



South Korea Doesn't Need U.S. Military Babysitting

Seoul is rich enough and strong enough to deter Pyongyang by itself.

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The U.S. Defense Department has reportedly given President Donald Trump options for reducing America's force levels in South Korea. When asked about the report, U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper carefully sidestepped the issue, saying that he had ordered no reduction. With the United States and South Korea deadlocked in negotiations over host nation support, a troop withdrawal of some level seems the logical next step for the Trump administration.

The proposal has naturally horrified official Washington, as did the president's insistence on drawing down forces in such diverse nations as Syria and Germany. There is almost universal agreement across partisan and ideological lines that in foreign policy whatever is must forever be. No matter how the international environment changes, no U.S. defense commitment or deployment can ever be reduced—only, at most, mildly shuffled.

There were good reasons for Americans ending up on the Korean Peninsula. Continued U.S. support was essential for the South's survival in the aftermath of the Korean War. Seoul remained vulnerable to both subversion and invasion. The ravaged country was desperately poor and suffered under the unpopular, despotic, and aged Syngman Rhee. In contrast, the North enjoyed a fuller economic recovery and retained support from both the Soviet Union and China.

However, that world soon disappeared.

After Rhee's overthrow, Gen. Park Chung-hee eventually took control and set the South Korean economy on a course of reform. Political freedom took longer to arrive, but today South Korea is a stable democracy with an economy that ranks in the world's top dozen.

It is the North that is an economic wreck. I saw ox carts when I first visited Pyongyang, the regime's showcase, in 1992. At least half a million North Koreans died of starvation later that decade. Although the capital was free of oxen and more colorful when I returned three years ago, no one would confuse the two nations. The South's GDP is estimated to be more than 50 times bigger and population to be twice as large.

Moreover, no one imagines Russian or Chinese military intervention to back the North in war. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is on his own. South Korea leads on every measure of national power except the military—and even that is a quantitative advantage. South Korea's soldiers are better trained, and its weapons are more advanced. Any difference in numbers is a matter of choice. There is no special gravitational anomaly that prevents the nation to the south from building a larger military than the one in the north. Only the temptation to rely on the United States to cover the gap.

President Richard Nixon began the drawdown process, withdrawing a U.S. Army division. A half-century later, there is no military reason to maintain U.S. forces on the peninsula. Instead, the response seems to be mostly emotional and symbolic. Consider U.S. Sen. Ben Sasse's strange outburst: "Our aim is to give the Chinese communist leadership and the nuclear nut tyrannizing his North Korean subjects something to think about before they mess with us."

The North has never been interested in "messing" with America. It is an evil regime but one largely obsessed with maintaining its own power and status, not suicidal ideological glories. Kim is not interested in leaving this world in a radioactive funeral pyre in Pyongyang. It is because he understands the threat of U.S. action against North Korea that he almost certainly will never yield his nuclear arsenal. He saw all too well what happened to Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya. U.S. troops in the South are not defending the United States.

As for South Korea, why can't it provide the force necessary to stop the North from "messing" with it? After all, Seoul just proposed its largest military budget ever for next year, and there is talk of acquiring nuclear-powered submarines. Duyeon Kim of the International Crisis Group has noted that many South Koreans believe the alliance should be based on "common values." No doubt, sharing the latter is useful, but U.S. defense commitments should be based on necessity, not charity.

On the Korean Peninsula, the balance of power has shifted irrevocably. The U.S. presence has turned from security guarantee to military subsidy, essentially welfare to a well-heeled friend able to defend itself.

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American forces also do nothing to deter North Korea's reliance on nuclear weapons. To the contrary, U.S. units are essentially nuclear hostages, within easy reach of the North. Historically the United States maintained a tripwire to ensure involvement in any war on the peninsula, but such a deployment loses its *raison d'être* if Seoul takes over its conventional defense.

As for China, a U.S. army division in South Korea is but an annoyance. The United States is unlikely to invade Manchuria, whatever the future holds for U.S.-China relations. Moreover, anyone who imagines that Seoul will allow Washington to use South Korean bases for operations against China for anything other than defense of the South, a very unlikely target for Beijing, is living in an alternate universe.

Seoul refused to criticize China over the crackdown in Hong Kong. No South Korean government would make itself a military target by supporting U.S. military operations to defend Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, or Scarborough Shoal. China has a long memory, and it will remain a neighbor when the United States eventually leaves, whether in five or 50 years' time. So if Beijing decides to "mess" with America, U.S. policymakers should not plan on using forces based in South Korea.

If Uncle Sam were not essentially bankrupt, lavishing largesse on friends might not be so bad. But Washington entered 2020 having borrowed nearly \$1 trillion last year. This year, the red ink likely will exceed \$4 trillion, and that is before the third bailout that an election-minded president and Congress seem certain to approve. Next year, the federal government will borrow at least \$2

trillion. In succeeding years, entitlement spending will burgeon as more baby boomers retire. Even the Pentagon will have to start setting priorities.

Of course, the military commitment to South Korea is not the only one that warrants review. If war between China and Japan is a real responsibility, why does Tokyo continue to limit its military spending to an anemic 1 percent of GDP? The historical issues are real but 75 years in the past. Washington should not be expected to carry the burden of wealthy nations that perpetually underinvest in their defense.

The case of Europe is similar. Most European states feel little threat from Russia, and those that do expect America to deal with any problems. Hence even the most vulnerable nations to the east that loudly clamor for U.S. troops devote barely 2 percent of their GDPs to their armed forces. The continent enjoys an enormous edge over Russia: 11 to 1 in economic strength, 5 to 1 in military outlays, 3 to 1 in population size. Why must the United States babysit the continent decades after the Soviet Union's collapse?

Circumstances change. So should U.S. security guarantees and force deployments. The Cold War is over. South Korea has raced ahead of the North. The United States faces severe financial distress that will only worsen. Seven decades after the start of the Korean War would be a good time to rethink America's many overseas commitments, including to Seoul, and adjust them to the changing world around us.

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