

TIME TO LEAVE -- KOREA

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, AUG 2 2009

There is talk about US forces leaving Iraq early, in 2010 rather than the scheduled date of 2011. Terrific. But before one gets too enthusiastic about that prospect, one should consider the Korean case. The war in Korea started in 1950 and is still technically on although shooting incidents are rare events. After the Truce Agreement in 1953, the US continued to maintain forces in South Korea. More than five decades later, the US still has over 28,000 troops in South Korea with thousands more stationed elsewhere in the Pacific and earmarked as backup.

In 1953 South Korea was a poor, war ravaged country facing a poor, war crazed country to its North. Initially, US forces were needed to help defend South Korea from North Korea which had strong Soviet and Chinese support. Much, however, has changed since then. North Korea's Soviet Union patron died 20 years ago, and its China ally has long ago gone down the Capitalist Road, selling goods to and buying debt from the US of all counties. North Korea may have the bomb, but it is having trouble feeding its population and has trouble finding friends.

Meanwhile things have changed for South Korea as well. It is now quite rich, claiming one of the top ten economies in the world. It is much richer than the North, thirty times richer by one calculation. It also has twice the population of the North and lots more food and friends. South Korea is rich enough to maintain large, well equipped forces—over 650,000 on active duty and another 3,000,000 plus in reserve. If it wants nuclear weapons, it could easily build them.

Isn't time to leave South Korea? Start packing up in Iraq for sure, but send the moving vans first to Korea to show that there are indeed ends to these stories. And yes, include Germany and Japan on that list of pickup points as well.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.