armistice Agreement. The UNC also monitors the Joint Security Area where the two Koreas face each other in
the DMZ. Its mandate would technically terminate should the Armistice Treaty come to some form of an end.

The Moon government sees the UNC not just as a longstanding symbol of peninsular division but as an impediment to peace initiatives. For example, a conflict of interest between Seoul and the UNC was detected when in August 2018, citing Seoul’s procedural error, the UNC exercised its jurisdiction over the DMZ to temporarily block South Korea’s plans for a joint survey of an inter-Korean railway. The Moon government considered the survey an important first step toward rebuilding the railway linking Seoul and Shinuiju in North Korea. Pyongyang, for its part, raised tensions by refusing to engage in talks to establish “peace trails” in the Joint Security Area until the UNC surrenders its management—something the UNC made clear it will not do.31 More recently, in October 2019, South Korea’s unification minister called for limiting the UNC’s DMZ authority, which he claimed interferes with the South conducting non-military activities.32

Seoul continues to affirm its commitment to the alliance and has not overtly called for an end to either the CFC or the UNC. But Moon’s policies are tuning up their swan song sooner rather than later. He mimics Pyongyang’s language seeking the “complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.”33 Since neither the United States nor South Korea maintains nuclear weapons on the peninsula, complete denuclearization has long been North Korea’s code for removing all US forces. Moon not only delayed for two years meeting top USFK commanders, but he displayed antipathy toward the deployment of the US-operated Thermal High Altitude Ariel Defense system (THAAD), designed to protect American and South Korean forces from North Korean missiles.

In August, the Congressional Record Service concluded that “collaboration between the United States and South Korea has become more inconsistent and unpredictable … Differences remain between Washington and Seoul on policy issues such as whether and under what conditions to offer concessions to North Korea and how to share costs associated with the US-ROK alliance. Seoul generally favors more and earlier economic concessions than does Washington.”34 One senior US official reportedly observed, “We have a big problem coming with South Korea … They no longer feel the need to act in parallel with us.”35

**The Unveiling of Anti-US Nationalism**

The Philippines’ unfortunate history of domination by foreign powers—Spain, the United States, and Japan—periodically generated a nationalist opposition to America’s military presence, requiring periodic US accommodation. In 1956,
President Magsaysay and Vice President Nixon affirmed Philippine sovereignty over the bases. Then, in 1959, the allies reduced the lease term from 99 to 25 years. What’s more, a 1979 amendment recognized US bases as Philippine military facilities where the Philippine flag would fly, its officers would be stationed, and its military would control perimeter security. Treaty reviews would take place every five years. The new Philippine Constitution (1987) required Senate approval of further base agreements, once the existing one expired in 1991. But, as the Cold War wound down, beginning with Mikhail Gorbachev’s election as the Soviet Union’s General Secretary in 1985, anti-American voices in the Philippines started to grow louder.

Five years before the 1992 Subic Bay base closure, a CIA report concluded that, while most Filipinos probably supported a continuing American military presence, the political leaders and the general public were susceptible to propaganda campaigns. The report went on to suggest that “Sovereignty is probably the single most important issue dividing opponents and supporters of the bases.” The Philippine’s then-ambassador to the United States, Emmanuel Pelaez, declared, “We are not makers of our own destiny.” As the 1980s closed, Joseph Estrada, then a senator and later Philippine president (1998–2001), called for “cut[ting] off the rope [America’s influence] that strangles our growth as a nation.” The Los Angeles Times foreign policy editor painted an even more negative picture: “[A]ny visitor to Manila cannot avoid the bases issue. It comes up in every conversation. According to members of the Filipino political elite—from right to left—there is a consensus in the country that the new agreement must phase out the bases.”

Washington and Manilla still tried to maintain the status quo, negotiating for a year to renew the lease for Subic Bay and smaller installations. They agreed in 1991 to at least another decade of American military presence in exchange for US$203 million in annual aid. Polling indicated Filipinos largely supported the renewal because closing the bases meant major losses of aid, businesses, and jobs. But, by the time the Philippine Senate voted on ratification in September 1991, security concerns had further declined, allowing nationalism to dwarf remaining defense worries and economic interests. The Senate rejected the treaty 12-11 after a debate that seemed “less [one] over the bases’ value than a demonstration of sovereignty and national pride.” One anti-base senator proclaimed, “This is the final act—the entombment of the father image of America in this country.”

By 1991, Philippine nationalism dwarfed remaining defense worries and economic interests.
salvage the treaty with a national referendum. The United States had no choice but to relocate to Japan, Guam, or other viable military alternatives. The next year, at Subic Bay’s closing ceremony, Aquino’s successor, President Fidel Ramos, boasted that for the first time in over four centuries, no foreign troops were on Philippine soil.

Similarly, Korea’s history as China’s tributary state throughout the 500-year Yi Dynasty (1392–1897), then a Japanese colony (1910–45), and finally a junior partner to the United States in the postwar period has generated a strong sense of nationalism. While North Korean threats have tempered the South’s nationalism, a perceived decline in that threat could unleash a Philippines-like fervor to rid the land of foreign troops for the first time in more than one hundred years.

President Moon appears ready. Nationalism infuses his peace rhetoric, tapping into South Koreans’ communitarianism and yearning to control their destiny. Reminiscent of Fidel Ramos’ earlier remarks, Moon wrote in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, a German newspaper, that Japanese colonialism and the Cold War prevented the Korean people “from determining their own destinies.” Victims of circumstance no more, he promised to “develop our own way forward.” During Moon’s September 2018 Pyongyang visit, he spoke through teary eyes that “We had lived together for five thousand years but apart for just 70 years … [W]e can become one again … Chairman Kim Jong-un and I will firmly clasp the hands of 80 million Koreans in both the North and South and move forward to create a homeland anew.” In the new homeland envisioned by Moon, there would seem to be no room for a foreign military presence.

South Koreans have a tendency to buy into this halcyon vision of national unity regardless of realities on the ground. Soon after the June 2018 Singapore Summit, an Asan Institute survey found that Kim’s “favorability” rating increased more than fourfold, from 0.88 on an eight-point scale in November 2017 to 4.06 in June 2018. North Korea’s favorability rating rose from approximately 2.5 in January 2016 to 4.71 in June 2018. Despite Pyongyang’s history of noncompliance with international treaties, 62.6 percent of all age groups in South Korea predicted it would implement the Singapore agreement, and 54 percent said North Korea can be trusted, compared to 10.7 percent in 2013. Even among conservatives, 63.2 percent assessed the Singapore summit as a success. The public’s positive outlook has since dimmed (in June 2018, after the Singapore summit, 75.3 percent believed North Korea could denuclearize in the near future; in January 2019, 54.6 percent thought so). But the dramatic mood swing reveals South Koreans’ willingness, even eagerness, to embrace a benign view of their northern brethren. Those who accept Moon’s paradigm may come to resent Washington’s resistance to his peace initiatives. While Trump and Moon seem to share, at least on the surface, a perplexingly benign
view of Kim Jong-un, Seoul and Washington still diverge over the conditions for relieving sanctions.

The Moon government increasingly seems content, even eager, to live, trade, and bond with a nuclear North. Before the failed Hanoi summit, an impatient Moon forecasted a “turning point … which will help the peninsula become a land of peace and prosperity.” Despite Hanoi’s disappointing results, Moon continues to advocate sanctions relief to allow for inter-Korean economic projects. Re-opening the Kaesong industrial complex and Mt. Kumgang tourism takes priority, but other ambitious plans are in the offing. Connecting railroads and roads across the border, establishing new economic zones, and building a trans-Korea gas pipeline are cases in point.

To these ends, President Moon has been on a mission to convince the international community to relieve sanctions on North Korea as a way to demonstrate his sincerity to Chairman Kim. At the October 2018 Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in Brussels, he unsuccessfully sought to persuade the heads of France, the United Kingdom, and Germany, among others, to support reduced sanctions. Christopher Hill, the former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and US point man during the Six-Party Talks, remarked that he has “never seen inter-Korean dialogue move so fast at a time when denuclearization is moving so slowly.”

While the Moon government actively seeks to energize inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation, voices in the Trump administration have not shared Seoul’s rosy view. Several months after the Singapore Summit, then-Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats testified that North Korea is unlikely to completely give up its nuclear weapons. His CIA counterpart, Director Gina Haspel, added that the Kim government is committed to developing a long-range nuclear-armed missile capable of striking the United States. Recent events confirm these worrisome assessments. According to a study by Nagasaki University in Japan, North Korea’s nuclear stockpile may have increased to 20–30 warheads from 10–20 in 2018. Another study claims that uranium enrichment operations continue at the Yongbyon site amidst the resumption of ballistic missile launches in May 2019.

The Trump administration maintains, at least officially, full commitment to Complete Verifiable Irreversible Denuclearization (CVID) or Final Fully Verifiable Denuclearization (FFVD). When President Moon visited Washington in April 2019 to discuss, among other things, sanctions relief on North Korea, President Trump responded that the sanctions are at a “fair level.” Secretary Pompeo has since reiterated that sanctions relief depends on the “final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea.”

When push comes to shove, these differences have the potential to aggravate bilateral relations to the point of no return as in the Philippines. Moon Chung-
in penned a second piece in March 2019 arguing that Washington should allow Seoul greater flexibility with inter-Korean economic exchange and cooperation. Criticizing Washington’s “all-or-nothing” approach at the Hanoi summit, he stressed that President Moon is “obliged to implement [this cooperation] in tandem with the denuclearization of North Korea.”56 In May 2019, he proposed that Seoul and Pyongyang reopen their joint Kaesong Industrial Complex, North Korean workers there be paid, and North Koreans be permitted to buy southern consumer goods and raw materials.57 President Moon’s unification minister, Kim Yeon-chul, a longtime opponent of sanctions, wants to “seize the opportunity for co-prosperity of the South and the North” and “reap the fruits of peace.”58

South Korean media’s portrayal of international sanctions, not North Korean recalcitrance, as the main barrier to inter-Korean cooperation reinforces a false narrative that the United States, not North Korea, is to blame for peninsular insecurity. Exemplifying this ideological tilt, a popular Korean cable television network, JTBC, announced a special documentary series that the producers promised would “question the existence of the DMZ in an era when we stand between peace and tension.”59

Anti-Americanism is not new in South Korea. When two Korean school girls were accidentally killed by a US military vehicle in 2002, the country erupted in anti-American protests. At the time, a Gallup poll showed that 75 percent of Koreans in their 20s, 67 percent in their 30s, and half in their 40s “did not like” or “hated” the United States.60 Some businesses banned Americans, and, on some university campuses, students stepped on American flags on their way to classes.61 The left-leaning Roh Moo-hyun won the 2002 presidential election promising not to “kowtow” to Washington and to pursue a more independent North Korea policy.62 Another major anti-American protest exploded in 2008 when tens of thousands of Koreans, in Seoul and other major cities, marched against US beef imports, ostensibly because of fears of mad cow disease. Part of the protesters’ narrative was that President Lee Myung-bak acceded to Washington’s pressure to import the beef at the expense of public safety.63 The accusation was proven to be completely unfounded but not before seriously undermining the Lee government.

More recently, in October 2019, at least 19 South Korean university students climbed over the walls of the US ambassador’s residence to protest the American military presence, with banners saying “Leave this soil, [US Ambassador] Harris.” Before being arrested, they shouted messages that included...
“Stop interfering with our domestic affairs,” “Get out,” and “We don’t need U.S. troops.”

Back in 2002, the United States sought to calm the Korean public’s anger over the school girls’ deaths with apologies and expressions of regret from various military and civil officials, including President George W. Bush. In 2008, Washington addressed the protests by agreeing to limit US beef exports to Korea. Should something similar happen today, President Trump is not likely to be as patient or diplomatic. On many occasions, he has publicly and privately characterized the alliance as an overpriced burden. Three years before becoming president, he commented, “We spend billions and billions of dollars to protect [South Korea] from North Korea. They are not giving us anything.”

The Moon government is primed to exploit an anti-American, nationalist wave when it becomes useful. Its inner circle, after all, is dominated by former activists from leftist civic organizations, trade unions, and student groups with a history of manifest anti-American activities. At the outset of Moon’s presidency in 2017, Wŏlgan Chosŏn, a prestigious monthly magazine, reported that 22 of 63 key staffers in the Blue House shared this background. The author of this report believes that the number has since increased, especially among high-ranking staffers. Hailing from the pro-North Korea camp (Chusap’a), most have been affiliated with Chŏndaehyŏp (National Council of Student Representatives) and its successor, Hanch’ongryŏn (South Korean Federation of University Students Councils). One of their main agendas has been Jaju Gukbang (self-reliant national defense), which entails the withdrawal of US forces and a shift to some type of non-aligned defense posture. Lee Tong-ho, a former activist-turned-conservative politician, portrayed their student activism as “deeply rooted in viewing American imperialism as the biggest reason for our society’s ills.” Lee added that, though no longer university students, they still see America as the main enemy. On the eve of the February 2019 Hanoi summit, Moon spoke for this generation when he proclaimed, “We [South Koreans] will take the lead in preparing for a new Korean Peninsula regime by standing at the center, rather than the periphery, of history.” A Blue House official elaborated: “The president made clear that we are the masters of the destiny of the Korean Peninsula.”

The September 2018 Pyongyang Joint Declaration was a dress rehearsal for South Korea acting independently of the United States. The agreement, which ended all live-fire artillery drills and training exercises near the MDL and NLL, was reached without full prior consultation with Washington. In an extraordinary revelation, South Korea’s Foreign Minister Kang Kyŏng-wha disclosed at a parliamentary audit on October 10, 2018 that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was unhappy about not being sufficiently briefed. Likewise, Seoul’s precipitous withdrawal from its intelligence-sharing agreement
with Japan (GSOMIA) over a trade dispute exemplifies Moon’s prioritization of nationalism over the US-led East Asian security structure.\textsuperscript{73} Despite Washington’s criticism of the move, which came at a time of multiple North Korean missile tests, the Moon administration continues to treat the US alliance as secondary to its conflicts with Japan. Moreover, Moon is using this conflict to promote his “peace regime.” He calls for “overtak[ing] the Japanese economy,” in part through “economic cooperation between the South and the North,”\textsuperscript{74} thus entwining Korean integration with anti-Japan nationalism. As in 1991 Philippines, nationalism’s risk to the US alliance cannot be discounted.

**A Tipping Point**

The US-Philippine alliance waned as the Cold War ended, anti-American nationalism rose, and Washington lost enthusiasm for accommodating Manilla. After the Philippine Senate rejected the 1991 base agreement, the parties discussed an alternative three-year phase-out, but the George H.W. Bush administration, alienated by a long and angry negotiation and ratification process, chose to leave instead.\textsuperscript{75} Richard Solomon, US ambassador to the Philippines (1992–93), observed that “Neither the U.S. military nor the Filipinos were taking a strategic view of the situation…. [T]he Pentagon, in particular, was fed up with the Filipinos, and they didn’t want the monetary burden of sustaining the bases.”\textsuperscript{76} When President Aquino refused to see Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney during his 1990 Philippine visit, Ambassador Solomon summarized Washington’s attitude: “If they want us to go, we’ll go. Goodbye.”\textsuperscript{77} America withdrew at a cost of billions of dollars, relocating thousands of personnel and dependents despite not having a comparable replacement for Subic Bay.

Washington’s views on troops deployed to South Korea have varied with changes in the perception of the North Korean threat as well as the global strategic environment. After the Korean War, the number of US troops in South Korea peaked at 62,000 following the 1968 U.S.S. Pueblo incident, but, by 1971, 20,000 troops were withdrawn pursuant to the Nixon Doctrine’s retrenchment policy. President Jimmy Carter tried to remove the remaining ground troops during the 1970s, but the plan was aborted in the face of strong opposition from Congress, the military, and Washington’s Asian allies. With the end of the Cold War, the George H. W. Bush administration withdrew a
further 7,000 troops, and, a decade later, George W. Bush announced a reduction of about 12,500 by 2005 to meet the challenges of global terrorism.

More than any post-WWII president, it seems President Trump harbors an aversion to long-running foreign military commitments. His skepticism over the utility of US troop commitments has been well documented. As early as 1990, he bemoaned that the United States “is being ripped off so badly by our so-called allies; i.e., … South Korea.”78 He has consistently said that many allies, like South Korea, are free-riders and that they should simply pay more for US forces, especially if they enjoy a trade surplus with the United States.79 Almost a year before the June 2018 Singapore summit, Trump reportedly vented to his cabinet about troops in South Korea: “I don’t know why they’re there. Let’s bring them all home!”80 Following the Hanoi summit, he complained that the United States spends a tremendous amount of money protecting rich countries.81 According to the chief speechwriter and communications director for former Secretary of Defense James Mattis, President Trump in July 2017 called South Korea a “major abuser” that should pay US$60 billion a year for the United States to station American troops in the country, otherwise the relationship is “a losing deal.”82

President Trump’s isolationist views have already been implemented in other parts of the world. After repeated comments about “bring[ing] our troops back home” from Syria, he ordered a precipitous withdrawal along the Syria-Turkey border, leaving the Kurds, loyal American allies in the campaign against the Islamic State in Syria, vulnerable to President Erdogan’s immediate invasion of northeastern Syria, where most of the twenty-one million Syrian Kurds reside. Because many Syrian Kurds are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, which Turkey classifies as a terrorist organization, they have fallen victim to violent Turkish aggression. The Turkish operation has killed hundreds of fighters and civilians and displaced approximately 300,000 residents; Kurdish leaders call it a genocide. Before the recent retreat in haste, US military commanders assured the Kurds, much as they do the South Koreans, that the United States was committed for the foreseeable future.83

Strategic concerns aside, the Syrian withdrawal and Trump’s plans for the same in Afghanistan are telling displays of his aversion to sacrificing lives and dollars to protect others “who do not appreciate what [the United States is] doing.”84 It may be a matter of time before his rosy view of Kim, the costs of stationing troops in South Korea, and the Moon government’s penchant for anti-US nationalism spark a similar impulsive action.

That spark may be ignited much sooner than anticipated as the negotiations to renew the US-South Korea Special Measures Agreement (SMA), which allocates the costs of stationing US troops, appear nowhere near complete. President Trump demanded a 100 percent increase for 2019, and his negotiators pressed for US$1.2
billion: about a 50 percent increase. Seoul’s argument that it does more than Japan—based on per capita GDP, waiver on land/facility rent, and tax breaks—simply did not register with the president. An agreement was finally reached in February 2019, with South Korea increasing its share by more than 8 percent to US$924 million, about half the cost for the upkeep of America’s military presence. Keeping the contribution below US$1 billion was a small victory for Seoul, but the agreement was for just one year, not the usual five. So, the two sides are locking horns again to conclude a new agreement for 2020. Reportedly, the United States opened with a $4.7 billion demand, roughly a fivefold increase. The negotiations are not likely to sail smoothly.

In the past, South Korean governments kept the cost down using the time-honored security argument. That would be awkward for the Moon administration, whose North Korea policy centers on peace, not security. It is precisely Moon’s indifference to security matters that reinforces Trump’s predisposition for troop withdrawal. A hasty decoupling may prove to be the tipping point, à la the Philippines.

Costs of Miscalculation

Despite closing America’s Philippine bases, Washington and Manilla maintained their Mutual Defense Treaty, allowing naval visits, aircraft transits, and scaled-down military exercises. Still, without a permanent American presence, the alliance deteriorated. Washington had already warned Manilla in 1992 that without the bases, guaranteeing the Philippines’ defense would be difficult. Meanwhile, Philippine nationalism continued to generate domestic opposition to the status quo ante in alliance relations.

Beijing almost immediately filled the power vacuum, expanding into the South China Sea. The same year Subic Bay closed in 1992, China passed the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone Law, asserting territorial and maritime jurisdiction over the Spratly Islands, also claimed by the Philippines. The law authorized the use of Chinese military force to protect the claims. In 1995, China unilaterally occupied the jointly claimed Mischief Reef and has been militarizing the island ever since. Beijing submitted its Nine-Dash Line to the United Nations in 2009, asserting sovereignty over approximately 80 percent of the South China Sea, including the Spratly Islands and jointly claimed Scarborough Shoal. Notwithstanding the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s 2016 decision finding that Mischief Reef...
belonged to the Philippines, China continues to force its will on its weaker neighbor. Losing ground in its own waters to Chinese aggression was one heavy price the Philippines ended up paying for discarding US basing.

By the mid-1990s, Washington and Manilla realized their mistake and moved to repair the alliance. But so far, all they have salvaged is a scaled-down, inconsistent, often contentious security relationship focused mostly on humanitarian assistance, counter-terrorism, and interdicting piracy and smuggling. Though Washington continues to affirm its treaty commitment to defend the Philippines against an armed attack, the denuded alliance has neither protected the Philippines’ territorial claims from China nor prevented Manilla’s gravitation to Beijing. US aid fell dramatically beginning in 1993 and did not begin to recover until 2002. Except in 2011, aid has been tens of millions of dollars below what it was during the eight years before the base closure (1985–92).\(^8^8\) Manila can no longer count on the hundreds of millions of dollars in base-related payments and Subic Bay’s contributions to the local economy, including the employment of thousands of Filipinos. While new Chinese foreign aid and investment may offset some or all of this financial loss, America’s aid symbolized a close military and diplomatic relationship, without which the Philippines finds itself unable to protect its outlying islands and surrounding waters from China’s grip.

Logistically, exiting Korea may be simpler for the United States, since its military can pull back a short distance to Japan. A pro-US Abe government is most likely to accommodate such a move without reservation. However, the prognosis for South Korea would be quite grim. For starters, North Korea’s denuclearization would effectively go out the window. If denuclearization could not be achieved with the US military presence, it’s certainly not going to happen without it. Future inter-Korean relations would invariably have to deal with a nuclear North Korea, leaving the South decidedly disadvantaged in any negotiation.

What’s more, a US exit would leave South Korea to cope alone with China’s hegemonic ambitions. China’s territorial claim may not stop at South Korea’s Ieodo, or Socotra rocks, located southwest of Cheju Island. A US departure would surely embolden Beijing to ratchet up its pressure to force Seoul to yield not only Ieodo, but also a large portion of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Yellow Sea. In an environment heavily infused by Chinese and North Korean influence, foreign investments are expected to wither, diminishing South Korea’s hard-earned economic prosperity and international stature. Worse still, South Korea could fall for North Korea’s ploy to establish a North-South federation, rendering South Korea’s constitutional commitment to unification based on principles of liberal democracy (Art. 4) forever untenable.\(^8^9\)
Avoiding Déjà Vu

South Korea should be wary that the US-Philippines alliance collapsed despite almost a century of cultural, linguistic, and economic bonds, reinforced by a military pact spanning over four decades. It ended with little fanfare. As one senior American official then observed, “Once it begins, it is an irreversible process.”

The United States and South Korea may be approaching a similar perfect storm. Both Presidents Trump and Moon perceive a reduced North Korean threat, albeit diverging over approaches toward Pyongyang. Trump playing down the significance of recent North Korean missile launches attests to his tolerance. With the shared perception of a reduced North Korean threat, the implications of Trump’s neo-nationalist desire to scale down US troops abroad are significant. Should Trump move to reduce or even eliminate the US presence, Moon and his inner circle could seize the opportunity as a positive development to boost inter-Korean confidence. If, on the other hand, “maximum pressure” is maintained, the situation could trigger an anti-American nationalist backlash in South Korea. In either case, the outcome does not bode well for the three institutional pillars of the alliance—USFK, CFC, and UNC. Already under strain, they could face escalating challenges merely to survive.

This is a scenario that ought to be avoided at all costs. Knowing what transpired in the Philippines, Washington and Seoul can prevent a Déjà Vu. At the institutional level, all efforts should be focused on strengthening the USFK, CFC, and UNC. A strong institutional link is what’s needed to withstand political whims in both countries. Bipartisan legislation in the US Congress in January 2019 aimed at preventing the unilateral withdrawal of American troops from South Korea is precisely the type of step needed. The United States and the Republic of Korea Alliance Support Act (H.R. 889) is designed specifically to limit the use of government funds to reduce US forces in South Korea. That said, South Korea could unilaterally call for a withdrawal under the Mutual Defense Treaty. Its Article 6 allows either party to terminate the treaty with a one-year notice.

The Philippine government told US troops to leave, not fully recognizing the negative implications for its own security and economy. A better understanding of what a US pullout could mean for South Korea’s sociopolitical, economic, and security future could help curb the Moon government’s potential urges to trigger Article 6. There’s a role here for the media, think tanks, and legislators in both countries.

Washington and Manilla’s 1991 treaty did not adequately address the Philippines’ concerns. During the initial discussions, additional aid and a shorter lease would not have been major US concessions, especially given the costs and consequences of relocating. But, once the Philippine Senate rejected the treaty,
Washington’s pride made those concessions difficult. Regular communication at all levels, not just among the presidents and ministers, is critical if a similar mistake is to be avoided in South Korea. Washington, meanwhile, should be wary of issues that could touch off South Korean nationalism. It should not be forgotten that 2002’s candlelight vigils over the death of two Korean girls run over by a US military vehicle contributed not only to an outburst of raw anti-American emotions, but also to the election of an anti-American president, Roh Moo-hyun.

Burden-sharing is precisely the kind of issue that could spark nationalistic passion. During the negotiations over a new Special Measures Agreement, it would help for Washington to recognize the full range of Seoul’s financial contributions. It would also help to work with a more realistic number instead of the fivefold SMA increase Trump is said to have proposed. According to Ambassador Harry Harris, Washington’s view is that South Korea is not doing enough commensurate to its economic size. Seoul’s earlier decision to send a naval unit to join a US-led maritime force to help guard oil tankers sailing through the Strait of Hormuz is a step in the right direction that may win back a bit of Trump’s appreciation. What would be even better is for the Moon government to contribute to US freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. To ease the SMA negotiations, this option should be considered in earnest by President Moon.

The difference over conditions for sanctions relief is another contentious issue that could potentially disrupt the alliance. Here, it would help if President Moon can finally realize the futility of soliciting foreign governments to lift sanctions on the North. No one’s listening because no one has faith in the genuine viability of a peace regime. President Trump, meanwhile, must end his romance with Kim Jong-un. His flirtation with one of the worst dictators in the world is, if anything, empowering the pro-North Korea, anti-US forces in the South, ultimately weakening, not enhancing, American influence in that part of the world.

Most importantly, Washington and Seoul must do what the United States and the Philippines did not—accurately value their security relationship as well as the consequences if it comes apart. There’s too much at stake for the blood alliance to collapse. Rather, the alliance should be bolstered in the face of North Korea’s WMDs and China’s hegemonic ambitions. The Republic of Korea and the United States are indispensable partners. They must stand together not only to confront a rogue nuclear state, but more broadly to preserve regional stability and further a liberal world order.
Notes


11. The second summit between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un took place on an ad-hoc basis on May 26, 2018, two days after President Trump revealed, through the release of his letter to Kim Jong-un, his intent to cancel his scheduled meeting with him on June 12. Lee Je-hun, “Turning Point toward ’Replacing Mistrust with Trust’ on the Korean Peninsula,”


38. Central Intelligence Agency.


41. Sanger.

43. Sanger, Oberdorfer.

44. Drogin.


61. McGill.


69. Interview with Choi Woo-sok, a Wólgan Chosun reporter, November 5, 2019.


75. Sanger.


77. “Politics, Pinatubo and the Pentagon.”


79. Cha and Lim, “Database.”


86. De Castro.


89. Sanger.

