

“How Long Should We Stay in Korea?”

By

General Vincent Brooks, USA (RET.)

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General Brooks started his presentation with some background information on Korea for the non-specialist. He served in Korea, most recently from the Spring of 2016 until November 2018. During that time he was the commander of the United Nations Command (a vestige of the 1950-53 war), U.S. Forces Korea, and the Combined Military Command (CMC). Brooks referred to the CMC as *the sword* of the alliance, entailing about 680,000 military personnel, of which the lion’s share come from South Korea. During his time as commander, North Korea tested a family of ballistic missiles (medium-range, intermediate, intercontinental, submarine-launched) and conducted nuclear weapon tests.

Speaking to the question of how long the United States should station forces in Korea, Brooks refrained from a specific timeline, and instead laid out two considerations for making this determination.

First, *until war and armistice are replaced by peace*. Recall that the armistice signed in 1953 suspended hostilities and heavy fighting, but did not formally end the war. Achieving peace and a non-nuclear Korean peninsula are closely bound together.

- General Brooks said that there can be no lasting peace with North Korea in possession of nuclear weapons.

Second, *until our interests can be served without our presence there*. Brooks emphasized that our presence in South Korea is multifaceted.

- In terms of politics, the economy, culture and language, “U.S. DNA is all over South Korea”.

As to the military aspect of our presence, the U.S. and South Korea are pledged to a Mutual Defense Treaty.

- Although the mission opposite North Korea is primarily one of deterrence, forward presence hones warfighting capabilities via such things as access, bases, overflight rights, etc.
- And beyond North Korea, Northeast Asia is a dangerous neighborhood. United States’ forces must signal messages to and provide options against China, Russia, and perhaps others.

General Brooks concluded that the conditions for being able to ensure our interests without forward presence are *not close*.

Moderated by Council Board Chairman Hagenbeck, General Brooks fielded a number of interesting questions from the viewing audience, including on issues of regional geopolitics.

- Chinese representatives claim to be *frustrated* and have little leverage over Pyongyang. China's greatest interest in North Korea is avoiding instability that might spill across borders, and Beijing could live with the North's nuclear armaments if the overall system was stable.
- Russia would like to profit off of North Korea, possibly as a transit route into the rest of the Korean peninsula. But foreign policy-wise, Moscow would like to keep Pyongyang *in a box*.
- Japan has a limited, adversarial relationship with North Korea, and would probably be the last regional interlocutor to establish a dialogue with Pyongyang. Despite Tokyo's need to consider new types of advanced weaponry, its forces remain primarily defensive, and it would be a mistake to see the North Korean threat as sufficient to drive Japanese remobilization or rearmament.

Given the dynamics of Northeast Asia, and the substantial defense burden and host nation support which Seoul already bears, General Brooks cautioned that it would be a mistake to lump South Korea in with certain other U.S. allies as a *freeloader*.

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