



## TWO TASKS FOR MAKING US-ROK TROOP BURDEN SHARING SUSTAINABLE

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Why have US-South Korean negotiations over a new military cost-sharing deal been so contentious? Yes, the size of the US “ask” is significantly larger than in the past. But negotiations also have been complicated by the fact that South Korea is nearing a legislative election on April 15. The latest meeting between US Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper and South Korean Minister of Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo at the Pentagon on February 24 failed to yield a breakthrough.

The US position is that the cost of common defense cannot fall disproportionately to US taxpayers. Yet without taking into account the political necessity of persuading the Korean citizenry that any increase is reasonable and justifiable, a hefty increase in South Korea’s contribution risks fraying this crucial alliance.

The Trump administration is aggressively negotiating a new framework for the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) that governs how the two countries split costs for maintaining 28,500 US soldiers based on the Korean peninsula. Demanding that allies make higher contributions for mutual defense costs has been a priority for the US president since the 2016 campaign trail.

The US “ask” reportedly began at nearly \$5 billion annually, a five-fold increase from South Korea’s current contribution of KRW 1.039 trillion (\$875 million), a request that shocked both the Korean negotiators and the Korean public. The US seeks to broaden the scope of the agreement to include funds for rotational troops and other military assets—which is far more expansive than the current framework. Enhanced transparency is especially important with an upcoming election so the Korean public can better understand the U.S. position.

Negotiations are now in overtime. The 10th and most recent SMA expired December 31 and the two countries face their seventh round of negotiations with a wide gap remaining. The US has stated that it will start furloughing thousands of Korean workers paid under the SMA if a new agreement is not reached. Never before has the US gone that far.

Often overlooked in discussions about these difficult talks is the need for broad South Korean political buy-in. Notably, a new SMA does not require US congressional approval, but it does require ratification by the democratically elected South Korean National Assembly, the members of which are highly attuned to public sentiment.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in is not up for re-election in April (presidents are limited to a single five-year term), but all 300 National Assembly seats are in play.

If the Trump administration wants a deal it faces two tasks. One is political, to win over both South Korean public sentiment and the National Assembly. For that to happen, greater transparency in the American ask is necessary, and greater emphasis in explaining its logic to the South Korean electorate.

The stakes are high. The South Korean press has provided blanket coverage of the SMA negotiations and the US demands. As a result, anti-American protesters have staged rallies and one group even broke into the grounds of the ambassador’s residence.

Recent polls have revealed some incipient fissures in South Korean public opinion. In early December, a Chicago Council on Global Affairs poll found an

overwhelming majority (92%) of the Korean public supports the US alliance and three-quarters (74%) support the long-term stationing of American soldiers in South Korea. The poll also revealed that “a clear majority (68%) believe South Korea should negotiate a lower cost than America’s new proposal, but most are willing to pay more than the current amount. One-quarter (26%), however, said South Korea should refuse to pay. If the two countries fail to reach a deal, a majority would be willing to see US forces in South Korea reduced, a potentially dangerous development that would be welcomed by China and North Korea.

South Korea can afford to pay more, and it should: more strategic assets are now required to defend South Korea and the East Asia region from North Korea’s increasingly potent missile and nuclear threats. As a share of GDP, Korea pays more than Japan and Germany for its own defense, but a higher price tag for the US military presence may be justified based on these changing conditions. The task yet to be taken up by US negotiators is to clearly explain the new formula.

The second task is strategic. The Trump administration should agree to allow the SMA to once again become a multiyear agreement and not continue the process of annual renewals that it instituted last year. This would minimize disruption—and tension—in this important alliance. Former US Forces Korea Commander Vincent Brooks has gone on record arguing that one-year renewals cause “structural instability” and should be replaced by three-to-five year deals.

The US-ROK alliance has successfully deterred aggression from North Korea as well as China for nearly seven decades. It has led to a flourishing of economic and cultural exchanges that has significantly benefited both countries. Failure to find common ground is counterproductive to a shared deterrence posture and faith that the US and its ally will credibly deter in crisis. That, in turn, has broader ramifications.

The time is now for the United States and South Korea to come to terms on a deal that works for both sides. The smooth functioning of the alliance should not be

impaired by an accounting impasse that loses sight of the incalculable benefits from 70 years of partnership.

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