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Experts ponder state of S. Korea without U.S.

By [Jeremy Kirk](#), Stars and Stripes

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SEOUL — During the presidential campaign last fall, candidate Roh Moo-hyun rode a wave of anti-U.S. military sentiment and galvanized the support of younger South Koreans with tough anti-U.S. language.

Shortly after the Dec. 19 election, however, President-elect Roh threw water on the flames, downplaying his criticism and telling protesters to cool down. Eleven days later, he asked South Korean military officers about a contingency blueprint if the 37,000 U.S. servicemembers here were to pack up and leave.

“I wanted to ask whether our military has any plans to prepare for a possible U.S.-troop cut since I have never heard of them,” Roh told The Associated Press.

The comments were probably aimed at ensuring the South Korean military maintains a high state of readiness rather than real preparation for a U.S. pullout, said Kim Joung-won, distinguished professor of international law and politics at Sejong University in Seoul.

U.S. Forces Korea officials would not speculate on any cutbacks or buildups to present force levels, a spokeswoman said.

“The U.S. forces in Korea are already forward deployed executing our assigned missions,” Lee Ferguson said. “At this time, we are not looking into any troop strength reductions or increases to our forces in the Republic of Korea.”

Some South Koreans — driven by strong nationalistic feelings — say accidents, crimes and environmental damage by the U.S. military outweigh any potential North Korean threat. Editorial writers in U.S. newspapers debate whether it’s time to leave.

For 50 years, the Korean peninsula has been an unlit fuse and is again facing its most serious security challenge since 1994, when North Korea and the United States nearly went to war over the communist country's nuclear weapons program.

The newest challenge again puts the 37,000 servicemembers here at the forefront of debate, a loathed and loved force of fleeting foreign faces.

South Korea's modern military force has benefitted much from U.S.-style military tactics and training.

"We have a lot to learn from the United States," said Kim Changsu, director of U.S. studies for the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, a government-funded think tank.

The country spent \$12.1 billion on its 700,000-person force in 2002, according to U.S. Forces Korea. It trains with F-16 fighters, indigenously produced tanks and artillery systems in addition to submarines and warships.

Training exercises, such as Ulchi Focus Lens and Foal Eagle, simulate the integration of South Korean and U.S. forces. The Combined Forces Command is the U.N. warfighting unit responsible for South Korea's defense.

In a war, U.S. Gen. Leon J. LaPorte would be top commander of all forces, with a South Korean four-star general as deputy.

The United States spends about \$3 billion annually for soldiers, operations and maintenance, construction and family housing to keep forces in South Korea. That figure does not include dozens of tanks, fighter planes, artillery and other dedicated hardware.

"That is the equivalent of about one-fourth or one-fifth of the [South Korean] defense budget," Kim said. "That is an enormous amount of money that American people spend to maintain the peace and security."

Two years ago, the South Korean Defense Ministry estimated the total value of U.S. forces in Korea at \$14 billion, said Lt. Col. Kim Il-sok, who works for the U.S. relations section of the Policy Planning Bureau.

For that investment, many experts say U.S. forces have been the linchpin of security. The American commitment in South Korea has been an enduring symbolic feature, said Kurt Campbell, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific affairs under former President Clinton.

"I think it is an important symbol of the American commitment that we will stay,

we will continue to play a role,” Campbell said.

While dissent regarding U.S. forces has been widely visible, Kim said younger South Koreans don't remember the hardships of the Korean War. U.S. forces have helped keep the peace, he said.

“I think most Korean people strongly believe they should stay in Korea in order to further maintain peace and security on the Korean peninsula,” Kim said.

U.S. forces act as a “trip wire,” for massive reinforcement of international forces if North Korea attacked, Kim Changsu said, adding that the threat remains real.

North Korea has 70 percent of its military forces within 90 miles of the Demilitarized Zone, according to USFK. This includes 700,000 troops, 8,000 artillery systems and 2,000 tanks.

“Without moving any pieces, Pyongyang could sustain up to 500,000 rounds per hour against Combined Forces Command defenses and Seoul for several hours,” according to the 2002 USFK Resource Management Fact Book.

While U.S. personnel strength may not be high in peacetime, American forces do bring high-tech equipment that is beyond South Korea's budget.

South Korea lacks carrier battle groups and advanced weapons such as Tomahawk missiles and the F-117 stealth fighter, said Patrick Garrett, an associate analyst with Global Security, a military analysis Web site.

The United States has the ability to target anywhere at any time, Garrett said. Naval resources would allow U.S. Marines to mount landing operations. Marines from Okinawa would be reinforcements in the event of a conflict, he said.

Advanced artillery location systems also are key, said Kim Changsu. Those systems allow southern forces to hone in on North Korean artillery systems and counterfire quickly.

U.S. military technology “is invaluable to us,” he said. “Not just intelligence gathering, but they have very important, very sophisticated cutting-edge weaponry.”

The goal for friendly forces would be to stop North Korean forces from taking Seoul, a mere 35 miles south of the Demilitarized Zone. Those approach avenues have been the subjects of intense study, Garrett said.

The main U.S. Army fighting force is the 2nd Infantry Division, a 14,000-

member unit spread over 17 camps in the South Korean countryside north of Seoul. It's equipped with Paladin artillery systems, M1A1 tanks, Apache attack helicopters and Bradley Fighting Vehicles.

Its job would be to stop the oncoming onslaught. But experts estimate that up 80,000 to 100,000 U.S. soldiers could die in a new Korean War, a conflict they say could kill 1 million overall.

Even though U.S. forces stationed here now are relatively few compared to South Korea's military, "I really don't think that that is a division is as much of a speed bump as people are making it out to be. That division is there to win," Garrett said.

Could South Korea defend itself on its own without U.S. help? Experts agree that South Korea could hold its own, though the war would be much longer and bloodier.

The war would last only a couple weeks if the United States were involved, Garrett said. Without U.S. forces, "I think the question becomes how long it will take the South Koreans to win and at what cost," he said.

"I think that the ROK army is capable, but I definitely don't think it's the U.S. Army and I definitely don't think it has the capability from the technological and from the training standpoint," Garrett said. "I think those are the winning cards the U.S. has."

John Pike, director of Global Security, wrote in an e-mail to Stars and Stripes that "as long as the war was only between the Koreans, and as long as neither had nuclear weapons, South Korea could win without U.S. assistance."

But others, such as Campbell, don't want to envision a second Korean War. "It's a scenario and hypothetical that I hope we never have to face," he said.

— *Choe Song-won contributed to this report.*

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