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S. Korea Should Focus on Defending Itself

By Doug Bandow

When a South Korean warship recently sank in the Yellow Sea, suspicions immediately turned to North Korea. It now appears that Pyongyang was not involved. But the war scare should remind officials in Seoul that the Korean Peninsula still remains threatened.

The North has long used brinkmanship as a negotiating technique. Pyongyang responded to recent joint maneuvers between the U.S. and South Korean forces with its usual rhetorical threats.

Ships of the two Koreas exchanged fire last November around their ill-defined sea boundary in the Yellow Sea.

Nevertheless, tensions on the peninsula have receded in recent years. Two South Korean presidents have even ventured north for summits with Kim Jong-il.

The ROK spent roughly 10 years subsidizing the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea as part of the ``Sunshine Policy.''

Today the two states hover somewhere between a cold peace and a cold war. The lack of reciprocity from the DPRK has led South Korea's President Lee Myung-bak, elected in 2007, to end the South's unconditional aid and investment.

The North responded angrily, but later alternated conciliatory moves with hostile rhetoric.

Little has changed in terms of the military situation. North Korea's armed forces are large but decrepit. Pyongyang could wreak enormous havoc in any war, but almost certainly would lose badly. The South has a more modern, better-trained force, including its navy. And America's capabilities are without peer.

However, the ROK remains unnecessarily dependent on the U.S. Indeed, instead of focusing on national defense, Seoul has been expanding its international ambitions.

President Lee now talks about ``Global Korea.'' His government's latest Defense White Paper spoke of ``enhancing competence and status internationally.'' In addition, Seoul has begun regularly contributing to international peace-keeping missions.

Washington has promoted this perspective, enlisting the South Korean military in Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance.

A new study from the Center for a New American Security argues that ``the value of the alliance goes far beyond security in the Korean Peninsula.'' Participants urged the South to create a capability ``to provide assistance in more global contingencies.''

It obviously is up to Seoul to decide what it wants to do in the world. And South Korea has emerged as a significant global player.

But the ROK's first responsibility is to defend itself. As long as 27,000 American

personnel remain stationed in the South, Seoul is not doing enough militarily.

Moreover, the U.S. maintains the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force in Okinawa as backup for Korean contingencies. Other U.S. forces also would be expected to deploy in the event of war.

Yet the South is capable of defending itself. Over the last 60 years it has been transformed from an authoritarian wreck into a prosperous and democratic leader internationally.

The ROK's economy ranks 14th in the world. South Korea's GDP is roughly 40 times that of the North's. By some measures, Seoul already spends an amount equivalent to the entire North Korean GDP on defense. The South could do even more if necessary.

The international environment has also changed to the South's advantage. Both China and Russia recognize South Korea; neither would back aggression by Pyongyang. The South could count on support from throughout East Asia and around the world.

Obviously, no one wants an unnecessary arms race on the peninsula. But if Seoul can't defend itself without American aid, it isn't doing enough. The ROK should spend as much as it takes to defend itself without subsidy from Washington.

Moreover, South Korea could use the threat of an arms buildup to encourage a more accommodating attitude in the North. Pyongyang can only squeeze its people so much to wring out additional resources for the military.

It also is in America's interest to shift responsibility for the South's defense back where it belongs. The U.S. spends almost as much as the rest of the world on its military, even as Washington's finances deteriorate.

Moreover, America's armed forces have been badly stretched by lengthy occupation duties in Iraq and continuing combat in Afghanistan.

Washington should focus on potential threats from major powers, not more peripheral dangers which can be handled by allied and friendly states.

The Korean War ended in 1953, but the potential for conflict has never fully disappeared, as evident from the recent events in the Yellow Sea.

However, the dangers, though real, should be a problem for South Korea, not America. Before the government in Seoul attempts to save the world, it needs to protect its own people.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of ``Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World'' and co-author of ``The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea.'' He can be reached at ChessSet@aol.com. The views expressed in the above article are the author's own and do not reflect the editorial policy of The Korea Times.