



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Should America's Asian Allies Adjust Their Security Policy?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The media focused its attention on the success or failure of the Singapore Summit in June 2018 and the Hanoi Summit of February 2019, but largely disregarded President Trump's policy on joint military drills with South Korea. His decision to postpone the drills raises questions about US policy in the region.

For many years, the cost of deployment of US forces in South Korea and Japan has been a key matter of discussion between Washington and its Asian allies. Over time, Tokyo and Seoul have increased their share of those costs. They not only pay for the US forces that are deployed on their soil, but have also purchased US military equipment in the billions of dollars. In many cases, they were expected by Washington to choose US weapons systems over EU or Israeli defense manufacturers. Washington's main argument was that the weapon systems used by South Korea and Japan should be synchronized with the equipment of the US forces deployed in those countries. In view of the sacrifices made on their behalf by American soldiers, they were expected to prefer US products.

Over the years, Washington has indicated its desire that its Asian allies share more of the burden of its expenditures in that region by increasing the required payment for the costs of US deployment in Japan and South Korea and by insisting that they purchase US military equipment. During his presidential campaign and then during his first year in office, President Trump stressed the need to decrease the cost to the US taxpayer of US forces in Asia by increasing the Asian share of expenses. Trump repeatedly praised the fact that Japan and South Korea have purchased US weapons, which aligns with his political agenda to help the US defense industry. He also expressed a desire to revise economic

agreements between the US and its allies in Asia, especially the Free Trade Agreements (FTA) that Washington signed under previous administrations.

After the Singapore Summit in June 2018, President Trump declared that he would freeze US-South Korean joint military drills because they threaten North Korea. Trump thus became the first American president ever to endorse Pyongyang's argument against the drills. He also stressed that freezing the drills would save the US taxpayer money, a message he reiterated after the Hanoi Summit in February 2019. "The reason I do not want military drills with South Korea," he tweeted, "is to save hundreds of millions of dollars for the US."

President Trump's focus on the cost of security raises questions about the commitment of his administration to America's Asian allies. Does he intend to maintain the force readiness of US and Asian forces to defend them? Suspending military drills will negatively affect the competence of all concerned: the US forces in the region, the Japanese forces, and the South Korean forces. With that in mind, Japan, South Korea, and even Australia might be well advised to reevaluate their security policy during the Trump administration.

If Trump continues to focus on the cost of drills and not on the need to maintain the competence of the military forces, the security of the US's Asian allies will be endangered in the long run. Tokyo, Seoul, and even Canberra should consider increasing their financial contribution to the cost of US forces, and at the same time, begin an incremental change of their defense policy to ensure that they will continue to train effectively even without US forces in the region.

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