

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear President Trump and Secretary Hegseth,

We write to express our serious concern regarding the decision to substantially reduce joint military exercises between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) and urge the Administration to maintain the training necessary to preserve the readiness of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

For more than 70 years, the alliance between the United States and South Korea has been a cornerstone of peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and throughout the Indo-Pacific. South Korea is a capable military ally, and the ability of our forces to operate together is not guaranteed. It is built and sustained through rigorous, realistic, and recurring joint training.

North and South Korea remain technically at war, and North Korea continues to develop its nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and conventional military capabilities. At the same time, North Korean troops have gained combat experience supporting Russia's war against Ukraine and can bring those lessons back to the Korean Peninsula, all of which could make North Korea more dangerous to U.S. forces and allies. At the same time, North Korea's deepening ties with Russia and China are reinforcing anti-U.S. alignment. This is not the time to reduce the readiness of U.S. and allied forces in the region.

Joint exercises such as Ulchi Freedom Shield provide U.S. and ROK forces critical opportunities to practice command and control, combined operations, logistics, and responses to evolving threats. Reducing these exercises risks degrading interoperability and readiness while sending the wrong signal to North Korea and our adversaries.

We are also concerned that reducing the training necessary to deter North Korean aggression could provide Pyongyang greater freedom to devote military resources elsewhere, including its support for Russia's war against Ukraine. Decisions about U.S. force posture and training must be driven by military requirements and the security of the United States and our allies, not political retaliation. Our allies should not be punished for declining to support unilateral U.S. military actions in the Middle East, particularly when such shortsighted measures undermine American military readiness.

Diplomacy and deterrence are not mutually exclusive. We support a credible diplomatic strategy toward North Korea, but diplomacy is strengthened, not weakened, when it is backed by a capable, ready U.S.-ROK alliance.

We urge you to reverse your decision to substantially reduce U.S.-ROK joint exercises and ensure that any changes to their scale and scope are based on the recommendations of U.S. commanders and a rigorous assessment of their effects on American readiness and deterrence of our adversaries.

We respectfully request that the Department of Defense provide Congress with an assessment of how the ordered reductions will affect U.S.-ROK interoperability, force readiness, deterrence on the Korean peninsula, and the ability of U.S. Forces Korea to execute its operational plans.

The United States should continue to stand firmly alongside our South Korean allies and ensure our servicemembers have the training they need to fight and win should deterrence fail.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mark Kelly". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mark" and last name "Kelly" clearly distinguishable.

Mark Kelly
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thom Tillis". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Thom" and last name "Tillis" clearly distinguishable.

Thom Tillis
United States Senator