

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 31, 2020

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump:

We write to express our concern regarding recent reports that your administration is considering reducing the level of U.S. troops based in South Korea.¹ American service members stationed in South Korea play a vital role in keeping our country safe from North Korean aggression, an assertive China, and Russia. A potential reduction in troop levels would hurt our national security interests and signal to our allies that the United States can no longer be counted on to help promote and maintain stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Withdrawing large portions of our forces from the region will undermine the safety of the United States by weakening our first line of deterrence and defense against both China and North Korea. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper acknowledged the need to prepare for a possible confrontation with China a mere four days after withdrawal plans were submitted to the White House.² Recognizing the importance of our presence in South Korea, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 required a certification to Congress prior to reducing U.S. troop levels below 22,000. Faced with evolving challenges from China, Russia, and North Korea, we should not undercut our longstanding commitment to supporting South Korea and our allies in the Indo-Pacific region, but rather strengthen and deepen those partnerships.

The Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and South Korea, signed in 1953 at the end of the Korean War, commits the United States to help South Korea defend itself, and the alliance helps the United States promote its interests in East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. This June marked the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the Korean War and the beginning of an unshakeable alliance between the United States and South Korea that is based on mutual strategic interests and shared democratic values. Since U.S. and South Korean troops

¹ Michael R. Gordon and Gordon Lubold, "Trump Administration Weighs Troop Cut in South Korea," The Wall Street Journal, July 17, 2020, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-administration-weighs-troop-cut-in-south-korea-11595005050?mod=breakingnews>.


² Nancy A. Youssef, "U.S. Is Positioning Military Assets Around Asia to Counter China, Esper Says," The Wall Street Journal, July 21, 2020, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-is-positioning-military-assets-around-asia-to-counter-china-esper-says-11595340363>.

fought and died to ensure freedom on the Korean peninsula, the United States has enjoyed the longstanding support of South Korea. South Korea has contributed troops to every war in which American soldiers fought since the Korean conflict and most recently sent 700,000 tests kits to the United States to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic.³ A withdrawal of U.S. troops would harm this longstanding, mutually beneficial alliance, weakening the United States posture in the region while strengthening our adversaries and competitors.

Additionally, we would like to stress the importance of communicating with our allies, especially South Korea and Japan, before making any decisions about appropriate troop levels in the region. The Senate recently recognized the importance of engaging with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region to compete with and counter China through passage of the Indo-Pacific Cooperation Act, and it is critical that the perspectives of our allies are considered when making any major decisions affecting regional stability.

American troops based on the Korean peninsula form the bedrock of our alliance with South Korea. U.S. Forces Korea benefit from combined forces training exercises Key Resolve and Foal Eagle, and South Korea and the United States enjoy a high level of interoperability. Our alliance strengthens American security, whereas a drawdown of U.S. forces would be welcomed by China, Russia, and North Korea. We urge you to reject any plans to reduce U.S. troop levels in South Korea.

Sincerely,



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator

³ Sue M. Terry, “The Unraveling of the U.S.-South Korean Alliance,” Foreign Affairs, July 3, 2020, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2020-07-03/unraveling-us-south-korean-alliance>.