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## Lowering Old Glory in South Korea

By Jeremy Kirk

SEOUL - The US flag has been lowered on more than a half-dozen deteriorating encampments for American soldiers who have kept armed vigil for more than five decades near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) dividing South and North Korea.

The potential for conflict still looms: North Korea's nuclear-weapons and ballistic-missile programs seek to fortify the world's fifth-largest military. But US military policymakers are hoping improvements in weapons technology can replace boots on the ground needed elsewhere, and still keep the peace.

Before Iraq, South Korea was the only place where US M1A1 Abrams tanks kept their ammunition loaded on board in case of a sudden attack. But since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US military has faced severe staff challenges, and it's not cost-effective to maintain relatively idle troops presiding over the Korean War armistice, signed in Panmunjom 52 years ago on July 27, 1953.

"Leveraging technology allows us to be more efficient and capabilities-based rather than numbers-based," said US Forces Korea (USFK) spokesperson Kevin Krejcarek. "Exercises and training rotations continue to sharpen war-fighting capabilities. We have great capability to deploy strategic forces where needed."

The flag came down at the end of last month. The US military plans incrementally to withdraw 12,500 of the approximately 37,000 service members by 2008. About 3,600 troops from the 2nd Infantry Division along the DMZ were dispatched to Iraq last summer and will not return to South Korea, and about 1,400 more were scheduled to leave last month.

The US military is also consolidating its bases and will move from Yongsan Garrison, a massive 255-hectare army base in the middle of Seoul, by 2008. The presence of a large US Army base in the country's capital has been a long-standing concern with some Koreans who see it as a slight to their sovereignty.

But that move also comes with a hefty US\$4.9 billion price tag. South Korea's legislative body, the National Assembly, ratified the agreement that also calls for about \$200 million in US financing for the move. The Korean government has said it will finance it through sales of the highly valuable land in central Seoul and by issuing government bonds.

Many 2nd Infantry Division units - which comprised the bulk of the

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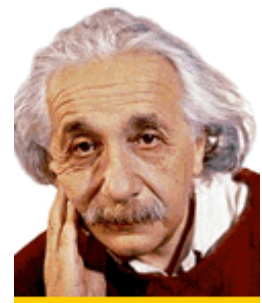
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war fighting power - were stationed at small camps established shortly after the Korean War and were within mortar range of North Korea, putting them at immediate risk should war break out. Nine of them were scheduled to shutter their gates by the end of last month.

It also marks a change in US war-fighting strategy, one in which advancing technology has allowed troops to move further away from the front line but still maintain a powerful punch.

"I would say that proximity to the DMZ is not as important as it used to be, given the long reach of weapons systems and the fact that the US likes to fight a mobile operation," said Joseph S Bermudez Jr, author of several books on North Korean military capabilities. "We don't need to be there as a tripwire," he told Asia Times Online.

The "tripwire" effect meant that if North Korea attacked, US troops because of their close proximity to the DMZ would be immediately drawn into the conflict.

Throughout this year, the United States has pledged to spend \$11 billion on 150 systems to enhance its force in South Korea. Those investments will include rotation of the army's Stryker wheel-armored vehicle system, upgrades to Patriot anti-missile systems and use of unmanned aerial vehicles.

The United States initially wanted to complete the withdrawal of 12,500 troops by the end of last year. The timeline was extended after the South Korean government sought a delay, highlighting its dilemma: how to secure the country's national security and defense but also maintain an equitable military and political alliance with the US.

North Korean reaction has been sharp. "The issue of reducing US forces occupying Korea is merely an instrument to pressure or a snare to further strengthen its grip on South Korea," according to a broadcast on Pyongyang Broadcasting Service. "The South Korean authorities should abandon as soon as possible their submissive attitude toward the US and assume the standpoint of self-independence of the nation."

South Korea has depended heavily on the United States for its defense, said Nick Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute and author of the *The End of North Korea*. Seoul has estimated it would have to double defense spending in order to match the US capabilities if the United States completely pulled out, he said.

USFK officials claim formidable capabilities. Marines from Okinawa can be transferred on high-speed ships within hours. US Army Stryker units can be airlifted here within 11 hours and military assets can be steamed from Saipan or Diego Garcia within days, they have said.

The US Air Force has B-52 bombers stationed on Guam, part of continuing upgrades on the strategic isle. Navy and marine F/A-18E-F Super Hornets provide all-weather nighttime precision-strike capabilities. F-117 Nighthawk stealth fighters were deployed to South Korea for exercises in July and last year.

"Capabilities have changed so significantly that it allows us to make changes in force levels and dispositions," said military spokesperson Krejcarek.

A total US pullout could also have a negative impact on foreign investment. Last year alone saw a \$2.6 billion investment by US banking giant Citigroup and a \$1.2 billion investment by General Motors in South Korea. US officials traditionally have been quick to cite the force presence as a stabilizer, allowing for South Korea's phenomenal economic growth since the end of the Korean War, though it has since entered the economic doldrums.

A pullout "would translate into high unemployment rates almost immediately for the young", Eberstadt said. "If the US alliance is undermined with South Korea, the first people who will suffer financially are going to be the young kids."

The alliance has become increasingly strained by public strategy divisions in dealing with North Korea. The US approach - entering another four-year stretch with the re-election of President George W Bush - has clashed with the government of South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, which has muted criticism of its northern neighbor and pushed economic engagement with Pyongyang.

Despite what is portrayed as rosier economic cooperation between North and South Korea, the South's Defense Ministry recently announced plans to increase defense spending from 2.8% of its total gross national product (GNP) to 3.2%. The budget increase, pegged to cost \$92.5 billion over the next four years, would finally put South Korea on par with most developed countries for defense spending as percentage of GNP, usually around 3%.

"We decided to strengthen the role of South Korean military forces to defend our nation in the face of the reorganization of US Forces Korea," Major-General Bang Hyo-bok told South Korean media.

However, South Korean and US negotiators failed to reach an agreement after two days of talks this week on how much the country should contribute to the stationing of US forces. Last year South Korea contributed about \$623 million, and the US is reportedly seeking a greater contribution.

Planned improvements by South Korea include Patriot missile batteries, Aegis destroyers and new satellites, officials say. But "the US provides a lot of the glue that stitches" South Korea's defense systems together, author Bermudez said. Those include advanced command and control systems (C4I) and anti-special-operations forces to counter North Korea's formidable special-operations troops.

"A lot of that, both at sea and on land, is heavily dependant on US helicopter assets and special air assets that use cutting-edge US technology," Bermudez said.

But the scenario of all-out war with North Korea is one both South Korea and the United States want to avoid at all costs. Experts estimate tens of thousands of casualties at the onset of war and devastating long-term consequences.

"There is no military solution to this challenge we face with North Korea," US Ambassador Christopher R Hill told students at Korea University recently. "We need to find a diplomatic solution."

*Jeremy Kirk is a freelance writer in Seoul specializing in*

*Northeast Asia. He can be reached at [jeremy\\_kirk@hotmail.com](mailto:jeremy_kirk@hotmail.com).*

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**Head Office:** Rm 202, Hau Fook Mansion, No. 8 Hau Fook St., Kowloon, Hong Kong  
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