



South Korea's Dependency on Washington Comes at a Heavy Price

Washington sends a clear message that it makes defense policy for the benefit of Washington, not for South Korea.

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The Trump administration said it was rushing a second carrier group to Northeast Asia. White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer explained that “the forward deployment is deterrence.” But it turns out that an aircraft carrier strike group led by the USS *Carl Vinson* headed off into the Indian Ocean instead. Anxious South Koreans were not pleased.

One newspaper headline stated “Trump’s lie over the Carl Vinson.” The paper compared Washington’s strategy to the North’s use of fake missiles in its military parades and asked whether the administration was “now employing ‘bluffing’ as its North Korea policy?”

U.S. officials responded that it all was an unfortunate misunderstanding. But that offered little comfort to South Koreans. In fact, they have cause to worry both about North Korean provocations and American threats to bomb the North. Either approach could misfire and result in full-scale war.

Still, residents of the Republic of Korea shouldn’t complain. They have turned their defense over to Washington, so they inevitably will be held hostage to America’s assessment of the Korean Peninsula’s geopolitical importance and how best to manage inter-Korean confrontation. There’s no reason to assume that Washington and Seoul emphasize the same factors or weigh them the same, which means America could easily do too much or too little from the ROK’s standpoint.

For instance, former South Korean president Park Chung-hee worried about America’s commitment, especially with the United States heavily involved in Vietnam and President Richard Nixon’s determination to get client states to do more in their own defense. Park sent troops to Vietnam to aid Washington in order, he hoped, to preclude proposals to withdraw U.S. forces from the ROK. He also began a nuclear program to strengthen the South’s defense.

But despite Park’s concerns, the Nixon administration withdrew an army division from the peninsula. And very strong U.S. pressure forced Park to end the nuclear program. Today’s threat from the North would look very different if the South had its own nukes.

Even worse from Seoul's perspective was President Jimmy Carter's proposal to withdraw other U.S. forces from the ROK. Unsurprisingly, the Park dictatorship went into hyperdrive to block Carter's plan. Facing strong opposition—even within his administration—Carter eventually abandoned the idea. Nevertheless, he reminded South Koreans that Washington can take away as well as give when it comes to military support.

President Bill Clinton went in the opposite direction. In 1993, Ashton Carter, the assistant secretary of defense for international security policy, was appointed to direct a DOD task force. That task force, reported West Point's Scott Silverstone, "drafted a paper for the National Security Council that recommended a military attack on Yongbyon," the North's chief nuclear facility. Carter and former Defense Secretary William Perry later explained that they had "readied plans for striking at North Korea's nuclear facilities and for mobilizing hundreds of thousands of American troops for the war that probably would have followed."

There is some disagreement over how close the United States came to attacking the DPRK. However, the late South Korean president Kim Young-sam claimed in his memoir to have received a phone call from President Bill Clinton announcing the latter's intention to attack. Kim warned that airstrikes would "immediately prompt North Korea to open fire against major South Korean cities from the border." Clinton then backed down.

Now another U.S. president is beefing up military forces in the region and threatening war. Trump administration officials highlighted the recent strike in Syria as demonstrating their resolve. President Donald Trump famously stated his intent to "solve" the problem if China did not.

No one in Washington appeared to pay much attention to the opinion of South Koreans, however. While it is impossible to state with any certainty how the North would respond to airstrikes—the reaction might depend on the target and direction of the military operations—few observers believe that Kim Jong-un would let an attack pass without a violent response. Even if the United States was able to mitigate the damage, war with the North would still leave tens or hundreds of thousands of casualties and significant destruction, especially in Seoul.

In 2002 Carter and Perry again pushed war, though both were out of office. They coauthored an article for the *Washington Post* which contended that "Today, just as in 1994, a conventional war would be incredibly dangerous, but not as dangerous as allowing North Korea to proceed with this new [missile] program." Again, they made no pretense of considering the welfare of the South Korean (and Japanese) people.

Yet just as the ROK was nervous about an overly truculent North Korea, it found out that tough-sounding American administrations often prefer to ignore DPRK provocations. For example, in 2010 Pyongyang sank a South Korean navy vessel, killing scores of sailors, and it also bombarded a South Korean island, killing several civilians. Understandably many in the ROK wanted to make a strong response, but Washington officials urged restraint. Washington didn't want to go to war over such stakes, even though the atrocities outraged most South Koreans.

Now the South finds that the Trump administration was bluffing when it threatened the North—and bluffing badly. So much for that extra carrier group the administration said it was sending. Even if it eventually shows up, the crisis may have ebbed by then.

Indeed, the USS *Carl Vinson* saga might remind South Koreans that candidate Trump has been sharply critical of their defense efforts. He cited the ROK as among those of America's allies who have not been "paying their fair share." "We get practically nothing compared to the cost of" America's 28,500 member garrison in the South, he said. Do South Koreans feel comfortable turning their security over to him?

There was a time when only the U.S. military protected the ROK from another North Korean invasion. That day is long past, however. The South is well able to defend itself. It simply has chosen to rely on Uncle Sam. After all, it's nice to be able to send most of the bill for one's protection to the clueless rich guy across the Pacific Ocean.

However, South Koreans should realize that they pay a high price for sacrificing their independence. Washington makes defense policy for the benefit of Washington, not the ROK. That could mean standing by and ignoring North Korean provocations. It also could mean jumping in and starting a war with the DPRK. Is saving a few bucks worth that price?

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