How South Koreans Are Reckoning With a Changing American Military Presence

Media coverage in Seoul of President Donald Trump meeting with Kim Jong-un of North Korea in June.CreditAhn Young-Joon/Associated Press

In late June, Gen. Vincent Brooks, commander of United States Forces Korea, addressed a large uniformed crowd at an outdoor ceremony 40 miles south of Seoul. He christened a glittering new headquarters at United States Army Garrison Humphreys, usually referred to as Camp Humphreys, an American military base in the city of Pyeongtaek. Just two weeks earlier, President Donald Trump suggested in Singapore that American troops should be drawn down, if not removed altogether, from the Korean Peninsula, but Brooks made no mention in his remarks of any planned reduction, instead proclaiming that United States Forces Korea “will remain the living proof of the American commitment to the alliance.” In his own congratulatory message, President Moon Jae-in of South Korea said the partnership between his country and the United States has been “the foundation for peace and stability and paved the way for South Korea’s democratization and economic growth.”

Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, the United States has operated upward of 175 military installations in South Korea, a country the size of Kentucky. Today, that number is closer to 90, due to a massive consolidation. Fourteen years ago, the Americans and South Koreans agreed to close and relocate three major bases to the once-sleepy outpost of Camp Humphreys: two near the North Korean border and the third at Yongsan in Seoul, the longtime headquarters of United States Forces Korea and its largest component unit, the Eighth Army. Camp Humphreys has since been modernized and expanded to more than 3,500 acres, at a cost of nearly $11 billion, 90 percent paid for by South Korea. It is now the largest American military base overseas. When it is fully populated, sometime in the next few years (there is no official deadline), it will host more than 18,000 soldiers and an additional 27,000 civilian employees, contractors, retirees and family members.

In June, I visited Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek and United States Army Garrison Yongsan in Seoul to document the impact of the evolving military presence on Koreans and Americans. The recent summits between North and South Korea, and between the United States and North Korea, have shifted the conversation from “total destruction” to peace. And President Trump’s offhand remarks in Singapore — not only about withdrawing 32,000 American troops from South Korea but also about canceling a forthcoming joint-military exercise — serve as a reminder that the American presence is not an immutable fact.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony at Camp Humphreys in June.CreditAhn Young-Joon-Pool/Getty Images

For decades, every American soldier posted to South Korea attended orientation at the Yongsan Garrison, in central Seoul, before proceeding to his or her assigned base. Yongsan, meaning “dragon hill,” came into military use long before the Americans’ arrival. The Japanese, who colonized the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945, chose Yongsan as their army headquarters and built an array of walls, bridges, guard posts, offices and residences in brick and stone. After World War II, Korea was split at the 38th parallel, with the North controlled by the Soviets and the South by the Americans — the model for what would happen in Vietnam a decade later. The Korean War was fought over that boundary, when the North invaded the South. Seoul changed hands four times, and Pyongyang was carpet-bombed before the war ended in stalemate. Millions of civilians and service members were killed, and the peninsula was divided again along the same latitude.

Choi Chi-sun was born in August 1953, just after the signing of the armistice. His parents had been refugees from the north of the peninsula and eventually found themselves in Pyeongtaek, then a collection of farming villages populated by fewer than 100,000 residents. With its natural harbor and proximity to China, Pyeongtaek, like Yongsan, had been used by Japan’s imperial army. The Americans, defending the South against Northern and Chinese forces, inherited and expanded K-6, the Japanese airfield that would later be called Camp Humphreys, and added another base, K-55, farther north, forcing dozens of families from their land. Bases and airfields bearing American names became a feature of the postwar landscape.

Choi’s father found work as a plumber inside K-55, now known as the Osan Air Base, and Choi grew up in the *gijichon*, or military camptown, just outside its walls. “In the 1960s, everyone in Korea was very poor, but my dad at least had his job at the base to put us through school,” Choi said. “There were a lot of bad things about the *gijichon*’s ‘Yankee culture,’ including environmental damage and violence, but those of us who lived nearby saw the Americans as good, and we benefited from their presence.” Soldiers and Marines transported refugees to safety, distributed rations and supplies, employed maids and drivers and patronized local stores. “We were taught that unless and until an anti-Communist reunification occurred, the U.S. presence was necessary,” Choi said.ke So Long to See a Cast Like ‘Crazy Rich Asians’?

Much of the wartime generation still feels indebted to the Americans. During a Korean Memorial Day celebration, on June 6, in Seoul, I watched a large, elderly crowd wave American and South Korean flags to the 4-4 beat of martial music. Their sentiments were summed up by a friend of Choi’s, Lee Dae-sung, a retired elementary-school principal in Pyeongtaek who also grew up in a *gijichon*. “If it hadn’t been for the Americans, we would have all died at the hands of the Japanese,” he said. But this loyalty must contend with darker histories. In July 1950, the second month of the Korean War, American soldiers shot and killed an estimated 400 civilians in the southern village of No Gun Ri, a massacre that was not widely covered until 1999. And long after the war’s end, in the *gijichon* outside every American military base, servicemen abused waitresses and sex workers and left wives and children behind when they rotated out of the country.

In 1971, the Nixon Doctrine reduced the number of military personnel in South Korea by 20,000. South Korea was considered a hardship assignment, and most uniformed personnel stayed just a year (and still do today). Though United States Forces Korea was focused on defending against the Communist North, it backed successive autocratic regimes in the South. There were fatal crackdowns on student and labor activists, and anyone even remotely left-wing. In 1980, President Chun Doo-hwan oversaw the slaughter of protesters advocating democratic reforms in the southwestern city of Gwangju. The Carter administration acknowledged South Korea’s “need to maintain law and order, if absolutely necessary by reinforcing the police with the army.” Just a few years later, though, after North Korea tried to assassinate Chun, the Americans restrained him from retaliating against Pyongyang.

Beginning in the late 1980s, South Korea fitfully transitioned into a democracy and became known for its “economic miracle.” A strengthened civil society brought forth the concerns of oppressed groups, including *gijichon* women. In 1992, an American soldier killed a sex worker named Yun Geum-i, and in 2002, an American military vehicle ran over two 14-year-old schoolgirls, Shin Hyo-soon and Shim Mi-sun, killing them. These and other crimes provoked large-scale protests throughout the country and, in 2003, prompted the newly elected president, Roh Moo-hyun, to negotiate the long-discussed consolidation of American troops within the confines of Camp Humphreys. The Americans, meanwhile, were eager to move soldiers and matériel to an updated facility farther away from the Demilitarized Zone.

For some residents of western Pyeongtaek, consolidation translated into another enormous disruption. Choi’s neighbors in the rice-farming village of Daechuri, on the border of Camp Humphreys, were marked for eviction. “There were people in Daechuri who wound up there because they were kicked off their land in 1952,” when K-6 and K-55 were established, Choi said. “These residents didn’t want to move yet again.” They fought back at public hearings and in court, and with pickets and sit-ins. Ten thousand Koreans marched through Pyeongtaek. When the diggers and bulldozers came at them, in 2005 and 2006, they tied themselves to roofs and fences and took fists and bamboo poles to the metal batons and shields and helmets of the South Korean riot police. It was no match. Hundreds of protesters were arrested, and the land was razed. The police filled irrigation ditches with concrete to prevent further cultivation.

Camp Humphreys is in one of the last agricultural sections of Pyeongtaek, a city whose population now exceeds half a million and is growing fast. More than a decade after what some people remember as the Daechuri War, the new Humphreys bears no obvious scars from the confrontation. As the headquarters of United States Forces Korea, it is at once larger and less conspicuous than its predecessor in megalopolitan Seoul. “Goodbye, Yongsan. Now it’s the Pyeongtaek era,” Korean news outlets have begun to proclaim. (The Yongsan Garrison is slated to become a public park once the Americans finish evacuating and the land is remediated, which could take decades.)

The privilege of being allowed to enter Camp Humphreys was not lost on me: As a journalist and the family member of an Army veteran, I had access to thousands of acres that most Koreans will never see. The turnstile of the walk-in gate gave way to Anytown, U.S.A. The streets inside were conspicuously wide; the asphalt was new. A queue of young men waited to use an A.T.M. that dispenses American dollars, and a redheaded girl zoomed by on a scooter. From a base shuttle bus, I looked out at miles of half-built apartment towers and office buildings, colossal equipment hangars, the Pacific Victors chapel, a child-care center and outdoor pavilions with Korean-style roofs. A row of California-style mansions (housing for “the stars” — the generals, in Korean parlance) butted up against a golf course and a pond. The capaciousness was jarring; I pictured the claustrophobic alleys of downtown Pyeongtaek just a few miles away.

Downtown Seoul.CreditJean Chung/Getty Images

Near the new Humphreys movie theater, which was playing the latest Marvel flick, I met a Korean contractor who had been moved from Yongsan. He was adjusting to life outside Seoul and the loss of longtime colleagues — he said many civilians had been fired during the consolidation. Pyeongtaek had also paid a price: “The land we’re standing on used to be grape farms.” In the mess hall of the Second Infantry Division, the unit relocated from the North Korean border, I ate macaroni and cheese and watched the Golden State Warriors celebrate their championship win. A soldier wearing shorts and a T-shirt at a nearby table said he had yet to explore the base, let alone Pyeongtaek city, though he arrived several months earlier. I wondered if he qualified as a “barracks rat,” the kind who prefers the confines of Anytown. “I came here when the tensions with North Korea were high,” he said. “The guys were excited because we thought it’d be World War III.” It was a crude but understandable comment: How odd to be a restless 20-something, dropped in the middle of Asia, no conflict in sight.

On another visit to Pyeongtaek, Maj. Zach Delabastide welcomed me to his off-base apartment. Delabastide is a physician assistant and a Trinidadian immigrant who began his tour last August. He lives in the Brown Stone, a shiny complex that caters to American military personnel; his wife and two children remain back home, near Fort Bragg in North Carolina. After two tours in Iraq and a three-year stint in Germany, Delabastide was surprised by how little he learned about Korea during his in-processing at Yongsan. “In Germany,” he said, “there’s an entire week on just language, culture and history. I was hoping for that here.” I asked Delabastide what his purpose was on the peninsula and how he felt about the recent spate of bilateral summits. “The tensions between all the countries involved have been going on for so long,” he said. “When the talks started, I felt optimistic, but also, why would it be different this time?” He was there, he said, to be in a perpetual state of “readiness,” in South Korea’s defense. As to the specifics, “There’s so many decisions being made that I never see,” Delabastide said. “People a lot smarter than me are thinking it through, seven steps ahead.”

Camp Humphreys seems vast enough to impede on the daily lives of every Pyeongtaek resident. But over the past decade, Pyeongtaek has branded itself a “new economic city,” partly in an attempt to move past its association with *gijichon* culture. The Korean technology giants LG and Samsung have built new factories in town, triggering a building boom of apartment towers, office parks, shopping malls, roads, bridges, a luxury Chinatown and express trains that connect to Seoul. Given all this development, “people in Pyeongtaek don’t really know about the base or don’t really care,” said Jeeyeon Han, the manager of the Pyeongtaek International Exchange Foundation. “But they do notice there are more Americans in the area.” Han has worked with Lanae Rivers-Woods, a native of Alaska who lives in Pyeongtaek and runs South of Seoul, a website and app catering to expatriates and military families, to draw American personnel beyond the strip of shops and restaurants outside the main Humphreys gate. Rivers-Woods took on the role of town evangelist when she realized that the ballooning military population was given no introduction to Korean customs, language or food. “The idea of 40,000 people who hate it here was scary to me,” she said.

In South Korea, protests against the United States military presence tend to be spurred by high-profile incidents or major construction projects. A sliver of the population, though, has maintained a steadfast resistance. Oh Hye-ran is on the staff of Solidarity for Peace and Reunification of Korea, or Spark, a Seoul-based nonprofit group that advocates the withdrawal of American forces and supports local activists near American bases and installations. In Spark’s humble book-lined offices, Oh explained that recent gestures toward peace between the two Koreas had given their cause hope. “When it comes to the North-South situation, North Korea doesn’t have the military capability. Even without the U.S., South Korea can defend itself,” she said. Spark was active in the fight against the Camp Humphreys expansion; its latest campaign is for the removal of Thaad, an American missile-defense system installed last year in the farming village of Soseong-ri.

While the Korean people may not agree on the desirability of the American military presence, “a pro-U.S. security consensus is fairly well embedded in domestic institutions and ideology,” according to Andrew Yeo, a professor at Catholic University. South Korean liberals and conservatives, while at odds in their rhetoric, are equally bound by the “norms that guide South Korean national-security strategy,” including an enduring alliance with the United States, Yeo writes in his book, “Activists, Alliances and Anti-U.S. Base Protests.” Fear of a rising China is similarly bipartisan: These days, it’s not uncommon to read op-eds by professors and politicians in the Korean press warning that “if the U.S. washes its hands and leaves, all of Northeast Asia will be left to the Chinese.”

Though the South Korean military is by no means anemic (618,000 uniformed personnel, universal male conscription, warships, submarines, missile-defense systems and fighter planes bought from American arms manufacturers), the foreign-policy establishment believes that American troops should, and will, remain in place. “I think it’s important, both in the face-off with North Korea and for regional and global stability,” said Jonathan Cristol, a research fellow at

Adelphi University. Moon Chung-in, an adviser to President Moon, recently wrote that the suspension of joint-military exercises should not be construed as undermining “the alliance and combat readiness.”

Korean prosperity and power are insufficient, and unlikely, to displace the America-Korea alliance, according to Choi Chi-sun, the Pyeongtaek native. The residents of the *gijichon* know this best, he said: “They lived through the Nixon Doctrine. … They know that things won’t change quickly, that there won’t be reunification right away.” In 1987, after studying and working in Seoul, Choi returned with his family to his hometown. He built an electronics business and, in his off hours, became an amateur ethnographer of the area. “I wanted to capture the city’s disappearing history,” he said. “Pyeongtaek’s modern history is a microcosm of Korea — the economy, the military — all of it. And without the U.S. bases, you can’t tell the history of Pyeongtaek, past, present or future.”

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