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Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Trump's New Signals: Is America Redefining Its Global Security Commitments?

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President Donald Trump's decision to scale back major U.S. military exercises with South Korea deserves to be examined as more than a routine adjustment in the American military calendar. Exercises on the Korean Peninsula have for decades served two purposes: they prepare American and South Korean forces for a possible conflict with North Korea, and they demonstrate publicly that the United States remains committed to defending its ally. Any reduction, therefore, has strategic significance.

Trump has offered understandable reasons for wanting to reduce the burden. Large military exercises are expensive, consume enormous quantities of fuel and ammunition, and require the deployment of substantial American military assets. He has also cultivated a personal relationship with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and may believe that reducing exercises could create diplomatic space for further engagement with Pyongyang.

Yet, there may be a much larger story behind the decision.

The United States has emerged from years of expensive wars and is now confronting a problem that Washington can no longer ignore: **American military power is formidable, but it is not limitless.** The wars and crises of recent years have consumed

vast quantities of precision-guided munitions, interceptor missiles and other military stocks. The conflict in the Gulf has placed additional demands on American forces, while support for Ukraine has simultaneously required the United States to draw upon its reserves.

The shortage of interceptor missiles is particularly revealing. Modern warfare has demonstrated that even the world's most powerful military can rapidly consume sophisticated defensive weapons when faced with sustained missile and drone attacks. Replenishing these stocks is neither quick nor inexpensive.

There is, consequently, an economic dimension to America's strategic choices. The United States carries an enormous national debt, while defense expenditure continues to rise. Trump has repeatedly argued that America's allies should assume a greater share of the cost of their own defense. His message to NATO members has been unmistakable: the United States cannot be expected indefinitely to provide security for wealthy allies while carrying a disproportionate financial and military burden.

The decision regarding South Korea fits comfortably into this broader philosophy.

A message to Seoul

Any new administrative unit raises the question of how resources would be divided

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between it and the units it is carved out from. This requires a transparent formula, under Pakistan's existing fiscal federalism framework, which has relied heavily on population share with some weight given to poverty, revenue generation and inverse population density. Applying it to new units presupposes reliable, disaggregated data on population counts, poverty headcounts and revenue potential specific to each proposed unit, which does not currently exist. That gap should be named plainly rather than evaded. It is not, however, a permanent obstacle; building it is an immediate, inevitable task that can begin now while drawing on existing local government census and social-registry data as a starting base. Even though completing it credibly will take time, making that investment early, through a properly mandated research process is what will allow any future formula to rest on evidence rather than negotiation from a standing start.

Tokyo will be watching

Japan will be watching the Korean developments particularly closely.

Japan's security relationship with the United States is even more important because Tokyo faces not only North Korea but also an increasingly powerful China. American forces in Japan constitute a central element of the regional balance of power.

If Washington appears reluctant to conduct exercises with South Korea because of their cost, Japanese strategists will inevitably wonder whether similar calculations could eventually affect American commitments to Japan.

The likely Japanese response would not necessarily be confrontation. It could instead be greater military self-reliance: higher defense expenditure, stronger indigenous capabilities, more long-range missiles, and possibly a greater willingness to discuss capabilities that were once politically unacceptable.

Thus, an American attempt to save resources could inadvertently encourage its allies to become more militarily independent.

And what message is China receiving?

Beijing is perhaps the most important audience.

China will carefully distinguish between a temporary reduction in exercises and a genuine American withdrawal from East Asia. Nevertheless, any indication that Washington is becoming overstretched will attract Chinese attention.

The central question for Beijing is not whether America remains powerful. It plainly does. The question is whether American power can be employed simultaneously in Europe, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.

This is particularly relevant to Taiwan.

The United States does not have a conventional mutual-defense treaty with Taiwan comparable to its treaties with Japan and South Korea. Instead, Washington follows a policy of strategic ambiguity under which it has deliberately avoided stating precisely what it would do in the event of a Chinese attack.

That ambiguity has historically been regarded as a means of deterring both Beijing and Taipei from taking reckless steps. But strategic ambiguity depends upon credibility. If America's allies begin to believe that Washington is unwilling or unable to sustain prolonged military commitments, China's calculations could change.

Beijing would then have an incentive to ask whether American military power could really be concentrated in the Taiwan Strait if Washington were simultaneously engaged in crises elsewhere.

Is Trump beginning a new doctrine?

This is the larger question.

Trump's approach appears increasingly to favor **burden-sharing, transactional alliances and strategic selectivity** rather than the traditional American commitment to maintaining overwhelming military superiority everywhere and at all times.

This does not necessarily mean American

isolationism. Trump is not withdrawing America from the world. Rather, he appears to be asking a different question: *What does the United States receive in return for the enormous resources it spends defending others?*

The danger of strategic ambiguity

There is, therefore, a paradox at the heart of Trump's approach.

America wants its allies to become stronger so that the United States can carry less of the burden. But if Washington pushes too hard or too quickly, allies may begin questioning whether American guarantees remain reliable.

And once doubts about an alliance begin, restoring confidence can be much harder than creating it in the first place.

The reduction of military exercises with South Korea may, therefore, prove to be much more significant than the exercise itself. It could become an early indicator of a broader American strategic adjustment—one driven simultaneously by Trump's political philosophy, the enormous financial cost of maintaining global military commitments, depleted weapons inventories and the realities exposed by contemporary warfare.

For South Korea, Japan and Taiwan, the message is uncomfortable: **America remains powerful, but American power may no longer be available without limits.**

For China, the message is potentially encouraging: Washington may be entering an era in which strategic priorities have to be chosen rather than simply funded.

For Europe, the lesson is even clearer: NATO members can no longer assume that American protection will always be available on the same terms as in the past.

The ultimate test will not be whether America reduces one military exercise or demands another increase in allied defense spending. The real test will come when Washington has to choose between competing commitments.

If Trump consistently chooses economy, burden-sharing and strategic selectivity over open-ended military engagement, historians may look back at this period as the beginning of a significant transformation in American grand strategy.

The question is not whether America is withdrawing from the world.

The question is whether America is beginning to **put a price on its leadership.**

