

Trump Orders Pentagon to Consider Reducing U.S. Forces in South Korea

By MARK LANDLER MAY 3, 2018

WASHINGTON — President Trump has ordered the Pentagon to prepare options for drawing down American troops in South Korea, just weeks before he holds a landmark meeting with North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, according to several people briefed on the deliberations.

Reduced troop levels are not intended to be a bargaining chip in Mr. Trump's talks with Mr. Kim about his weapons program, these officials said. But they acknowledged that a peace treaty between the two Koreas could diminish the need for the 28,500 soldiers currently stationed on the peninsula.

Mr. Trump has been determined to withdraw troops from South Korea, arguing that the United States is not adequately compensated for the cost of maintaining them, that the troops are mainly protecting Japan and that decades of American military presence had not prevented the North from becoming a nuclear threat.

His latest push coincides with tense negotiations with South Korea over how to share the cost of the military force. Under an agreement that expires at the end of 2018, South Korea pays about half the cost of the upkeep of the soldiers — more than \$800 million a year. The Trump administration is demanding that it pay for virtually the entire cost of the military presence. The directive has rattled officials at the Pentagon and other agencies, who worry that any reduction could weaken the American alliance with South Korea and raise fears in neighboring Japan at the very moment that the United States is embarking on a risky nuclear negotiation with the North.

Officials declined to say whether Mr. Trump was seeking options for a full or partial reduction of troops, though a full withdrawal was unlikely. They emphasized that rethinking the size and configuration of the American force was overdue, regardless of the sudden flowering of diplomacy with North Korea.

But Mr. Trump's meeting with Mr. Kim injects an unpredictable new element. His enthusiasm for the encounter — and the prospect of ending a nearly 70-year-old military conflict between the two Koreas — has raised concerns that he may offer troop cuts in return for concessions by Mr. Kim. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis added to those concerns last Friday when he suggested that the future of the American military presence might be on the table.

“That's part of the issues that we'll be discussing in negotiations with our allies first, and of course with North Korea,” he said. “For right now, we just have to go along with process, have the negotiations and not try to make preconditions or presumptions about how it's going to go.”

A spokesman for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Col. Patrick Ryder, said he had no information about troop options being prepared for the president.

For Mr. Trump, withdrawing troops would have multiple benefits, said Victor D. Cha, a Korea scholar at Georgetown University who was for a time under consideration to be ambassador to Seoul. It would appeal to his political base, save the United States money and give him a valuable chit in his negotiation with Mr. Kim.

“But from the perspective of the U.S.-South Korea alliance,” Mr. Cha said, “it would represent a major retrenchment.”

Kelly E. Magsamen, a top Asia policy official at the Pentagon during the Obama administration, said, “U.S. presence in South Korea is a sacrosanct part of our alliance.”

The South Korean government reiterated this week that the troops were still needed and would not be pulled out as a result of a peace treaty with North Korea. But even close allies of President Moon Jae-in have raised doubts about the rationale for a long-term American presence.

“What will happen to U.S. forces in South Korea if a peace treaty is signed?” Moon Chung-in, an adviser to the president, said in a widely read article published this week. “It will be difficult to justify their continuing presence.”

Mr. Kim recently declared, through South Korean officials, that he would drop the North’s longstanding insistence that American troops leave the peninsula. Some experts argue that watching American soldiers depart is far less important to him than winning relief from economic sanctions.

For years, the American presence has been more important as a symbol of deterrence than as a fighting force. At their current levels, the troop numbers are down by about a third from the level in the 1990s.

As the South Koreans have become a premier fighting force — with their own special operations forces, the ability to oppose the North’s artillery along the Demilitarized Zone and now their own cyberforces — they have become less dependent on the United States. Most American troops have pulled back to well south of Seoul.

Since President George Bush removed tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea in the early 1990s, the nuclear deterrent against the North has been based far away, in missile silos on the continental United States, submarines in the Pacific or bombers based on Guam.

Mr. Trump is not the first president to push for troop reductions. Jimmy Carter ran for office on a promise to withdraw all ground combat forces, in part to protest South Korea’s autocratic government at the time. Resistance from the military and Congress stymied his efforts. In 2004, George W. Bush’s defense secretary, Donald H. Rumsfeld, shifted nearly 10,000 troops from South Korea to the Iraq war.

During the Obama administration, former officials said, the Pentagon was always reluctant to consider troop reductions or the suspension of joint military exercises when the White House talked about potential pathways to ridding North Korea of its weapons.

“It would be foolish to give any of that away early in discussions, given the long North Korean track record of breaking agreements,” said Christine Wormuth, a former top Defense Department policy official in the Obama administration.

Mr. Trump, however, has long argued that America’s military presence is not an asset but a liability — not just in South Korea but in Japan as well. As both countries became wealthy, he said, they should have taken on more of the burden for their defense. During the 2016 presidential campaign, he even suggested that the two nations acquire their own nuclear weapons so they did not have to depend on the American nuclear umbrella.

Grudgingly, Mr. Trump admitted that the troops had kept the peace on the peninsula. But he said they had not prevented the North from acquiring nuclear weapons or menacing its neighbors.

“We’ve got our soldiers sitting there watching missiles go up,” he said in an [interview with The New York Times](#) in July 2016. “You say to yourself, ‘Well, what are we getting out of this?’”

Over the past year, officials said, Mr. Trump has continued to question the need for troops with aides like his former national security adviser, Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, and his deputy, Maj. Gen. Ricky L. Waddell.

Before the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, when tensions between the United States and North Korea were high, the president broached the idea of withdrawing the dependents of troops from South Korea for security reasons. His chief of staff, John F. Kelly, talked him out of the plan, a former official said, because it would have stoked fears of an imminent military strike against the North.

During that period, tensions flared between the White House and the Pentagon because Mr. Trump’s aides believed the military was dragging its feet in providing the president with options for a limited strike on North Korea.

Now, officials said, the situation was reversed: The Pentagon worries that Mr. Trump will push too swiftly to demilitarize.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/04/opinion/trumps-dangerous-global-retreat.html>

Trump’s Dangerous Global Retreat

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The Eurofighter Typhoon is Germany's premier front-line jet fighter. This week, Der Spiegel reported that just four of the Luftwaffe's 128 Typhoons are combat ready. You [read that right: four](#). Also, not one of the German Navy's six submarines is in a condition to put to sea, and [only 95 of its 244 battle tanks are operational](#). At this point, Luxembourg could probably conquer Germany.

Should anyone seriously care that Germany, with the world's fourth-largest economy, would be unable to defend itself in the event of war, much less fulfill its treaty obligations to NATO? Not if all you can think about is how Donald Trump is going to squirm out of one potentially incriminating lie by inventing another.

But Vladimir Putin undoubtedly cares, and so does Trump. It's a toxic combination.

Germany's persistent, deliberate military weakness is a reminder of just how unprepared much of the world is for the continued unraveling of global order, characterized by two pronounced trends: emboldened dictatorships and risk-averse, inward-looking democracies.

About the former: Bashar al-Assad continues to advance against his opponents in Syria, despite last month's feckless U.S. missile strikes. The Kremlin reportedly intends to supply [Assad with advanced anti-aircraft systems](#) to defend against Israeli attacks. Israel is bracing for war with Iran and its militant proxies in Lebanon, even while it is being savaged in the media for defending its border fence with Gaza.

Elsewhere, Russia is sitting unmolested on its conquests in Ukraine. Beijing continues to militarize artificial islands in the South China Sea, reportedly by deploying surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles to them. Turkey [rolled its tanks into Syria against U.S.-allied Kurdish forces](#) — the ones who have done the bulk of our fighting against ISIS — to little U.S. protest. Against this stands an American president whose governing foreign policy instincts are bluster and retreat.

In the last month or so, Trump has said he wants to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria that are now the chief deterrent against the Turks, though France's Emmanuel Macron seems to have persuaded him not to remove them yet. The administration's trade negotiators are forcing a renegotiation of Nafta that appears to be calculated to invite rejection by legislatures in Mexico or Canada, and maybe the U.S. Congress, too. If they do, Trump could declare the trade pact a dead letter, whether or not that's legal.

Then there is South Korea. On Thursday, The Times's Mark Landler [reported the stunning but not entirely surprising news](#) that Trump has ordered the Pentagon to prepare options for withdrawing at least some of America's 28,500 troops from the peninsula.

Why now? Part of the answer is that Trump is trying to force Seoul to foot more of the bill for the U.S. military presence. But Seoul already pays half the U.S. costs and fields one of the largest armies in the world. Unlike Germany, it is no military deadbeat.

A likelier answer is that Trump sees American withdrawal as an achievement in its own right and hopes a peace treaty with the North is his ticket.

This is the kind of classic diplomatic blunder that, had it been committed by a Democratic president, would have produced thunderous denunciations from people like John Bolton and Mike Pompeo. Here's an administration squeezing a close ally while telegraphing our negotiating terms to a deadly enemy. Expect Pyongyang to demand substantial U.S. withdrawals as its price for promises of peace and denuclearization. Beijing, which has long aimed to push the U.S. out of East Asia, will be thrilled.

The G.O.P. counternarrative is that Trump has cowed Kim with sanctions and military threats. Please: Kim is running the exact same play his father and grandfather did. And the president is simply not a liberal internationalist in the mold of Harry Truman, concerned with the welfare of the free world. He's a nationalist transactionalist. He believes in what's-in-it-for-us, specifically what's-in-it-for-him. This has been his core conviction for [at least 30 years](#), if not his whole life.

Let's close with some questions for the president's right-wing supporters.

Does Trump have any larger goal in Korea other than to find a pretext for a military exit and gain a moment of glory along the way?

Does he have a detailed strategy toward Iran other than to renounce the nuclear deal and hope for better terms?

Is the plan for Syria to let Assad — and his Iranian and Russian patrons — win, and let the Israelis and other U.S. allies deal with the fallout?

Is there a concept for a North American trade regime should Nafta collapse?

The world learned on [Sept. 1, 1939](#), where the mentality of every-country-for-itself leads. Our willful and politically wounded president is leading us there again. A warning to countries that have relied too long and lazily on the promises of Pax Americana: The policeman has checked out. You're on your own again.