



It's Time for America to Cut South Korea Loose

The first step to solving the North Korean problem is removing U.S. troops from the middle of it.

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Asia contains the world's two most populous nations, the country with the largest Muslim population, the two largest economies after America, and the next superpower and peer competitor to the United States. But when U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited the continent recently, small, impoverished North Korea nearly monopolized his attention.

Why is the United States, which dominates the globe militarily, politically, and economically, fixated on this poor, isolated, and distant nation? Because America has gotten entangled where it does not belong.

Washington has been deeply involved in the Korean Peninsula since the end of World War II. Subsequently, the Cold War gave a zero-sum quality to international relations, with Washington's loss being the Soviet Union's gain. Having invested some 37,000 lives to save South Korea during the Korean War, America's credibility was also at stake. And with the "loss" of China to communism fresh on Americans' minds, nobody was willing to see another Asian nation go red.

But that world disappeared long ago. The Korean Peninsula has lost its geopolitical significance, South Korea its helplessness, and America's Korea commitment its purpose. While there is much to criticize in the approach of Donald Trump's administration to the rest of the world, the president correctly sees the need for a foreign policy that more effectively protects America's interests. A good place to start shifting course is the region home to the world's newest and least responsible nuclear power.

The Koreas are no longer a proxy battleground between superpowers. There was a time when U.S. withdrawal from a confrontation with a Soviet ally in Asia would have, analysts believed, signaled weakness a continent away in Europe. But the Soviets are long gone and the cause for American commitment with them. An inter-Korean war would be tragic and the body count enormous, but absent American involvement the fighting would largely be confined to the peninsula. The continued presence of U.S. forces, by contrast, virtually guarantees the spread of conflict.

South Korea's defense no longer requires Washington's presence. The South's economy began racing past its northern antagonist during the 1960s. Democracy arrived in the late 1980s. By the

1990s, when mass starvation stalked Pyongyang as Seoul's economy boomed, the gap between the two Koreas was already huge and growing. The South's military potential is correspondingly great though as yet unrealized — in part because dependence on the U.S. presence has affected strategic choices.

Yet America's military presence has remained sacrosanct. Jimmy Carter's plan to bring home U.S. troops was opposed even by his own appointees. Ronald Reagan pushed a more muscular confrontation with the Soviet Union and other communist states. With the end of the Cold War, his successors expanded alliance commitments, particularly in Europe, but also in Asia. Today, 28,500 troops remain in South Korea, backed up by U.S. forces in Okinawa and other Asian-Pacific bases, and highlighted by periodic decisions to overfly the North with bombers or send aircraft carriers to nearby waters whenever Washington wants to demonstrate "resolve" to Pyongyang.

So why is America still there?

One argument, advanced by analyst Robert E. McCoy, is moral, "since it was American ignorance that facilitated the division of the Korean Peninsula in the concluding days of World War II." Some Koreans malign America for this division. But this is the wisdom of hindsight; in the chaotic aftermath of global conflict, no U.S. official wanted to push the Soviets over a faraway peninsula. The alternative was pure inaction, which would have resulted in South Koreans joining their northern neighbors in the Kim dynasty's new Dark Age. Perhaps inadvertently, Washington did a very good deed. For that it deserves praise, not criticism and claims that it must forever police the peninsula.

More practical is the contention of analysts such as the Heritage Foundation's Bruce Klingner that U.S. backing is "necessary to defend" the South. Yet, in contrast to 1950, there is no reason the South cannot protect itself — if properly motivated to do so by the departure of U.S. conventional forces. With a bigger economy, larger population, and significant technological edge, as well as greater international support, Seoul could construct armed forces capable of deterring and defeating the North. Doing so would be expensive and take serious effort, but so what? The South Korean government's most important duty is to protect its people.

Taking on that responsibility also would force Seoul to treat Pyongyang more consistently. The "Sunshine Policy" begun under former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung resulted in the transfer of some \$10 billion in cash and assistance to the North, even as the latter was developing missiles and nuclear weapons. That approach was viable only because Washington provided a military backstop (and if the new South Korean president, to be elected in May, revives the Sunshine Policy, as some have suggested, there's no telling if the Trump administration would be so forgiving). The South needs to bear both the costs and benefits of whatever approach it takes.

But even if South Korea couldn't defend itself, the argument would still fall short. American soldiers shouldn't be treated as defenders of the earth, deployed here, there, and everywhere. The United States should go to war only when its most important interests are at stake.

South Korea's prosperity is not one of those vital interests, at least in security terms. A renewed conflict confined to the two Koreas would be horrific, but the consequences for the United States

would be primarily humanitarian and economic, not security. The cost would be high but fall primarily on the region. In contrast, direct U.S. involvement in another Korean War would be much more expensive than the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts, which have cost America thousands of lives and trillions of dollars.

Of course, the North's possession of what we assume to be a growing and at some point deliverable nuclear arsenal skews the peninsula's balance of power. However, this doesn't create a need for a conventional American military presence on the peninsula. Washington could still guarantee massive retaliation against any North Korean use of nuclear weapons, providing a deterrent against the North's threats.

But it is worth contemplating whether it would be better to allow South Korea to construct its own deterrent. In the late 1970s, South Korean President Park Chung-hee worried about Washington's reliability and began work on a Korean bomb — only to stop under U.S. pressure. Since then, support for reviving such work has periodically surfaced in South Korea. Encouraging such efforts might actually be in the best interests of the United States, even if America has to maintain its nuclear umbrella while the Korean bomb is developed.

Yes, encouraging nuclear proliferation is a risky path. But the United States would gain from staying out of Northeast Asia's nuclear quarrels. China, fearful that Japan would join the nuclear parade, might take tougher action against Pyongyang in an attempt to forestall Seoul's efforts. The South could feel confident in its own defense, rather than remaining reliant upon U.S. willingness to act.

A potpourri of broader claims is also made for maintaining U.S. forces. America's presence supposedly constrains China, promotes regional stability, and deters an arms race. Let's consider those claims in order. What sort of constraint is allegedly being posed to China? If the idea is to coerce it into assuming responsibility for North Korea in the event of its collapse, Beijing has shown no interest in attempting to swallow a Korean population likely to prove indigestible. And if the calculation is rather that Washington can persuade South Korea to pressure China on non-Korean matters, it's easy to predict the unfriendly response Seoul's Blue House would give if invited by the White House to join it in warring against China to, say, save an independent Taiwan, counter Chinese moves in the South China Sea — or, horror of horrors, defend Japan. Indeed, absent U.S. protection, South Korea and Japan might feel greater pressure to finally settle historical disputes so often misused by their nationalist politicians.

As for the idea that the U.S. presence deters a regional arms race, building weapons so others don't have to is not the sort of charity America should engage in. Alliances can deter. But, as dramatically demonstrated by World War I, they also can act as transmission belts of war. Moreover, small nations often act irresponsibly — such as underinvesting in defense — when protected by big powers.

The U.S. security presence in South Korea is an expensive and dangerous commitment that America can no longer afford. Nor has it ever brought the United States much popularity in the country, where U.S. soldiers are a constant irritant to nationalists. The South is no longer a poor nation in need of protection from the specter of global communism but one more than capable of standing on its own two feet.

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