

the use of older land mines that, unlike "smart" mines, do not self-destruct after a certain period.

The United States now deploys the older mines only around its base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba (where they are being removed) and in South Korea.

In the case of Korea, Pentagon strategists say anti-personnel mines are vital to thwarting any invasion by the 900,000 North Korean troops massed along the demilitarized zone.

And not in the way that might seem obvious, by laying a mine field deadly enough to discourage a frontal assault. Instead, the mines protect concrete anti-tank barriers on the first line of defense from North Korean demolition teams.

The Pentagon insists that without the mines the North Koreans might reach South Korea's capital, Seoul, before being beaten back. And the defense of South Korea is not just a U.S. mission, but a U.N. mandate, as administration officials noted in the face of criticism. Canada, the leader of the effort to draft a treaty banning the production, stockpiling and deployment of anti-personnel mines, would be called upon to fight, too.

Robert L. Cowles, director of the Pentagon's Office of De-Mining and Anti-Personnel Land Mine Policy, said Korea's unique circumstances qualified it for an exemption and would not automatically lead other countries to seek exemptions.

"Korea is a throwback," he said. "There's no place like it in the world."

At a time when the United States depends on lighter, more mobile forces to defend its interests around the world, the Pentagon has also concluded that it cannot do without the "smart" anti-tank mines. Under the treaty being considered, those mines would be banned because they incorporate anti-personnel mines, mainly to keep soldiers, who don't weigh enough to trigger the anti-tank mines, from simply lifting them out of tanks' way.

These mines had their first test in battle against Iraq's armored divisions during the Persian Gulf war in 1991 and, according to Pentagon officials, proved devastatingly effective. "We dropped them behind the Iraqi units," one said. "When they realized they were surrounded, they surrendered, saving not only American lives but Iraqi lives as well."

Critics dispute these claims, saying the United States is using