



PERSPECTIVES

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Trump's Higher Price Tag Makes Japan and South Korea Weigh Their Options

by Dr. Alon Levkowitz

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: President Donald Trump is quadrupling the price tag on US troop deployment in South Korea and Japan, a demand Seoul and Tokyo find overwhelming. Should they consider alternatives to their defense dependency on Washington, they will need to bear in mind that doing without US protection could prove even more costly than Trump's raised price.

The US plays an important role in the defense of South Korea and Japan, two of its main allies in Asia. Almost 80,000 US soldiers are deployed in those states. In the event of war, those US forces are expected to defend the two states alongside South Korean and Japanese forces.

Over the years, Washington has negotiated the cost of its forces with Seoul and Tokyo, with the two allies expected to pay part of the burden of the deployment. Burden-sharing negotiations have addressed such questions as: should the Asian allies pay the cost of renting facilities and maintaining and paying the salaries of US forces at the Asian bases, or should they be responsible solely for the salaries of Japanese and South Korean forces?

The real expense of the defense relationship goes well beyond such matters, however. Washington expects Japan and South Korea to purchase US-made weapons systems that synchronize with the US forces deployed in those countries. This is a legitimate demand if one expects these forces to be able to fight effectively with their South Korean and Japanese counterparts during wartime—but over time, Washington has increased pressure on its Asian allies to prefer US weapons systems over non-US systems, even when those weapons are synchronized with the US systems. In some cases, the US has pressed Tokyo and Seoul to purchase military systems they do not need.

President Trump's administration has changed Washington's burden-sharing policy towards Asia by demanding that its allies there increase their share of payment for US forces deployed in Japan and South Korea by 400-500%. Seoul is expected to increase its contribution from just under \$1 billion to \$5 billion and Tokyo from \$2 billion to \$8 billion. Both countries are overwhelmed by this demand.

The raised price tag has prompted debate in Japan and South Korea about their alliances with the US. It is being asked, in public, whether Trump is employing the kinds of business tactics he used with Canada and Mexico—in other words, demanding a maximum in the expectation of reaching a compromise deal. Amid the growing perception that Washington sees its Asian alliances as mere business opportunities, its commitment to the defense of those allies is coming into question.

Washington's demand that its Asian allies pay significantly more for US defense has reopened a larger debate on the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances. Seoul and Tokyo depend on Washington for their defense, but might feel they need to reconsider that dependency. But a change in their defense policy might force them to increase their defense budgets in order to build and maintain a deterrent force. That could cost them even more Trump's new price tag.

Dr. Alon Levkowitz, a research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, is an expert on East Asian security, the Korean Peninsula, and Asian international organizations.