"Do U.S. Troop Withdrawals Cause Instability? Evidence from Two Exogenous Shocks on the Korean Peninsula"

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Does withdrawing forward-deployed U.S. troops increase instability? This question is at the heart of current grand strategy debates, yet endogeneity issues make this very difficult to answer. Put simply, stability may cause the United States to withdraw forces and lead one to incorrectly infer that withdrawals do not lead to greater instability. We suggest a research design to help alleviate this endogeneity problem. By utilizing exogenous crises that cause U.S. troops to "redeploy" out of South Korea, we are able to estimate the causal effect of a withdrawal of U.S. troops on the probability of instability. We examine several exogenous crises after the end of the Korean War that force U.S. policymakers to rapidly redeploy U.S. forces out of South Korea. We then examine the rate of conflict between South Korea and North Korea, and the United States and North Korea. We find that U.S. troop withdrawals do not cause greater conflict but withdrawals are associated with other behaviors, such as conventional arming, nuclear proliferation, and diplomatic initiatives that could affect the future likelihood of war.

A quarter century after the Cold War, the United States maintains a large number of forward-deployed troops.[1] Some argue that U.S. troops embolden allies to start trouble and that a more restrained force posture can sufficiently deter adversaries. As a result, withdrawals will not increase instability (Posen 2014; Walt 2006; MacDonald and Parent 2011). Others claim that forward-deployed U.S. forces are necessary to deter adversaries and restrain allies and therefore oppose withdrawals (Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2012/13; Flournoy and Davidson 2012; Ikenberry and Slaughter, 2006). At the heart of this debate is an empirical claim about the causal effect of withdrawing U.S. forces on international instability.[2] The debate on American troop

[1] The Defense Manpower Data Center reports that as of December 31, 2016 the United States deployed 199,485 active duty military personnel and 40,345 National Guard/Reserves overseas, though not all are combat troops. See DMDC, Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country, December 31, 2016 data: https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dmdc_overview.jsp.

[2] For recent empirical research on similar issues see, for example, Machain and Morgan 2013; Rovner and Talmadge 2014; and Norrlof 2010.

deployments is embedded in broader discussions beyond the U.S. case on costly signaling as well as the role that defense commitments and alliance structure play in reducing or exacerbating instability in world politics (for example, Johnson, Leeds, and Wu 2015; Fuhrmann and Sechser 2014; Bleek and Lorber 2014; Knopf 2012; Johnson and Leeds 2011; Senese and Vazquez 2008; Palmer and Morgan 2006; Leeds 2003; Fearon, 1997, 1994).

The principal contribution of our paper is an innovative research design that tests a core proposition of the U.S. grand strategy debate: reducing U.S. troop presence causes instability. We find that U.S. troop withdrawals do not cause instability, defined here as the probability of war, to increase. We also find limited evidence that troop withdrawals are associated with other behaviors, such as arming, nuclear proliferation, and diplomatic initiatives that could affect the future likelihood of war. However, the relationship is inconsistent across the cases we examine. We find potential empirical support for both sides of the debate, highlighting the need for more nuanced theory.

Previous research on this question has suffered from endogeneity bias: Do troop withdrawals cause stability or does stability cause the United States to withdraw its troops? We suggest a novel research design to alleviate this issue. We examine exogenous events that caused U.S. troops to rapidly redeploy out of South Korea from 1955-2010, allowing us to estimate the causal effect of a withdrawal of U.S. troops on instability on the Korean Peninsula. Because the events exogenously manipulate the value of the independent variable (troop levels), this approach reduces threats to the validity of our inferences stemming from the endogenous relationship between (in)stability and troop presence. Hence it allows us to assess the impact of the dosage of the treatment as if it was assigned independently of the value of the dependent variable.

Our paper is the first to address this endogeneity problem, which has plagued policymakers' and scholars' attempts to determine the efficacy of forward-deploying U.S. troops. By introducing a new method for selecting cases, we hope to illuminate a path forward for scholars researching relationships that are potentially endogenous. We engage in in-depth case analysis using both quantitative indicators of instability and qualitative historical analysis. This provides several advantages. First, primary sources and secondary historical works can demonstrate the redeployments were in fact exogenous to U.S. officials' expectations of instability on the Korean Peninsula. Second, detailed examination of the historical records allow us to see if quantitative indicators omitted or miscoded incidents of conflict. Third, we can account for contextual factors and assess other state behaviors that might influence the future level of instability.

Our findings have important implications for current debates over U.S. grand strategy. They provide evidence that reduced U.S. troop presence will not necessarily lead to greater instability, so long as the United States maintains its security commitments and leaves some military presence on the ground. This supports the general Restraint grand strategy, which seeks to reduce the number of American boots on the ground and shift to a lighter regional military presence. However, the findings also show withdrawals are associated with other behaviors that may cause instability in the future such as conventional arming and nuclear proliferation. This supports the Deep Engagement grand strategy, which argues in favor of a large forward-deployed American presence to minimize such dangers. Our work thus provides some support for each side of the debate discussed in this article, demonstrating a need for theorists of grand strategy to more precisely define 'instability' and specify the causal mechanisms they believe are at play.

Our findings have several limitations. First, by focusing solely on the Korean Peninsula, our design privileges internal validity over external validity. This limits the generalizability of our findings, but it is a necessary tradeoff to estimate the causal effect. In particular, more research is needed before generalizing our findings to broader questions of military presence, intervention, and occupation. Second, our design allows us to estimate the effect of *troop withdrawals* on instability. We cannot directly measure the effect of *forward troop deployments* on instability. Doing so would require identifying cases in which troops were randomly deployed to a given region. We know of no such cases. Third, our design is not intended to estimate the effect of a total withdrawal of U.S. troops or the removal of U.S. security guarantees. Because we seek to isolate the effect of troop withdrawals, we select a research design that holds other factors such as the overall U.S. alliance commitment constant over the period of analysis.

The paper proceeds in five parts. First, we deduce competing theoretical predictions that follow from opposing arguments about U.S. troop withdrawals and international instability. Second, we discuss our research design for testing these propositions. Third, we identify two exogenous events that led to major U.S. troop redeployments and then examine the effect of those redeployments on instability on the Korean Peninsula. Fourth, we address possible objections to our analysis. We conclude by laying out the implications of our findings for the existing debate and policy more generally.

**The Debate**

We define grand strategy as a state's theory about how it can use its resources to further its vital interests (Posen 2014:1; Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2012/13:11; Brands 2014:1-16; Dueck 2015:14-5. On diverse meanings, see Silove forthcoming). This necessarily involves many foreign policy tools. We focus on one: forward-deployed U.S. troops. We do not seek to

adjudicate between grand strategy positions in their entirety, but rather to inform the use of one critical policy lever: the choice to reduce, maintain, or increase U.S. forward-deployed troops. These "boots on the ground" are key to contemporary U.S. grand strategy debates. We consider two of the main grand strategy prescriptions—deep engagement and restraint—which disagree on the implications of withdrawing troops.

Proponents of deep engagement argue for maintaining the current U.S. grand strategy, including substantial numbers of forward-deployed troops. They contend U.S. troops reduce instability for two reasons. First, U.S. troop presence provides Washington with leverage to restrain its allies from initiating confrontations. Second, it allows the U.S. to deter adversaries (Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2012/13). As former U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy and former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Plans Janine Davidson (2012:56) argue, "The cornerstone of forward engagement [is] positioning U.S. troops in vital regions to help deter major conflicts and promote stability." For this group, U.S. forces have the greatest impact when they are physically present in substantial numbers. "Forward-based, alliance-embedded forces can react more quickly, be reinforced more effectively, and fight better than forces that have to be introduced into the region from scratch," Robert Art (2003:145) argues. This, in turn, makes American reassurance and deterrence more credible and effective. Indeed, this was a major part of the logic undergirding the "pivot to Asia" and the 2016 decision to rotate increased combat forces into Eastern Europe.

This logic suggests even modest withdrawals can have destabilizing effects. "Naturally," writes Colin Dueck (2015:96), "as the United States downsizes its strategic presence overseas, this tends to be unnerving to America's allies and encouraging to its adversaries." Similarly, Kagan (2014) argues, "When the United States appears to retrench, allies necessarily become

anxious, while others look for opportunities." Therefore, the theory undergirding arguments for deep engagement predicts *U.S. troop withdrawals will be associated with more instability.*

Proponents of restraint advocate reducing the American troop presence abroad, especially ground forces. Variants of this grand strategy generally propose the United States continue its security commitments, diplomatic engagements, and commercial relationships, as well as sufficient military forces to maintain command of the global commons. However, as Walt (2006:222) argues, the United States "would no longer keep large numbers of U.S. troops overseas solely for the purpose of 'maintaining stability'" (see also Posen 2014; Rosato and Schuessler 2011; Mearsheimer and Walt 2016). Rather, Washington would gradually reduce troops, leaving a minimal forward presence after allies increase their own defensive capabilities.[3] The precise recommendations vary based on the regional situation. In Northeast Asia, Posen (2014:159, 131) argues that "Many, but not all of these [U.S.] forces should be disengaged," with the main ground forces being withdrawn gradually over ten years while naval and air forces remain. Similarly, Walt (2006:241) writes the United States should "maintain a significant military presence in Asia (primarily air and naval forces) and continue to build cooperative security partnerships with its current Asian allies."

Restraint supporters concede "relaxation of U.S. commitments involves uncertainty and risks" (Posen 2014:131). They accept these risks by noting that the United States is very secure. A close reading of restraint arguments, though, reveals four reasons why they do not expect U.S. troop reductions to increase instability (for example, Posen 2014; Walt 2006; Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky 1997). First, because U.S. troops underwrite allies' security this encourages allies to pursue adventures they otherwise would consider too risky. Troop reductions should thus make

[3] Though see Layne 1997; Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky 1997.

allies more cautious and decrease one source of instability. Second, U.S. troops provoke counterbalancing and make it more likely that the United States will become entrapped in regional conflicts. Withdrawals should mitigate these risks and thus reduce another source of instability. Third, as U.S. forces decrease, allies will invest more in their own defensive capabilities to preserve a favorable balance of power, preventing a rise in instability. Fourth, "[the] United States can maintain much of its military power just over the horizon…and still engage militarily in regions that it judges to be important" (Posen 2014:143). Because adversaries would continue to take American power into consideration even in the absence of forward-deployed troops and the U.S. has other policy tools to offset a troop withdrawal, such as arms transfers, so long as the United States maintains its overall defense commitment it can preserve stability in the region. Thus, an observable implication of the restraint grand strategy is that *U.S. troop withdrawals will not be associated with a change in the level of instability.*

Given that the debate is principally about how many troops to forward-deploy and not whether to deploy troops at all, the goal of our research design is to evaluate the effects of a *reduction* rather than *total withdrawal* of forward-deployed troops. Answering this question is critical for U.S. policymakers who may consider withdrawing some, but not all, forces. Current theory is not specific enough to stipulate a threshold regarding the number of American troops that can be withdrawn. Because the goal of this paper is to test existing theoretical expectations rather than develop theory, we leave threshold effects to future research.

We focus on U.S. troops and not whether local forces increase after a withdrawal. The unique role of U.S. troops in countering instability is central to the debate. Deep engagement views the substitution of local forces as problematic because they are less capable, thus weakening deterrence and inviting instability. At the same time, a smaller U.S. presence will

reduce American leverage to restrain allies from initiating disputes. Restraint argues the opposite. Greater local capabilities after U.S. withdrawals will deter rivals, preventing instability. Allies will be hesitant to initiate new disputes because they lack confidence in U.S. support. We nevertheless recognize that changes to the local balance of power may influence the results and address that challenge for our inferences in more detail below.

**Research Design: Testing Competing Theories of Instability**

To test the claim that withdrawing U.S. troops will cause instability**,** our research design employs two exogenous events driving rapid redeployments of U.S. troops out of Korea and to distant geographic locations. In essence, this is an interrupted time-series: we are estimating the level of instability before and after the rapid and exogenous withdrawal of U.S. troops. The treatment is the level of U.S. troop presence. The treatment is then interrupted—more precisely, the dosage of the treatment is reduced—by exogenous events. The internal validity of our research design hinges on our ability to demonstrate that the redeployments were, in fact, driven by exogenous events and *not* an expectation of declining instability.

As we cannot directly observe policymakers' true beliefs about the expected level of instability, we focus on two observable indicators that should co-vary with those beliefs. First, we assess declassified documents and secondary sources that capture the debate among U.S. policymakers regarding the redeployment of troops and their expectations of stability on the Korean Peninsula. Second, because policymakers may obscure their true beliefs, we use the observed level of instability, as operationalized by the frequency and intensity of violent incidents and crises, as an additional indicator.

The greatest threat to the validity of our design is that a *decrease* in the expected level of instability is causing U.S. policymakers to *withdraw* troops. If there is no change or an increase in the observed and expected level of instability before the decision to withdraw troops, then this particular source of endogeneity is alleviated.[4] As we demonstrate, in the period directly prior to the withdrawal, U.S. policymakers did not believe instability would decrease; if anything, they were concerned the withdrawals would lead to increased instability. There was no decrease in the observed level of instability, either. Relatedly, a lower expected level of regional instability *relative* to other regions might cause U.S. policymakers to withdraw troops. We find little evidence that this is the case.[5] These observations buoy our confidence that U.S. troop redeployments were driven by exogenous events and not an expected decrease in the level of instability on the Korean Peninsula.

In contrast to standard interrupted time-series approaches in which the interruption is the application of the treatment, our design studies a reduction in level of treatment, similar to epidemiological studies that consider dose-dependent effects. For illustration, researchers may want to know if smaller dosages of Tylenol could be used to effectively treat a child's fever. It would be unethical to randomly assign different doses of Tylenol to sick children. However, researchers could examine cases in which random exogenous events reduced the dosage of Tylenol. If there is no change in the child's fever with the reduced dose, then the researcher can conclude that the reduction did not cause the child's fever to worsen.

In our case, the patient's health is analogous to the level of instability and the treatment is U.S. troop presence. If reducing the treatment causes instability, then we should observe an

[4] It is possible an increase in the expected level of instability could cause policymakers to withdraw troops to limit the number at risk. We cannot rule out this possibility, however, we find no evidence for this.
[5] See the online appendix available at: https://dornsife.usc.edu/jonathan-markowitz/research/.

increase in the level of instability after the withdrawal of U.S. troops. However, if we do *not* observe an increase in the level of instability after U.S. troops are withdrawn, then we can (only) conclude that the reduction did not cause instability to increase.[6]

## Case Selection

We select the Korean Peninsula because it is the best case to assess the internal validity of each side's claims. First, there are multiple "events" that exogenously and rapidly manipulate the dosage of our treatment—where large numbers of U.S. troops are rapidly withdrawn due to exogenous events. The speed with which troops were withdrawn guards against the possibility that alternative sources of instability are driving our results. Alternative sources would need to co-vary with the exogenous events for this to be the case. We employ a set of robustness checks, including qualitative assessments of the treatment and outcome of interest before and after the redeployments, to guard against the possibility that our results were being driven by historical developments on the Korean Peninsula other than the exogenous events.

Second, the Korean Peninsula provides high variation in the level of our independent variable, U.S. troop presence over time. Third, in the absence of an equivalent comparison group, looking at variation over time helps ensure the treated group resembles the control group in all other respects (Trochim and Donnelly 2006). Were we to compare across regions, it would be difficult to rule out differences in instability being driven by regional differences. Looking at only within-case variation over time from a single region comes at some cost in terms of external

[6] These theoretical predictions assume all else is equal, however this is not a true experimental design and omitted variables could be driving the results. This research design is useful for dealing with one threat to validity: the potentially endogenous relationship between the expected and observed level of instability.

validity; however, we believe this is a worthwhile tradeoff to ensure that differences in the control and treatment groups are not driving the results.

Finally, though not a methodological reason, Korea is substantively important. The United States has maintained a military presence on the Korean Peninsula for over sixty years, and Asia is one of the few regions in the world where a large-scale, high intensity war remains distinctly possible.

## Dependent Variable

We define instability as the probability of war. The higher the probability of war at a given moment, the greater the level of instability; the lower the probability of war, the lower the level of instability. This restrictive definition of instability allows it to be operationalized *ex ante*. It is essential to define the concept of instability as analytically distinct from other behaviors that might affect future instability, such as conventional arming, nuclear proliferation, and diplomatic initiatives. These behaviors may or may not be associated with immediate or future levels of instability, but unless we define them separately, we will never know.

It is also critical to separate the concept of instability from U.S. interests. Instability may be good or bad for U.S. interests, but they are not the same thing. Defining instability as a separate concept allows us to assess the impact of various policies on the level of instability. We leave it to others to assess the implications for U.S. interests.

We differentiate between the *actual* level of stability and the *observed* and *expected* level of instability. The actual level of instability is a theoretical construct that cannot be directly observed. However, there are observable indicators that should be highly correlated with the level of instability. Specifically, the frequency and intensity of conflict should co-vary with the

probability of war. The intuition here is simple, and is theoretically and empirically validated by previous research: more frequent and intense incidents of conflict are associated with a greater probability of an extremely high intensity conflict event or war (Colaresi and Thompson 2005:345-64). Conversely, less frequent and intense conflicts are associated with a lower probability of war.

Operationalizing the concept of instability requires estimating the probability of war based on observable indicators of conflict. We use Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) as our main measure of the dependent variable, the *observed* level of instability. Despite its limitations, we employ this dataset for three reasons. First, it is the only dataset with the temporal coverage needed to capture both the frequency and intensity of disputes over the period of analysis. Second, the MIDs were coded independently which ensures our results were not driven by biases in our coding decisions. Third, it is the dataset most widely adopted to test theories of conflict and war. Showing that our results hold when using this dataset demonstrates that our findings are not based on obscure or cherry-picked data.

That said, numerous studies have demonstrated valid reasons to be wary of measurement error and sampling bias when using the MID data (Downes and Sechser 2012). To improve the construct validity of our measure, we use archival documents and secondary sources to conduct a qualitative assessment of the periods before and after the redeployments. The qualitative analysis serves as a robustness check, combing through the historical record for militarized incidents that quantitative data either failed to record or miscoded. Where temporal coverage allows, we also compare the MID data against other quantitative measures of conflict and find similar results.

Our measure allows us to estimate whether U.S. troop withdrawals are associated with more frequent and intense conflict events. Our conflict events are coded according to the MID data, which reports events "in which one or more states threaten, display, or use force against one or more other states" (Palmer et al. 2015; Jones et al. 1996). The frequency measure is a count of the number of MIDs on the Korean Peninsula in a given period. We assess changes in frequency by observing any changes in the number of MIDs in the periods prior to and directly after the redeployment. The intensity measure is an ordinal-level variable coded using the Correlates of War's Hostility Level measure, ranging from no militarized action to war (Maoz and Abdoladi 1989:3-35; Gartzke and McMahon 2014). We assess changes in intensity by observing whether there was a difference in the Hostility Level in the periods before and after the redeployment. If there is no change in the frequency and intensity of conflict, we can be more confident troop withdrawals did not cause a change in the observed level of instability.

We define *expected* level of instability as U.S. policymakers' assessment of the probability of war. While it is not our dependent variable, it is important that we include it to guard against the possibility that it is driving decisions regarding troop deployment. We code the expected level of instability as an ordinal variable that can take on three values: U.S. officials expected a lower level of instability, no change, or higher levels of instability. Following standard practices in the study of diplomatic history, we use documents such as internal reports and threat assessments where available, as well as contemporaneous press interviews with relevant officials, memoirs, and secondary sources (Trachtenberg 2009). We then use these documents to code the expected level of instability before and after redeployment of U.S. troops out of Korea.

## Independent Variable

Our explanatory concept of interest is U.S. military presence, which we define as deployment of U.S. military forces to a geographic location, in this case, the Korean Peninsula. Proponents of both restraint and deep engagement agree that U.S. naval and air forces should retain command of the commons; they disagree over the necessity of maintaining a ground presence. We operationalize presence by measuring changes in the number of troops on the peninsula, using data from the U.S. Department of Defense.[7] We include all U.S. troops (air force, army, marines, and navy) on the Korean Peninsula and exclude forces deployed elsewhere in the region. The actual measure records the total percentage change in the number of troops for a given time.

## Exogenous Events

We define an exogenous event as one occurring outside Northeast Asia resulting in a rapid redeployment of U.S. troops from South Korea. These exogenous shocks do not imply that U.S. commanders were unconcerned about potential instability if these troops were withdrawn; local commanders were very concerned. Our only claim is that these crises are exogenous to commanders' concerns about the expected level of instability on the Korean peninsula. Commanders were at least as worried about instability on the Korean peninsula before the crises as they were after. The key difference is that they now had to face a crisis outside the region that demanded the withdrawal of troops despite these concerns. What is critical for our purposes is that the redeployments were not driven by an expected decrease in instability on the Korean Peninsula, but rather by exogenous events. This allows us to rule out a major source of endogeneity that has undermined previous attempts to estimate the causal effect of U.S. troops

[7] Defense Manpower Data Center: www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp.

on instability. Our research design offers an opportunity to leverage these shocks for stronger causal inference.

Neither side of the debate specifies a minimum threshold for the number of troops that must be removed to be considered a withdrawal. To be included in our analysis a withdrawal must be driven by exogenous events and result in at least a 20% reduction in the level of troops. Two withdrawals meet these criteria. In 1970-1971, the United States withdrew one of two infantry divisions, and in 2004-2005, it withdrew an elite combat brigade that constituted roughly a quarter of U.S. combat troops. Admittedly, 20% is an arbitrary threshold, but it is appropriate for two reasons. First, we chose not to examine events in which less than 20% of U.S. combat troops were withdrawn, so as not to bias the test in favor of finding no change in the level of instability. Second, to guard against the possibility that this threshold reduces the set of events examined, we conduct a sensitivity analysis by lowering the threshold to 10% and find no additional events that were caused by exogenous events, ensuring that the set of events we examine are not sensitive to the 20% threshold.[8] As we noted, our design allows us to assess the impact of a reduction in the dosage of the treatment, not its total absence. It is possible that the complete removal of the treatment—redeployment of all ground troops—would produce different results.

**Analysis of Exogenous Events and Instability**

The analysis proceeds as follows. First, we demonstrate that events in 1970-71 and 2004-05 directly resulted in a substantial number of troops being redeployed.[9] We review the history

[8] For excluded cases that do not meet the exogenously driven criteria (1957-58, 1965-66, 1991-92), see the online appendix.
[9] We provide data on the relationship between the number of U.S. troops and conflict in every year in the online appendix.

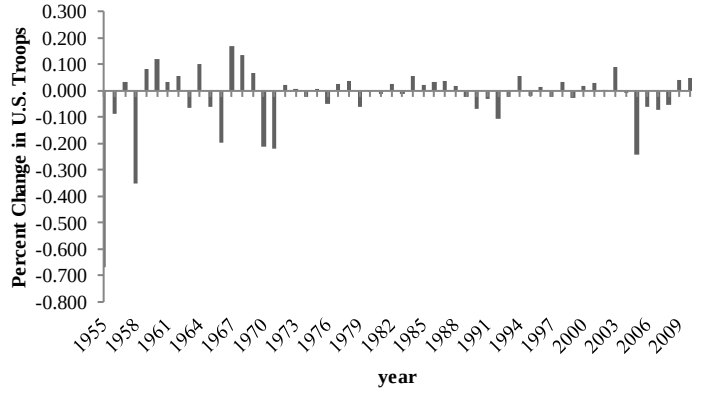
behind the events that caused the redeployments and demonstrate that the withdrawals were rapid and large (see Figures 1 and 2). We then examine the historical record to demonstrate that the redeployments were driven by exogenous events and not a change in the expected level of instability.

Next, we assess the effect of the redeployments on instability. We begin by conducting a graphical analysis of the quantitative indicators of instability on the Korean Peninsula from 1955-2010. The quantitative measures of conflict are used to generate and compare estimates of the observed level of instability before and after the two redeployments. We then conduct a detailed qualitative analysis in which we examine the two periods surrounding the redeployments. In addition to serving as a robustness check, the qualitative analysis allows us to examine whether South or North Korea reacted to U.S. troop withdrawals with behavior that might affect future levels of instability. Although these behaviors are not considered militarized incidents, and therefore not included in our measure of instability, they could potentially affect future stability. We conclude there was *no change* in the observed level of instability following U.S. troop drawdowns. Drawdowns were associated with behaviors that could affect the future level of instability (conventional arming, nuclear proliferation, and diplomatic initiatives). However, our findings for nuclear proliferation were inconsistent across cases, suggesting any causal link to troop withdrawals is at best conditioned upon other variables.

**FIGURE 1.**
**U.S. Troops in South Korea, 1955-2010**


Source: Defense Manpower Data Center.
https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp
*Notes*. Data for 1955-56 report troop levels as of June 30; data for 1957-2008 report troop levels as of September 30 each year.

**FIGURE 2.**
**Percent Change in U.S. Troops in South Korea, 1955-2010**




1969-71 Redeployment

Major and sudden redeployment**.** In March 1971, the United States withdrew the 7th Infantry Division (ID) from South Korea and remobilized the 2nd ID to positions south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), turning the defense of the DMZ entirely over to South Korean troops. This was a substantial reduction in combat forces: one of two combat divisions, or about

one-third of the total troop strength (Cha 1999:54-99). Additionally, the redeployment of the 2nd ID moved nearly all of the remaining U.S. forces out of range of the North's artillery, substantially reducing the tripwire role for U.S. forces in the event of a North Korean offensive. The withdrawal was also done with haste: the official decision to withdraw troops was made in March 1970, communicated to the South Koreans that June, and completed by the middle of 1971 (Department of State 2009:148-50; Shabecoff 1971).

Exogenously driven**.** The withdrawal of the 7th ID and redeployment of the 2nd ID to positions south of the DMZ were part of an overall U.S. troop drawdown in Asia and especially Vietnam early in the tenure of Richard Nixon. The 1969 Nixon Doctrine stated that U.S. policy would be to, "look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense" (Nixon 1969). In March 1970, the National Security Council (NSC) issued NSDM-48, calling on the Defense Department to plan for U.S. troop withdrawals from the peninsula and Korean force modernization to offset the U.S. redeployments (Department of State 2009:148-50; Laird 1972:197). According to a top Nixon administration military adviser, "The foremost reason for the timing of the reduction was to legitimize the [Nixon] doctrine, and Korea seemed the best possibility for implementing the doctrine outside of Vietnam" (U.S. Congress 1978:60). Adm. Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, cited pressure from Congress to "bring the boys home" and to reduce the chances of "another Vietnam" as central reasons for the withdrawal decision (Ibid.:63).

The security situation and the corresponding level of instability on the Korean Peninsula were peripheral to the administration's new policies. Official assessments estimated war to be unlikely, but there was disagreement within the government over the likely effects of a major

withdrawal. In 1969, a Special National Intelligence Estimate predicted that the high level of North Korean provocations along the DMZ and elsewhere in the late 1960s would continue indefinitely, and expressed uncertainty about the potential for escalation: "Even if war does not come again to South Korea, a tense and risky situation is likely to persist there for several years[.]" Yet it also stated, "Pyongyang might be tempted at some point to go well beyond incidents along the DMZ and occasional guerilla operations. It might, for example, stage a raid across the line with fairly large forces" (CIA 1969b). A National Intelligence Estimate issued later that year further cautioned, "This is not to say that partial U.S. troop withdrawals would have no impact," and reductions, "might lead Pyongyang to believe that its military and paramilitary harassments along the DMZ…could be stepped up without great risk" (CIA 1969a).

Studies undertaken by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the NSC, and the State Department disagreed on the necessary force size and structure to deter North Korea and its major-power allies from attacking the South, and to defend against a full-scale invasion. The JCS in particular argued the minimally acceptable U.S. troop presence was 1 1/3 U.S. divisions—substantially more than the 1970-1971 withdrawals actually left in Korea--even taking into account ROK military improvements and modernization. Importantly, the debate over the effects of withdrawing combat forces focused more on the political effects of withdrawal than the direct impact on the balance of forces in the theater. As Henry Kissinger explained in a March 1970 NSC meeting in which the issue was debated, "the problem is not one of purely military strength but also has definite political overtones" (Department of State 2009:144). Vice President Agnew similarly pointed out, "U.S. credibility to execute its commitments is a crucial point. Rhetoric is not enough…Asian leaders are very fearful of U.S. intentions" (Ibid.:146). In other words, the

issue was not so much about the military capabilities to defend against the North but the ability to credibly signal America's resolve to defend its ally.

U.S. concerns about the military balance and North Korean aggression had grown in the period before the withdrawal. U.S. intelligence analysts noted that North Korea's 1960s military buildup did not "stop or even slow" in the early 1970s (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2013:59). Seoul itself was greatly concerned about the sufficiency of ROK military forces and the ability to effectively deter DPRK aggression as U.S. troops withdrew. President Park Chung-hee described the withdrawal's effect on the strategic balance on the peninsula as an "irrecoverable disaster," and Korean elites expressed outrage at the withdrawal decision and concern that it would leave them militarily and politically vulnerable to the North (Cha 1999:66). As Defense Secretary Schlesinger later admitted in discussion with Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Miki on August 29, 1975, "Vietnam let loose many fears, especially in Korea. (Department of State 2011a:2). The next day, Schlesinger told the Japanese Foreign Minister Kiichi Miyazawa that "[t]he ROK feels beleaguered and is worried about the Vietnam example." He added that "it appeared that Kim [Il-sung] perceived a collapse of will on the part of the U.S" (Department of State 2011b:2).

U.S. analysts were also concerned that major North Korean provocations in 1968 and 1969 could continue in the 1970s. These concerns likewise drove U.S. military contingency planning (NSSM-53 1969; Cha 1999:63-4). In 1968, DPRK commandos carried out an unsuccessful attack on Seoul's Blue House (the ROK presidential residence and offices), and that same year North Korea seized the U.S.S. *Pueblo* in international waters and imprisoned and tortured its crew. In 1969 the North shot down a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft over international waters, killing 31 U.S. airmen. These incidents, the U.S. failure—in Park's view—to respond to them assertively, and the U.S. failures in Vietnam all contributed to growing South Korean

anxiety over the U.S. defense commitment (Choi and Park 2008:373-403). In short, there is little evidence to suggest that U.S. troop withdrawals were driven by a decrease in the expected level of instability. If anything, U.S. policymakers expected a higher level of instability prior to the withdrawal of U.S. troops.

2004-05 Redeployment

Major and sudden redeployment**.** Between 2004 and 2005, the United States reduced troop levels in Korea by over 30%. In summer 2004, the United States and South Korea negotiated a phased withdrawal plan to be completed by 2009. They also agreed to reposition all U.S. combat troops in the country to bases south of Seoul, ending entirely the "tripwire" role of U.S. forces that had already been greatly reduced in the 1970s (Lee 2006). Ultimately, the United States withdrew 9,000 troops between 2004 and 2006—5,000 in 2004, 3,000 in 2005, and an additional 1,000 in 2006—before agreeing to suspend further withdrawals. The United States also closed 15 of its military bases in 2004 and 2005 and began a major expansion of Camp Humphreys (40 miles south of Seoul) as the new headquarters for United States Forces Korea (USFK) and the Combined Forces Command (*Korea Times* 2004).

The 2004-2005 drawdown of U.S. forces came as a rapid series of redeployments, beginning with the redeployment of the 2nd ID, 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) to Iraq—5,000 U.S. combat forces, or roughly 15% of the total—to reinforce U.S. ground troops in Fallujah. The redeployment was publicly announced in May 2004, and the 5,000-strong BCT had been airlifted to Iraq by the end of August (Cimbala 2010). Although major redeployments had been discussed for more than a year prior, the announcement that an elite combat brigade from the sole U.S.

infantry division in Korea would be sent to Iraq came suddenly, giving the unit little time to train for its new mission.

Exogenously driven**.** The 2004 redeployment was also driven by events that were exogenous to the actual and expected level of instability. The George W. Bush administration's decision to withdraw troops from Korea, and to redeploy the remaining ground forces to positions south of Seoul, was driven by a combination of new ideas about force structure and requirements for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (Cornwell 2003). Several influential members of the administration such as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld came into office in 2001 intending to transform the military's force structure to be nimbler and more mobile, capable of rapid deployment anywhere in the world, and better able to leverage its relative advantages in technology and networked communications (Cimbala 2010). This objective was given greater impetus by the 9/11 attacks and was enshrined in the 2004 Global Defense Posture Review.

At the time, Bush administration officials portrayed the redeployment of the 2nd BCT to Iraq as part of its plan to transform U.S. force structure. However, critics in Washington argued that the move was primarily driven by the unexpected need for combat forces in Iraq. The move came at a time when the Defense Department was already struggling to meet the request from U.S. commanders in Iraq for more than 20,000 additional forces to fight the insurgency that unexpectedly developed after the 2003 invasion, and had begun to extend the tours of thousands of U.S. troops that had been deployed there (Schmitt 2004). Senator Jack Reed argued at the time that the U.S., "commitment in Iraq has seriously strained the capacity of the Bush administration to deal with North Korea," and argued the redeployment would weaken deterrence. Other experts argued it was a sign the U.S. military was stretched "dangerously thin" (White 2004). South

Korean officials also harbored major concerns about the redeployment's effect on deterrence, and many saw it as a sign of decline of the U.S. defense commitment (Nam 2006:615-31).

The redeployment decision also came at a time of high and increasing tensions on the peninsula. U.S.-North Korean relations had gone from an apparent path to normalization at the end of the 1990s to renewed crisis over the country's nuclear program (Carter 2003). According to Korea expert and former State Department official Kenneth Quinones, "The situation today [August 2003] on the Korean Peninsula is a greater threat to peace in Northeast Asia than was true in 1953 [when the Korean War ended]" (Quinones 2003). The Agreed Framework, which had frozen North Korea's plutonium-production program since 1994, had come undone by 2002. The North withdrew from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in January 2003, and declared in July that it had produced enough plutonium for a bomb. By late spring 2003, when the United States broached the issue of troop realignment with Seoul, the North had restarted the nuclear reactor that had been shut down under Agreed Framework. The Bush administration asked the Senate to lift a decade-long ban on the production of low-yield "bunker-buster" nuclear weapons to destroy deeply buried targets in North Korea (Chinoy 2008). Nor were tensions during this period limited to the nuclear issue. In 2002, the North renewed its incursions across the Northern Limit Line and initiated naval clashes with the South, killing four ROK sailors in November 2002 and sinking an ROK vessel. In March 2003, North Korean fighters intercepted a U.S. reconnaissance plane over international waters. That July, North and South Korean soldiers exchanged fire across the DMZ.

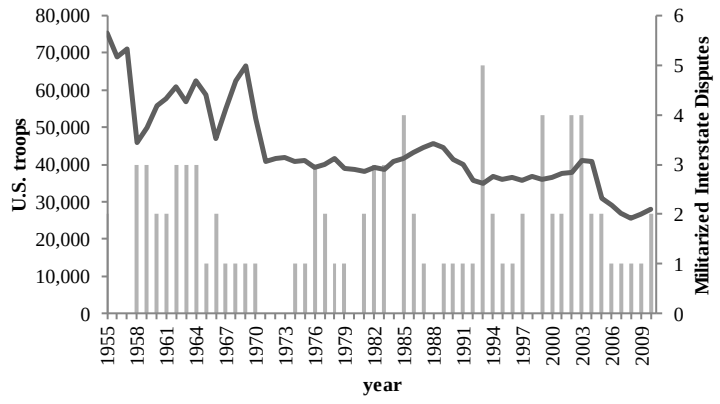
Importantly, the Bush administration leadership viewed the North Korean threat as large and increasing. In the 2002 State of the Union Address, the president included North Korea within the "axis of evil," a group of countries that posed a "grave and growing danger" to the

United States (Bush 2002). Later that year, the United States confronted the North Koreans with evidence that they were secretly pursuing a uranium route to a bomb, triggering a steep downturn in relations and the DPRK's December 2002 withdrawal from the NPT. By 2003, Bush administration officials had become increasingly concerned about North Korea's growing missile capabilities and its ability to target Japan and U.S. forces (Sanger and Shanker 2003). A number of top officials such as Under Secretary of State John Bolton and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz supported a more assertive stance toward North Korea (Lee 2006:234). Jack Pritchard, who had played a central role in crafting U.S. Korea policy under both the Clinton and early Bush administrations, publicly warned that the Bush administration's efforts to dissuade North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons were insufficient (Pritchard 2004). However, the administration's focus was consistently on Iraq during this period, and was concerned that a more assertive stance toward North Korea could lead to "two simultaneous crises" that could tax U.S. capabilities (Niksch 2003). Overall, the historical records suggest that U.S. redeployments were driven primarily by the Iraqi insurgency and not a change in the expected level of instability in Korea.

## Graphical Analysis

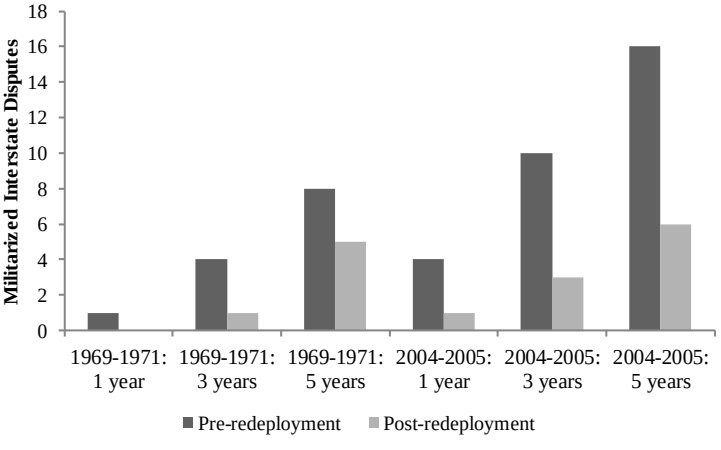
Data show there was no change in instability after the two exogenously driven redeployments. We begin by assessing the frequency of conflict—all disputes involving North and South Korea. We follow standard practice and code only states present at the outset of the dispute and identify each pair of states in the dispute separately. For example, in a hypothetical confrontation between the United States and South Korea v. North Korea we count two separate MIDs: North Korea v. United States and North Korea v. South Korea.

**FIGURE 3.**
**U.S. Troops and Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1955-2010**




The data do not reveal any major upswings in conflict after large U.S. troop reductions (Figure 3). To examine the trends around the troop drawdowns in more detail, we broke the data down into one, three, and five-year intervals before and after each redeployment. We use these intervals for two reasons. First, we set the lower threshold at one year because it is appropriate to extend the period some temporal distance from the redeployment. A state needs to first perceive the change and develop forces and strategies to take advantage of that new environment (Rose 1998:146-7). Second, we set the upper threshold at five years because, as more time passes, it becomes increasingly difficult to isolate the effect on instability that comes from changes in the level of troops relative to other potential variables (MacDonald and Parent 2011:21).

**FIGURE 4.**
**Number of MIDs Before and After U.S. Troop Drawdowns**



In each period, the number of MIDs involving North Korea or South Korea declined after the troop drawdown, compared to the equivalent time period prior to the drawdown (Figure 4). The number of MIDs was substantially lower in the five-year period after the 2004-2005 redeployment than before the redeployment ($p$ = .01).[10] The reduction in conflict in the five-year period after 1969-1971 was also lower, but the difference in means was not statistically significant ($p$ = .40).

Next, we examine the change in hostility level before and after the redeployments. Table 1 shows the number of MIDs that reached each hostility level before and after the redeployments. The results make clear that in addition to a decrease in the number of incidents, there was no major change in hostility level. In other words, there was a decrease in the frequency of incidents across all intensity levels. It is therefore not the case that there were fewer but more hostile incidents after the redeployment. These results are robust across the one, three, and five year periods. Finally, the frequency and intensity of MIDs tend to co-vary, which suggests that our measures of instability have convergent validity.

**Table 1. Number of MIDs by Hostility Level Pre- and Post-Troop Redeployments**

| Hostility Level | 1969-1971: 1 year | 1969-1971: 3 years | 1969-1971: 5 years | 2004-2005: 1 year | 2004-2005: 3 years | 2004-2005: 5 years |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| War | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 |
| Use of force | 1,0 | 4,1 | 8,4 | 2,0 | 6,0 | 7,2 |
| Display of force | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,1 | 2,1 | 4,2 | 7,3 |
| Threat to use force | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,1 | 2,1 |
| No militarized action | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 |

Notes. Cells display values for: pre-redeployment, post-redeployment.

Qualitative Analysis of Instability After the 1969-71 Redeployment

[10] We used a two-tailed t-test with unequal variance. See MacDonald and Parent 2011.

There is no evidence to suggest that the removal of half of the U.S. combat forces deployed in Korea led to greater instability in the region, either through deterrence failure toward the North or greater adventurism by the South. If anything, the 1971-74 period saw a relative lull in strategic tensions on the peninsula in contrast to the late 1960s. Citing U.S. government statistics, Cha shows that U.S. and ROK casualties resulting from DPRK incursions and DMZ and rear-area incidents dropped substantially in the early 1970s (Cha 1999: 64). Similarly, a statistical study by the Congressional Research Service finds that the late 1960s was "the most intense phase of provocations" by the DPRK on the peninsula. For example, of the nearly 4,000 DPRK agents known to have infiltrated the South between 1954 and 1992, roughly 20% of these infiltrated the South in just the two-year period 1967-68. In fact, between the January 1971 foiled attempt to hijack a South Korean airliner and the February 1974 sinking of two South Korean fishing boats, no major DPRK provocations took place (Fischer 2007).

This is not to suggest that there were no militarized incidents during the post-redeployment period. Tensions returned to a high level in 1974 after a second assassination attempt on Park (his wife was killed in the attack), and were further heightened in 1976 after North Korean troops killed two U.S. Army officers with axes in the Joint Security Area (JSA) (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2013:55-61, 74-83). These were major incidents, but overall the number and severity of incidents in the post-redeployment period were lower than in the years prior to redeployment.

## Additional Outcomes: Arming, Proliferation, and Diplomacy

### Arms Racing.

The 1970s saw a major arms race taking place on the peninsula. North Korea continued on its existing trajectory of a rapid arms buildup, while the ROK increased the

development of its conventional military capabilities in response to the withdrawal of the 7th ID and a perceived decline in U.S. security guarantees. In South Korea, President Park established the Agency for Defense Development (ADD) in 1970 to oversee military purchases and R&D (including the country's nuclear weapons program), and in 1975 initiated the Force Improvement Plan (FIP) and defense spending increased from 5% to 7.5% of GNP (Hamm 2012, vol. 10:80; Reiss 1988:81). During this same period, the U.S.-ROK joint military command adopted an offensive plan to respond to a North Korean attack against the South. However, these policies were encouraged and largely funded by the United States specifically to offset any vulnerabilities created by the U.S. troop redeployment. The Nixon administration promised increased arms sales and military aid to Seoul as part of its plan for ROK troops to increasingly fill the role of U.S. forces as a deterrent against the North. Likewise, the U.S. military drove the decision to adopt an offensive force posture—moving artillery and mechanized forces closer to the DMZ and building up bomber forces in theater (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2013:61-2). North Korea's arms buildup in the early 1970s was a continuation of its rapid military growth during the 1960s, and was heavily fueled by an increase in Chinese military assistance that occurred in spite of the beginnings of U.S.-Chinese rapprochement during this period (Goose, Bandow, and Carpentar 1992:37-58). Overall, arms racing on the Korean Peninsula was nothing new in the period after 1971, and was notable only for—if anything—its magnitude, which was largely driven by the two countries' Great-Power allies.

Nuclear Proliferation. The U.S. redeployment, and other signals from the Nixon administration that U.S. defense commitments in East Asia were in decline, drove Park Chung-hee's decision to begin a nuclear weapons program in the early 1970s (US Congress 1978:79-80; Choi 2014). Park

considered the nuclear weapons program a hedge against U.S. abandonment. In other words, Park's calculus was based not only on the immediate effects of the U.S. troop withdrawal, but on the possibility that the U.S. withdrawal, broader U.S. retrenchment in East Asia, deteriorating situation in Vietnam, and efforts toward détente with China presaged greater reductions to the U.S. defense commitment over the longer term (Choi 2014; Hong 2011).

President Park created the ADD and the covert Weapons Exploitation Committee (WEC) in late 1970. He charged the former with the task of modernizing the ROK's defense industry and overseeing technology research and development and the latter with exploring ways to import and develop sophisticated and advanced weaponry, including nuclear weapons technology and the components needed to build an indigenous capacity to produce fissile material. Seoul entered into negotiations with the French to purchase a pilot reprocessing facility, a step toward a capacity to produce fissile material that could be used for a bomb. Yet even then, the Blue House does not appear to have treated the nuclear program as a priority at the time of the U.S. troop withdrawal. The ADD did not complete a plan for the development of a bomb until 1973, and the plan it did develop envisioned a decade of work before the first weapon could be built. Significant resources were not devoted to bomb design until 1974, when the program was expanded under the rubric of Project "890" (CIA 1978). Moreover, Lyong Choi (2014) suggests that Park, knowing U.S. opposition to nuclear proliferation, pushed the nuclear program as a bargaining chip in which South Korea would halt pursuit in exchange for the maintenance of a U.S. commitment. Ultimately, the United States uncovered the ROK's nuclear weapons program in 1974 and was able to pressure Seoul to abandon the effort in late 1975 and early 1976, before significant progress was made.

To the extent that South Korea's continued reliance on American troops allowed the United States to compel Seoul to give up its nuclear weapons ambitions this is consistent with the predictions of the deep engagement camp. However, this could also be interpreted as the successful restraint of an ally despite a major troop redeployment and Seoul's anxieties about a decline in confidence in U.S. security assurances. Such an interpretation would also be consistent with the restraint thesis. Further complicating matters, a U.S. threat to withdraw civilian nuclear cooperation played a significant role in changing Seoul's plans, and it is not clear to what extent this drove South Korea's decisions relative to threats involving the U.S. security guarantee (Solingen 2009:82-99).

There is little evidence the American troop withdrawal led to any major change in the North Korean nuclear program. First, North Korean officials had begun inquiring about nuclear energy from the Soviet Union and investing in nuclear science as early as the 1950s well before any American troop drawdown (Pollack 2011; Ivanov 1956). Second, the status of the North Korean nuclear program did not markedly change following the troop withdrawal. For instance, Philip Bleek (2010:168-9) codes North Korea as exploring a nuclear option beginning in 1962 but only codes a shift to interest in nuclear weapon acquisition in 1980. Third, North Korean opposition to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty predated the American drawdown. Despite that opposition, North Korea did join the International Atomic Energy Agency in 1974 and, following Soviet pressure, joined the NPT in 1985 (Pollack 2011:51, 66, 94).

At most, the American troop withdrawal indirectly influenced North Korean nuclear decision-making. South Korean nuclear activity in the 1970s, partially influenced by U.S. withdrawals as noted above, may have reinforced North Korean nuclear ambitions (Pollack 2011:80-1). There is also evidence that the ROK program led to North Korean interest in

accelerating its own nuclear weapons program. For example, Kim Il-sung reportedly requested assistance on nuclear weapons from China during this period; however, this has not been established (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2013:252-3).

Diplomacy. Both North and South Korea pursued diplomacy ostensibly aimed at reducing tensions on the peninsula in the wake of the U.S. troop withdrawal. Seoul linked this effort to the troop withdrawal and the need to reduce tensions in an atmosphere of reduced American security commitments. In August 1971, in a major and sudden reversal of DPRK policy since the Korean War, Kim Il-sung announced the North was ready to engage in direct talks with the South. Seoul quickly reciprocated, and a meeting of North and South intelligence officials under the guise of Red Cross delegates took place on August 20, 1971. In late 1971 and early 1972, a set of higher-level exchanges and mutual visits took place, including a meeting in Pyongyang between the South's intelligence chief and Kim Il-sung in which Kim apologized for the 1968 assassination attempt against Park Chung-hee. The Red Cross exchanges continued until Pyongyang announced its suspension in 1974 after the South's kidnapping of Kim Dae-jung in Tokyo (Ibid.:43).

However, neither Seoul nor Pyongyang genuinely saw the diplomatic initiative as a route toward peace. Park's greatest interest in pursuing the talks was to justify the authoritarian measures introduced in 1972, and argued that engagement with the North required the domestic repression of dissent in the South (Lee 2006:74-5). Pyongyang saw diplomacy as a way to build international legitimacy and to put pressure on the United States to further reduce its presence on the peninsula (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2013:25). Both states continued to build up their militaries

while diplomacy took place, and both continued to view Korean reunification on their own terms as their ultimate objective (Ibid:46).

Summary. We find no significant change in the level of instability on the Korean Peninsula across the years immediately before and after the U.S. withdrawal of the 7th ID and the redeployment of the 2nd ID to positions south of the DMZ. There does appear to be some increase in other behaviors that might be associated with future levels of instability such as arming and nuclear proliferation (in the case of proliferation, this was limited to South Korea).

Qualitative Analysis of Instability After the 2004-05 Redeployment

The U.S. decision to redeploy troops came at a time of rising tensions with North Korea. Despite a relative lull in tensions at the end of President Clinton's second term, which saw both a visit to the White House by North Korea's second-highest ranking military officer, Vice Marshal Jo Myong-rok, and a visit to Pyongyang by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, U.S.-DPRK relations rapidly turned sour after President George W. Bush took office (Chinoy 2008:43-142). The Bush administration rejected the Clinton administration's strategies as too conciliatory, and adopted a more confrontational approach toward North Korea. In the 2002 State of the Union Address, Bush labeled North Korea a charter member of the "axis of evil." Later that year Washington confronted the North Koreans with evidence that they were secretly working on uranium enrichment for a weapon, which quickly heightened tensions over the country's nuclear program.

Both pre- and post-redeployment periods were characterized by relatively few military provocations across the DMZ. In both periods, military clashes focused on the Northern Limit

Line, however in the post-redeployment period even these were of minor intensity until late 2009, when a DPRK sailor was killed in a naval skirmish. The first major incident was the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March 2010, which killed 46 ROK sailors. Tensions instead focused primarily on North Korea's nuclear and missile activities, which escalated in the years after the U.S. redeployment and culminated in the country's 2006 and 2009 nuclear tests (discussed below). The North also conducted a series of missile tests, including its long-range Taepodong-2 missile in July 2006, which failed 40 seconds after launch. Overall, the North tested a short-range missile in May 2005, two short-range missiles in March 2006, and seven missiles in July 2006 (including the Taepodong-2). Yet these developments were not associated with a change in the frequency or intensity of militarized incidents. Therefore, we conclude that there was no change in the level of instability on the Korean Peninsula across the two periods.

Additional Outcomes: Arming, Proliferation, and Diplomacy

Arms Racing. There is evidence that the U.S. redeployment decision contributed to South Korea's military expansion in the years afterward. In October 2003, shortly after the United States initiated talks over changes to its force posture, ROK President Roh Moo-hyun announced an 8.1% increase in the country's defense budget as part of a ten-year plan to boost ROK military preparedness (Ward 2003). Seoul also sought revisions to its security burden-sharing arrangements with the United States. President Roh stated he sought to, "develop a new relationship so that (South Korean) armed forces will perform leading defense missions on all fronts and the U.S. and its forces will help on that basis." (Ibid. 2003) U.S. redeployments were not, however, the sole cause of the ROK arms buildup. Public opinion in South Korea had

become less tolerant of the U.S. military presence in the years prior to the U.S. redeployment, and Roh and his supporters had long argued for greater ROK autonomy (Lee 2006:255-7).

The conventional arms buildup in the South, however, was not matched by the North. Despite its "military-first policy," North Korea failed to keep pace with South Korean military modernization during this period. Largely this reflected what by this period had become an enormous gap between the South's and the North's economies and the South's greater access to advanced weapons systems. The North instead sought to leverage the relatively low-cost, asymmetric advantages it had by concentrating light infantry and artillery forces at the DMZ to ensure that it could inflict pain on the South in any conflict regardless of the final outcome (Roehrig 2006: 8-84). This, however, was a long-term trend that had been ongoing since the 1990s. Overall there is little evidence that U.S. redeployment led to regional arms racing beyond Seoul's move to create a more independent military capability, which itself reflected longer-term trends.

Nuclear Proliferation. In the years after the U.S. troop withdrawals, the North conducted its first (2006) and second (2009) nuclear tests. However, as noted above, these events developed from the escalatory path toward a nuclear bomb that had been set during 2003 and 2004, which in turn grew from the overall downturn in relations between the United States and North Korea that began soon after the Bush administration took office. A period of crisis began toward the end of 2002, when the United States confronted the North with its suspicions that Pyongyang was secretly pursuing a uranium-enrichment route to a nuclear weapon, and as a result suspended the fuel shipments the United States had agreed to under the Agreed Framework that had kept the DPRK's declared nuclear facilities frozen for nearly a decade. North Korea restarted its

plutonium reprocessing in 2003, beginning a three-year path to its first nuclear test in 2006. By the end of 2003, North Korea claimed to have reprocessed enough plutonium to fuel six weapons. The United States agreed to negotiate with the North Koreans through the Six-Party Talks sponsored by China, but the talks stalled in June 2004 and did not restart until September 2005, well after the U.S. followed through on troop redeployments. By the time of the troop redeployments, North Korea had already committed to pursuing nuclear weapons. We cannot rule out the possibility that the U.S. troop redeployment either facilitated or contributed to North Korea's push for nuclear weapons, however North Korea was already clearly committed to such a path before the United States announced that it would redeploy forces.

South Korea made no new major nuclear initiatives during this period. Indeed, since the 1970s, U.S. troop withdrawals have not triggered any major move toward nuclear proliferation by Seoul. This is the case even after North Korea had developed its own nuclear capability and after the United States had withdrawn its nuclear forces from the Korea Peninsula (Weisman 1991). To be sure, a number of conservative political elites in Seoul have called for the development of an ROK nuclear arsenal over the past two decades (Einhorn and Kim 2016). In addition, ROK nuclear scientists were discovered to have conducted weapons-related research in violation of the country's IAEA safeguards (Pinkston 2004). But these are isolated incidents and not the sort of comprehensive program initiated by Park. Major proliferation datasets code no change in South Korea's status during this period (Bleek 2010; Monteiro and Debs 2014).

Diplomacy. Seoul responded to the planned troop withdrawals by seeking to reduce tensions and engage diplomatically with Pyongyang. In June 2004, former ROK president Kim Dae-jung, architect of the country's "sunshine policy" of engagement with the North, told the ruling Uri

Party leadership that "South Korea should respond to the planned cut in the U.S. armed forces by taking corresponding measures to reduce tension through military talks with North Korea" (*Korea Times* 2004; Choi and Park 2008:373-403). Seoul also initiated a policy of diplomatic outreach toward other regional powers, especially China and Japan. In April 2005, ROK Defense Minister Yoon Kwang-ung said that Seoul needed to increase "military exchanges" with China and develop military cooperation with Beijing "to the same level as" with Tokyo (Sang-min: 2005). In 2005, President Roh declared South Korea a "balancing power" in Northeast Asia (*Korea Times* 2005). The South Koreans also began to follow a more independent policy in negotiations with the North over its nuclear program. In February 2005, after Pyongyang declared itself a nuclear-armed state, Seoul sought high-level military talks, while the United States refused any bilateral discussions (Dinmore and Fifield 2005). In September 2005, Seoul sided with Moscow and Beijing and against the United States in affirming Pyongyang's right to a civilian nuclear program (Macartney 2005). In late 2007, the ROK and DPRK prime ministers met face-to-face for the first time in well over a decade.

Summary. We find no significant change in the level of instability across the pre- and post-redeployment periods. There was some conventional arming, and assessing the degree to which this affects instability is an important issue and should continue to be addressed in future work. In addition, North Korea acquired a rudimentary nuclear capability. Consistent with the deep engagement position, tensions between the United States and North Korea were higher in the post-redeployment period as a result of North Korea's nuclear weapons program and missile testing. It is critical to note, however, that confrontations between Washington and Pyongyang in the pre-deployment period drove North Korea's decision to restart its plutonium program (in

2002, before the troop redeployments were announced) and withdraw from the NPT (in early 2003, also before the redeployment announcement). Even including these proliferation-induced tensions, we did not find a marked increase in instability after the redeployment.

**Alternative Explanations**

In this section, we briefly address three potential objections to our analysis: possible changes in the local distribution of power, the fact that troop levels did not go to zero, and the potentially unique impact of Korean geography on stability.

Shifting Balance of Power

Beginning in the 1970's, the balance of economic and military power began to shift strongly in favor of South Korea over North Korea. One could argue that this change in the balance of forces may have resulted in a lower probability of war because North Korea would not start a war it knew it could not win. There are three reasons why we can rule out this potential objection. First, shifts in the balance of military power should not *necessarily* result in a decrease in the level of instability and might actually result in increased instability. Greater South Korean strength could result in North Korea behaving more belligerently, substituting demonstrations of resolve to make up for its relatively reduced capabilities. Alternatively, a stronger South Korea might make greater demands and behave more belligerently, as it seeks to leverage its superior capabilities.

Second, the shocks we examined and subsequent troop withdrawals were rapid. Thus, unless power also shifted rapidly immediately before both withdrawals, it does not confound our results. Both economic and military power shifted slowly over the course of decades. Additionally, by assessing the pre- and post-treatment observations of the level of instability on

the Korean Peninsula, even if the level of instability was decreasing over time, our method still allows us to assess whether there was a change in the level of stability after the rapid withdrawal of troops. Third, the empirical record reveals that the number of militarized incidents did not decrease steadily after the 1970s. There continued to be periods of heightened and relaxed tensions. Thus, it is not the case that increasing South Korean capabilities led to a more pacific peninsula.

### Withdrawals to Zero

Our test allows us to examine the effect of a reduction in the level of treatment, but we are not able to assess the effect of a *total absence* of the treatment on international instability. However, few proponents of restraint call for a rapid and total withdrawal of all American forces; most suggest gradual withdrawal. Thus, our design is most informative for evaluating restraint's theoretical predictions. Given that there was no change in the level of instability after a large and rapid withdrawal, we have greater confidence that slower, smaller withdrawals will not lead to an increase in the level of instability. However, even this partial withdrawal was associated with an increase in conventional arming and some change in interest in nuclear weapons. Additionally, the results *do not* suggest that a complete U.S. troop withdrawal will not affect instability. Although neither side of the debate specifies a threshold effect, it may be that so long as the number of U.S. troops remain above a certain threshold, there will be no change in the level of international instability. Future research should attempt to examine this possibility.

### Geography

Another potential objection is geography could depress the level of instability in the area. In particular, the ability of North Korean artillery to hold Seoul hostage reduces South Korean belligerence. The potential costs of a war on the Korean Peninsula—even one the South would ultimately win—has likely deterred even the United States, such as when the United States refrained from air strikes against North Korean nuclear targets in late 1993 and early 1994 when the first North Korean nuclear crisis was at its peak (Wit et al. 2004). Pyongyang must also consider that making good on this threat would likely trigger a major war and endanger North Korea's survival. Thus, it may be argued, North Korea would be unwilling to use its ability to put Seoul at risk as a shield to behave more assertively. In essence, both sides are deterred for fear of escalation. According to this, unique geographic circumstances bias against finding that troop withdrawals increase instability.

There are several reasons to believe this does not negate the overall findings. First, we should not assume North Korea would never use its threat against Seoul as a shield—and the empirical record suggests it has. Undoubtedly the likelihood of escalation and the grave threat the regime in Pyongyang would face as a result deters the North Koreans from inflicting damage on Seoul outside of the most extreme circumstances. Yet, the North's ability to hold Seoul hostage could embolden it to engage in low-level provocations it might otherwise be deterred from carrying out, as it could believe the escalation risk is low. Any situation where either side is willing to engage in modest provocations, as the North has frequently done against the South, is potentially unstable, as either side could misperceive red lines.

Second, Pyongyang's ability to hold Seoul hostage is unlikely to obviate the deterrent role of military forces in South Korea. Seoul's vulnerability has, for example, led the ROK and the United States to adopt a preemptive war strategy with the objective of damage limitation

(Roehrig 2006). Such a strategy's ability to minimize the damage the North could inflict on Seoul would have important implications for stability, as the strength of the North's deterrent strategy depends on the magnitude of damage it can inflict. Importantly, we would expect U.S.-ROK success at damage limitation to depend at least in part on the size and nature of forces deployed, meaning one would expect the overall size and composition of ROK and U.S. military capabilities to make a difference. In general, we should expect that the greater and more capable the forces, the greater the ROK-U.S. damage limitation capability and thus the lower costs the North Koreans could expect to inflict on the South. Absent the ability to hold Seoul hostage, then, one would predict North Korea would be less likely to engage in even lower level provocations because it would then be less effective at deterring South Korea from escalating. This would again lead one to predict that, even with this geographic feature, U.S. troop withdrawals might lead to increased instability as damage-limitation waned.

Third, even if the unique features of the Korean peninsula depress overall conflict, U.S. troops could depress the level of instability further. In other words, if the geographic situation made conflict unlikely then the presence of U.S. troops, according to the Deep Engagement logic, would make conflict even *less* likely. The withdrawal of troops would therefore still be associated with some uptick in the level of instability.

Finally, empirically there is variation in levels of conflict even if geography is playing a general pacifying role. As a constant, geography cannot explain variation in instability over time. Yet as the graphical and case analysis above shows, different periods witnessed greater or lesser amounts of instability. For instance, the 1960s and early 2000s saw a high rate of MIDs and a number of serious North Korean provocations relative to other periods such as the early 1970s and late 1980s. Thus the level of instability, even if low in general, does show variation. Those

periods of heightened instability are not associated with U.S. troop withdrawals. Rather, other factors appear to be driving instability independent of the number of U.S. troops and despite the geographic situation.

## Conclusion

As Washington debates retrenchment, one of the central questions is whether withdrawing forward-deployed troops will cause greater instability. Researchers cannot simply observe what happens after the U.S. withdraws troops because these withdrawals are endogenous to the expected level of instability. This has left policymakers with little rigorous empirical evidence regarding the consequences of U.S troop withdrawals.

To our knowledge, this paper is the first to directly address the problem of endogeneity in assessing the effects of U.S. troop redeployments. As a result, our findings, although limited in scope, provide some of the most direct evidence to date on the consequences of U.S. redeployments. We address this endogeneity problem by utilizing two exogenous shocks that resulted in the U.S. troops being withdrawn from the Korean Peninsula, despite the fact that U.S. policymakers expected that there would be an increase in the level of instability. We measured whether there was a change in the observed level of instability, as operationalized using quantitative indicators for the frequency and intensity of conflict, which should co-vary with the probability of war. We also used qualitative analysis to check the robustness of these quantitative indicators. We find that the withdrawal of U.S. troops resulted in no change and, in some cases, a decrease in the observed level of instability. While we investigate the effect of U.S. troop withdrawals on instability, the results are generally complementary to findings from recent analyses that higher numbers of U.S. troops do not reduce challenges against the host state

(Machain and Morgan 2013; Fuhrmann and Sechser 2014). Additionally, Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge (2014) find that relatively small numbers of British and then American troops in the Middle East were sufficient to maintain regional stability. Though data limitations will present challenges, future work can also more directly examine the extent to which changes in troop deployments made by other states within alliances can lead to instability as well as how those changes may interact with other policy tools such as arms transfers and joint military exercises to influence the likelihood of conflict.

An immediate increase in regional instability is not the only concern for policymakers. Many also worry that withdrawals might lead to regional arms races and nuclear proliferation. To address these concerns, we considered conventional arming and nuclear proliferation separately from our main indicator of change in regional stability. This approach yields a more nuanced analysis of the impact of U.S. troop withdrawals on different outcomes of interest. We find that although U.S. troop withdrawals are not associated with an increase in the level of instability, they *are* associated with an increase in conventional arming.

The relationship with nuclear proliferation was more complex. U.S. troop withdrawals had no obvious effect on North Korea's proliferation decisions. Troop withdrawal more clearly influenced South Korea's nuclear decisions in the 1970s, but there was no similar effect in the 2000s. The ROK weapons program in the 1970s was instigated more by concerns about long-term U.S. retrenchment than by the immediate effect of the troop withdrawals on the local balance of power. American assurances that it remained committed to Seoul's defense contributed to the successful effort to terminate the program. This suggests withdrawals are a permissive condition for proliferation, which is consistent with proliferation scholarship arguing

strategic vulnerability alone is insufficient to explain the historical infrequency of proliferation (Hymans 2006, Solingen 2007, Rublee 2009).

Our findings thus provide support to each side of the contemporary grand strategy debate by suggesting that withdrawing troops will not necessarily have a uniform effect across different outcomes related to instability. In so far as the findings demonstrate that U.S. troops withdrawals will not necessarily lead to greater instability, this supports advocates of Restraint, who claim that the United States should reduce its presence abroad. However, our results also suggest a causal connection, however limited, between withdrawals and local conventional arming and efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. This provides some support for advocates of Deep Engagement, who argue that maintaining current U.S. force posture is necessary to prevent arms racing and nuclear proliferation.

Our findings represent some of the best evidence to date regarding the causal impact of withdrawing troops. This evidence is based not on conjecture and correlation, but on an empirical test that addresses a critical endogeneity problem that has hampered the validity of previous studies. However, our research design does not test whether a complete removal of troops or termination of alliance commitments would lead to greater instability. Additionally, we caution against generalizing from the Korean Peninsula to other regions that may differ in ways that affect the relationship between troop presence and stability. Though limited, these findings nevertheless contribute to the grand strategy debate by illuminating the challenges associated with isolating the causal impact of U.S. military presence and exposing the inconclusive nature of current findings.

We close by offering some more specific guidance for future research into specific prescriptions from the grand strategy debate. First, additional work is needed to assess the

external validity of the propositions examined here by testing them in a wider set of cases. Second and relatedly, future studies should examine whether and why withdrawals are associated with instability in some instances but not others. This paper asked whether U.S. troop withdrawals cause instability. We find that in the Korean case they did not, but there may be other cases in which withdrawals *were* associated with greater instability. Answering such question will require more nuanced theory that can better specify the conditions under which withdrawals are likely to increase instability, and the policies that can best offset these effects. This will require the development of theory that more precisely sets out the mechanisms through which changes in forward-deployed troop levels can influence regional stability. Third, the mixed nature of the findings points to the importance of precisely defining and differentiating between the different dimension of instability such as conventional arming, nuclear proliferation, and conflict in future work. Doing so will allow scholars to provide policy makers with a more precise accounting of the consequences and tradeoffs across many different outcomes that associated with deploying or withdrawing troops.

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