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South Korea At The Edge: Should America's Peace Depend On A Shaman's Teachings?

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Since its creation in 1948, the Republic of Korea has become one of the world's leading industrialized nations. But now its government is in disarray, and policymakers in Washington as well as Seoul fear that North Korea might attempt to take advantage of the ROK's weakness.

An impoverished wreck at the end of the Korean War, the South prospered behind an American military shield. The early years were chaotic, but the country finally took off economically during the 1960s under dictator Park Chung-hee, father of the present president. South Korea enjoyed the sort of economic miracle that has come to characterize East Asia. The South now is one of the world's great trading nations and has begun to contribute to collective military missions. Its growing international presence is highlighted by the high-profile role of outgoing United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

Yet despite the country's rush into the 21st Century, Seoul remains a security dependent, stuck on American military welfare. Indeed, the U.S. even maintains wartime command of the South Korean armed forces, an extraordinary cession of national sovereignty. Much is unpredictable about the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, but no one could imagine dictator Kim Jong-un handing the reins of his military to China or any other nation, friend or foe.

The reason for what otherwise would seem to be a shameful concession by a proud, nationalistic people is to save money. Admittedly, the ROK devotes a larger share of its GDP to the military than do the Europeans, most of whom see little threat to defend against and are happy turning their defense almost wholly over to Washington.

But the South faces a far more serious threat. There's no evidence that Russia's Vladimir Putin is interested in starting a war with Europe. In contrast, the DPRK's Kim dynasty was forged amid mass bloodletting some six decades ago. And no one is prepared to testify as to Kim Jong-un's stability and maturity today. To alone adequately deter the North would require a much greater expenditure than South Koreans feel like bearing. So better to sacrifice self-respect in return for a hefty defense subsidy.

It's harder to understand the argument for Americans to pay to protect their populous and prosperous friends. The ROK has around twice the population and 40 times the economic strength, plus a multitude of other advantages over North Korea. Nevertheless, U.S. officials appear to think it would be ungenerous to expect those actually at risk to provide for their own defense. Hence Washington continues to protect South Korea ... and Japan and Europe and Afghanistan and Iraq and Saudi Arabia and

But short-term cost is not the only problem. So is long-term risk. Tossing out security guarantees and creating military tripwires help deter, but they also ensure war if deterrence fails. In this case Washington would be involved in a conflict with little relevance to American security, despite the many historic ties. War on the Korean peninsula would be a humanitarian horror, but there would be no need for Washington to get involved. And if the ROK bothered to take its own defense seriously, it could deter and defeat the North by itself.

It hasn't done so, of course. And now, even worse, it's not clear how well Seoul could respond to a military emergency. The South is consumed by political scandal, with no resolution likely for months.

Among the players are a thoroughly discredited president, a shaman, an old friend, fearful corporate executives, sleazy presidential officials, a discarded computer, an angry opposition, cash-rich corporate "chaebols," or conglomerates, an aroused National Assembly, and an angry population. The details make for a great soap opera, but don't matter much for Americans. The end result is that President Park Geun-hye, who had been losing political popularity like most of her predecessors in their last year, now is political road-kill. The only question is when her immunity as president will end and the prosecutors will envelop her.

But no one has an answer for that important question. An overwhelming, and bipartisan, vote of the unicameral National Assembly impeached her. She is suspended, with the prime minister acting president. The issue now goes to the Constitutional Court, which must approve or disallow impeachment. The process could take months, as many as six.

In the interim Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn is acting president. A Park loyalist who she was going to replace, he will have little independent authority. He cannot easily address domestic or international challenges, such as chart a new course toward North Korea, adapt policy to the incoming Trump administration, or adjust his country's approach to its large, complicated neighbor next door, China.

Moreover, two-thirds of the nine justices must agree to remove Park from office, but most are members of her Saenuri Party. And in March the terms of two jurists will expire. Since neither Park nor Hwang can appoint new judges, any verdict after that will have to be almost unanimous. If the justices don't agree, she will remain in office until the following year when her successor, elected in December 2017, takes office.

If she goes, an early presidential election will be held. So most everyone is looking ahead. The Saenuri party already was looking to Ban Ki-moon, whose term ends on December 31, to revive its fortunes. But now the question is whether Saenuri is too damaged a vehicle for his ambitions. Observers speculate that he might start his own party, perhaps along with a number of senior Saenuri officials. In the ROK politicians are far more ready to destroy established and create new parties than in America, adjusting to the winds of political fortune.

Unsurprisingly, the scandal has most boosted the fortunes of Moon Jae-in, who chairs the main opposition party. He lost narrowly to Park in 2012 and leads the opinion polls. However, he might face competition for the nomination from Park Won-soon, mayor of Seoul, the South's capital and dominant city, and Lee Jae-Myeong, mayor of Seongnam, who has been termed South Korea's Bernie Sanders. The sooner the election, the more likely the opposition is to

triumph.

However, the race might be a multi-party affair. Leftish independent Ahn Cheol-soo, an academic and entrepreneur, looked ready to make a strong race in 2012 but ended up supporting Moon. They have since split and Ahn might run this time. He has emphasized social justice concerns in the past and could capture the public's imagination, or simply divide the opposition, as has happened in the past.

Park's refusal to resign—she has fallen to a four percent in the polls and is the target of mass demonstrations—is thought to mix a desire to avoid jail as long as possible with an attempt to give her party more time to recover from the wreck of her administration. Whatever the reason, it ensures that her government will remain headless for the maximum period of time. That might not much matter in a more quiescent part of the globe. However, Northeast Asia is a global hot spot.

Worse, from Washington's standpoint, it is a global hot spot for which America is responsible. The U.S. divided the Korean peninsula with the Soviet Union after Japan's defeat in 1945, occupied the southern section and set up the ROK in 1948, defended the fledgling state from the North's Soviet-backed invasion in 1950, withstood Chinese entry in the war to roughly restore the previous boundary, reached an armistice in 1953, and defended South Korea ever since.

Along the way the ROK raced past its northern antagonist. On every measure of national power other than military, the South predominates. And with a more modern and sophisticated, if smaller, force Seoul probably would win any war. Most important, it has the resources to do far more to ensure that it would win any war. However, it has little incentive to do so as long as America stands guard. As with Europe and Japan, Washington maintains an antiquated, or "obsolete," to use President-elect Donald Trump's term, alliance.

The ongoing political turmoil in Seoul highlights the high cost of the South Korean military commitment to the U.S. Not only must Washington raise and maintain a larger military to deal with additional, significant military contingencies—the ROK provides no "host nation support" to pay military personnel and purchase weapons and materiel—but Americans bear an increased risk based on internal South Korean politics over which they have no control. Thus, today the U.S. is expected to be the ultimate guarantor as the Park presidency implodes. Which means America's security ultimately depends on the consequences of a shaman's teaching a continent away.

The ROK will survive its ongoing political imbroglio. When a new president is installed the Trump administration should insist on negotiations to transfer defense responsibility from America to Seoul. More than six decades after the conclusion of the Korean War, South Korea should take over responsibility for its own fate.

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