THE FUTURE OF THE US–REPUBLIC OF KOREA MILITARY RELATIONSHIP

The Future of the US–Republic of Korea Military Relationship

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First published in Great Britain 1996 by

MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS
and London

Companies and representatives
throughout the world

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-349-13912-5 ISBN 978-1-349-13910-1 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-13910-1

First published in the United States of America 1996 by

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, INC.,

Scholarly and Reference Division,
175 Fifth Avenue,
New York, N.Y. 10010

ISBN 978-0-312-12967-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kim, Jung-Ik.

The future of the US-Republic of Korea military relationship / Kim
Jung-Ik.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-312-12967-5 (cloth)

1. United States—Military relations—Korea (South) 2. Korea
(South)—Military relations—United States. I. Title.

E183.8.K7K55 1996

327.7305195—dc20

95-48386

CIP

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1996

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05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97 96

To the Army of the Republic of Korea

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express special thanks to the ROK Army for providing this invaluable opportunity for study at the Centre for Defence Studies at Aberdeen University and financial support during my studies.

On completing this dissertation, I wish to express my feelings of gratitude and appreciation to my supervisor, Mr David Greenwood, for his valuable advice and comments on the subject. His immense knowledge and experience have been essential to me in improving this dissertation, both stylistically and substantively.

I thank my colleague, Miss Gillian Wylie, for her constant reading of my chapters and acting as an informant with a native speaker's intuition.

I am happy to acknowledge my indebtedness to my family: my parents and in-laws for their consistent love and praying throughout these years. I have been fortunate in having my wife's unfailing encouragement and my dearest six-year-old son's incredible patience.

Summary

Since the end of the Second World War the security of South Korea has been dependent on the actions of the United States, whose chief interest was to block communist expansion in the free world. Throughout the Cold War the US was interested in defending South Korea from communist attack and by doing so to maintain stability in Northeast Asia. The close military relationship between the two countries was a direct result of this strategic consideration.

With the end of the Cold War, the strategic and military commitments of the United States have changed and thanks to the economic downturn, the United States has tried to cut defence expenditure. Without an apparent enemy, the US post-Cold War strategy now focuses on preventing regional conflicts and promoting human rights. As expected, the number of soldiers in forward bases throughout the world, including South Korea, has been reduced.

But for North Korean nuclear development, the force withdrawal programme declared by the Bush administration would have been executed as scheduled, forcing South Korea to take a leading role in defending the country by the end of this century. A conventional war in the Korean Peninsula will not seriously affect the strategic interests of the United States in Asia as long as the security of Japan is not threatened. The South Korean military may be able to stall an invasion by North Korea for some time until the international community responds. The United States no longer needs to sacrifice American lives by being directly involved in a military conflict in Korea. This being so, South Korea will be forced to take a leading role and allow the majority of US forces in Korea to leave.

The strategic considerations of the United States have been disturbed by the alleged North Korean nuclear development and the North's refusal to open suspected sites to the UN inspection team. Worried about nuclear proliferation, the prevention of which is one of the US post-Cold War objectives, the United States has been trying to stop the development and to put the sites under IAEA supervision by making direct contact with North Korea. Although the force withdrawal programme has been suspended to give the impression to North Korea of US determination, concessions like the cancellation of the Team Spirit joint military exercise have also been offered.

Like the United States, South Korea has been preoccupied with stopping North Korean nuclear development, but this has proved to be beyond its reach. Therefore, what is the most practical way to ensure the security of South Korea? Considering the behaviour of the North over the years and the reports on the progress of nuclear weapons development, it would be dangerous to believe that North Korea does not have nuclear weapons.

South Korea should consider the North Korean nuclear threat as well as the possibility of a conventional attack. In the new era when the United States is not likely to intervene automatically in a Korean conflict, the reliance on the US forces for security should be reconsidered. Due to the withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from Korea, which greatly affect the forward defence strategy of South Korea, it has already been rendered short of the fire-power necessary to stop a North Korean conventional attack, which would be characterized by deep penetration and successive strikes. South Korea should consider increasing fire-power to stop such a conventional attack and at the same time find a way to deter the North Korean nuclear threat.