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With American 'Friends' like These, South Koreans don't Need any Enemies

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South Korea long ago surpassed its northern antagonist economically and technologically. With a larger population and much larger network of international partners, the Republic of Korea could have defended itself from North Korea.

However, the ROK preferred to rely on Washington for its defense. Why spend the money if Uncle Sucker was willing to pay the bill? It seemed a good deal for Seoul, since the U.S. was ever ready to deploy ground forces, carrier groups, air wings, nuclear weapons, and whatever else might be needed.

But with growing support in Washington for launching a preventative war against the North, South Koreans could be forgiven for wondering whose interests their supposed American friends have in mind. For instance, last week Sen. Lindsey Graham appeared on NBC to discuss the challenge posed by Pyongyang.

When asked if he favored a military strike against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Lindsey said yes "If that's what it would take." Unfortunately, almost certainly North Korean leader Kim Jong-un would not supinely accept such an attack. He probably would suspect any military action as the beginning of an attempt at regime change—to which his best response would be to strike quickly and hard.

Lindsey acknowledged that the cost of conflict would be high: "It would be bad for the Korean Peninsula. It would be bad for China. It would be bad for Japan, be bad for South Korea. It would be the end of North Korea."

But no big deal for the U.S. After all, "It would be terrible but the war would be over [there], wouldn't be here." What the conflict "would not do is hit America."

Alas, that would be small solace to South Koreans.

For the ROK, war would be catastrophic. Seoul is the political, industrial, and cultural heart of the country. The Seoul-Inchon metropolitan area includes roughly half of the country's population. Unfortunately, the city lies barely 30 miles from the DMZ and is within range of artillery and Scud missiles. The North possesses chemical and biological weapons, as well as a nascent nuclear capability.

Moreover, Pyongyang has abundant armor and infantry, as well as sizable special operations

forces which might be able to infiltrate via tunnels under the DMZ. The South and U.S. would control the air, limiting the DPRK's potential gains, but North Korea's military wouldn't have to get far to wreak havoc.

Casualty and cost estimates vary widely, but there easily could be tens of thousands of dead, hundreds of thousands of wounded, and millions of displaced South Koreans. The economic damage could be in the hundreds of billions. The North also would be devastated. China and Japan could suffer too, depending upon the weapons used and trajectory of combat.

All this, after the U.S. spent the last 64 years dedicated to preventing the Second Korean War. And all this to forestall a potential threat still well into the future, which could be deterred. Kim Jong-un is evil, not suicidal. He wants his virgins in this world, not the next. He doesn't want to attack America. He wants to prevent Washington from attacking his nation.

Ominously, Sen. Graham said he had talked with President Trump, telling the latter "to stop" the North from developing an ICBM. The senator insisted that the president "is not going to allow this problem to get any worse than it is today."

What does President Trump think? He warned that a "major, major conflict" is possible, one which would be fought on South Korea, not American, soil—and by the decision of the U.S., not ROK.

Worse, the president has treated Seoul with what appears to be studied contempt. For instance, in an interview with Reuters he allowed that he's thinking of tearing up the free trade agreement with the ROK since it is "a horrible deal." (Apparently his definition of a bad commercial arrangement is one under which any American buys any imports from anyone.) Seoul was caught unawares, with the Trade Ministry "trying to understand what President Trump said exactly and the context of his remarks," according to one befuddled official. Cancelling the FTA would disrupt commerce and be a particular boon to the Chinese, who currently trade more with the South than do the U.S. and Japan combined.

The president also announced that he believes the South should pay for the THAAD missile defense system. Never mind that many South Koreans, including the candidate most likely to be elected South Korean president next week, opposed the system. And the fact that Washington didn't mention a price tag at the start.

Explained President Trump, he had "informed South Korea it would be appropriate if they paid. It's a billion-dollar system." And undoubtedly worth the money since it is—what else could it be?—"phenomenal." National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster followed up with a phone call to South Korean officials, saying don't worry, the president's statement was, well, not quite a joke, but "in line with the U.S. public expectations on defense cost burden-sharing with allies," according to the official statement of the South Korean government.

Still, President Trump is no fan of the alliance. During the campaign he argued that the U.S. wasn't getting its money's worth. Then Secretaries Tillerson and Mattis made nice with Seoul, appearing to restore the bilateral relationship. But after meeting with President Xi Jinping

President Trump announced that the latter had explained China's relationship with Korea, and that "Korea actually used to be a part of China."

In fact, the Trump administration has consulted with Beijing and even worse, Tokyo, but not Seoul in developing its North Korea policy. Surprising an ally is bad enough when it means wrecking trade relationships and sending out bills for security services rendered. But President Trump is taking the same approach when issuing threats of war involving *the South*.

The benefits which Seoul receives from relying on the U.S. for its defense are obvious. But under President Donald Trump, the costs are becoming equally apparent. If the latter triggers a war fought "over there," as Sen. Graham noted, Seoul will find the cost of the alliance to have been very great indeed. South Koreans might come to wonder whether they can afford to have friends like the Americans.

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