

Surveying Opinion on Withdrawing US Troops from Afghanistan and South Korea

Written by Timothy S. Rich, Sofia Kamali and Kaitlyn Bison

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TIMOTHY S. RICH, SOFIA KAMALI AND KAITLYN BISON, JUL 17 2020

The Trump administration has repeatedly threatened to withdraw troops abroad, including those in two Asian countries facing vastly different security conditions, Afghanistan and South Korea. While the economic and political factors behind potential withdrawals receives growing attention, American public opinion lags behind, despite piecemeal evidence that a sizable portion of the American public remains concerned about military spending and prolonged commitments abroad. For example, a 2019 Chicago Council Survey found considerable variation in support for maintaining versus withdrawing U.S. forces. We ask not only whether the U.S. public supports withdrawing from these two countries, but to what extent partisan and demographic factors influence support.

The U.S. committed at one point to over 100,000 American troops in Afghanistan, coupled with billions of dollars to fight a Taliban insurgency and fund reconstruction. In February 2020, in accordance with a preliminary peace deal with the Taliban, the U.S. agreed to reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan to 8,600 within 135 days. Additionally, the U.S. committed to withdrawing all troops from Afghanistan by April 2021 if the Taliban upheld commitments to prevent terrorist groups using Afghan territory to threaten the U.S. and its allies and pursued intra-Afghan negotiations.

Trump repeatedly states his support to withdrawal soldiers home from America's longest-running war that has cost \$822 billion since 2001. However, commanders remained concerned about a premature withdrawal could further destabilize the country. This could again result in safe havens for terror groups – the kind that Al Qaeda exploited to attack the United States in 2001. Additionally, since the war began in 2001, US forces have suffered over 2,000 deaths and over 20,000 soldiers injured in action. Additionally, former US ambassador to Afghanistan James Cunningham stated that withdrawing troops would result in negative consequences, including reenergizing the Taliban believing they had defeated the United States.

Shifting to South Korea, roughly 28,500 American troops remain as a Cold War holdover, with the purpose of deterring North Korean attacks. Although there are mixed feelings about South Korea's reliance on American support, a majority of South Koreans believe it is crucial to their nation's security. Additionally, a survey conducted in February last year found that a majority of South Koreans believe the continued presence of the U.S. military is a deterrence and as many as 28% believed Korean cost contributions should increase. However, this majority support has dropped before during periods of anti-Americanism, such as during the early 2000s.

The Trump administration consistently claims that South Korea has not paid its share for a U.S. military presence, ignoring South Korea's indirect contributions, as well as earlier increases of South Korean contributions under the Obama administration. The Trump administration's demand in December of a 400% increase in payments led many Koreans to protest the presence of U.S. military entirely, creating an impasse in negotiations as Korean officials called the demand a “non-starter”, and others suggested the demand was a pretext to justify an American withdrawal. Jimmy Carter, when proposing a similar withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea, was met with opposition by Congress and the U.S. intelligence community. U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun advocates for the continued presence of the U.S. military as the country was among the “most important alliance partners.” This belief appears to be reflected by the American bipartisan public who remain committed to

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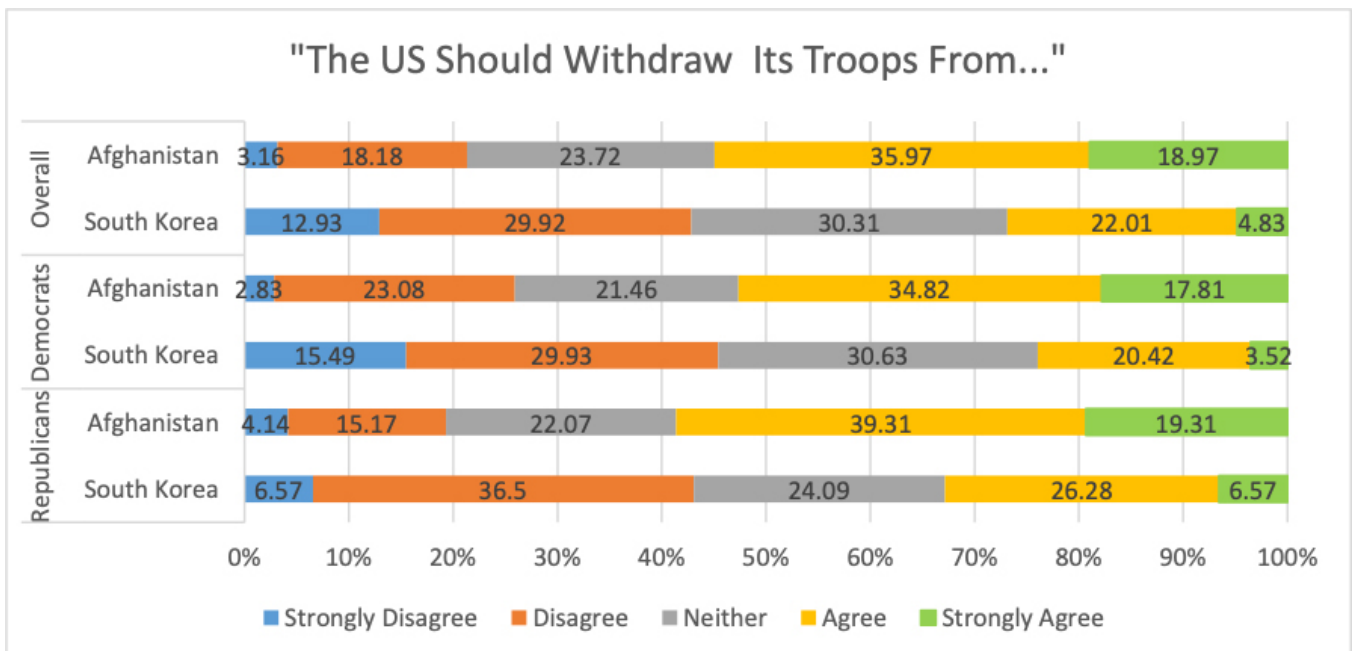
defending South Korean in the face of a potential North Korean invasion.

To address troop withdrawals, we conducted a web survey via mTurk Amazon of 1,024 American respondents on July 7, 2020. After a series of demographic and attitudinal questions, respondents were randomly assigned to a prompt either about Afghanistan or South Korea to evaluate on a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). We chose this set-up, rather than ask respondents about both, to avoid perceptions of one influencing the other.

The versions were:

- The U.S. should withdraw its 8,600 troops from Afghanistan.
- The U.S. should withdraw its 28,500 troops from South Korea.

The figure below presents the results for both randomizations for the overall sample as well as broken down by partisan identification.



From this, we see that 54.94% of Americans support the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan compared to only 26.84% that support withdrawing troops from South Korea. However, it is unclear exactly why Americans are opposed to a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan more than South Korea. After 19 years in Afghanistan and roughly 2,200 U.S. casualties, the American public may simply be less supportive of an ambiguous post-Taliban mission that included non-traditional military goals such as state building and democratization.

A Brookings/University of Maryland Poll in January 2020, for example, found Republicans in particular (63%) disagreed that it was America's responsibility to ensure the development of a liberal democratic government in Afghanistan. Our findings are consistent with Pew Research Center's 2019 survey that found 59% of the American public viewed the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting. However, it also contradicts a survey conducted in January, which found that a plurality of Americans supported long-term military bases in Afghanistan. When broken down by party preference, again clear majorities support the removal of troops from Afghanistan (52.63% for Democrats and 58.62% for Republicans).

For South Korea, 42.85% of respondents opposed withdrawals versus 26.84% in support, with opposition surpassing support by 21.48% among Democrats and 10.22% among Republicans, which reflects a previous survey

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finding Democrats more likely to view North Korea as an immediate threat. That support for withdrawal was highest among Republicans suggests that Trump's claims about cost-sharing, although arguably inaccurate, have been persuasive to his base. However, what motivates the broader support for maintaining a military presence in South Korea is hard to pinpoint. A history of positive relations with South Korea coupled with North Korea's hostility may influence perceptions. However, considering the broader literature on public tolerance of casualties, support here may be due to the success of deterrence and low expectations of broader military conflict.

Furthermore, regression analysis controlling for basic demographic variables (age, gender, education, income) finds no statistically significant difference in perceptions based on party identification, suggesting the possibility of bipartisan solutions. However, one unusual finding in our survey was that women were statistically more supportive of withdrawing troops from South Korea, yet less supportive from Afghanistan. Meanwhile, no other demographic factor influenced perceptions in both models.

Overall, the results do not suggest a blanket opposition to troops abroad, but rather that contextual differences matter, conditions that politicians promoting withdrawals should take into consideration.

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