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The Afghanistan Collapse: How Does North Korea See It?

Doug Bandow

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The Biden administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan, a failed war in a region of little strategic interest to America, was entirely justified. Nevertheless, the move worried U.S. allies around the world, including the Republic of Korea. However, the most effective way to turn Washington truly isolationist would be to insist that the U.S. forever fight unnecessary wars opposed by its own people. Like in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is likely to have little lasting impact on the Korean peninsula, despite slightly hysterical reactions to the tragic images from Kabul. In particular, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is unlikely to receive many benefits from the Taliban's victory.

Pyongyang attempted to put America's humiliation to propaganda use. For instance, the North accused the U.S. of creating refugees while mistreating them. The chaos that we see, declared North Korea, is a "product of social upheaval and bloody conflict," in turn resulting from "acts of intrusion and interference in the guise of promoting 'human rights' and 'democracy'." Although the charge had some truth, in this case, refugees were on the move because Washington was exiting, not beginning, a conflict. And Pyongyang could not criticize Americans for leaving.

Moreover, the Kim dynasty never supported the Taliban or other radical Islamists in Afghanistan. In fact, the avowedly atheist regime is in a difficult position dealing with such groups, even when they are anti-American. The DPRK supported the Soviet invasion and its proxy government, which battled an earlier iteration of Islamic fundamentalists. Pyongyang has dealt with Hamas and Hezbollah, but they are associated with the widely recognized governments of Iran and Syria.

The rise of the Taliban, though highly embarrassing to the U.S., does not provide a model for the North. The latter already claims to properly represent the entire peninsula and insists on reunification at the national level. The regime has not supported insurgents in the South since before the Korean War. Indeed, one of the factions later eliminated by Kim Il-sung on his journey to supreme power were Taliban-analogues, communists who had been active in the Republic of Korea.

Nor is there any realistic prospect, in the near-term, at least, that Washington will withdraw its military from the ROK. This presence remains a persistent rhetorical target of Pyongyang, and especially Kim's sister, Kim Yo-jong. Even before Kabul's capitulation Kim soeur opined: "For peace to settle on the peninsula, it is imperative for the U.S. to withdraw its aggression troops and war hardware deployed in South Korea."

In fact, there long have been good arguments for an American withdrawal, given how the South has dramatically overtaken the North on most measures of national power and Washington's fiscal position continues to worsen. However, this case was not advanced by Afghanistan's denouement. Indeed, the ROK's differences with Afghanistan are manifold: despite occasional isolated incidents, the peninsula is at peace; the U.S. and South Korea are linked by a mutual defense treaty; although the South Korean government was originally established by the U.S., it long ago ceased being a tool of Washington; ties between the two governments and peoples are strong; and the Korea peninsula has much greater strategic value than Central Asia.

In addition, the Afghan imbroglio won't strengthen Pyongyang's diplomatic position. Negotiations were going nowhere before, and the Biden administration's inevitable preoccupation with the aftermath of Afghanistan, including reassuring alliance partners elsewhere, likely will push any discussions with North Korea further into the future. Noted Ken Gause of CNA's Adversary Analytics Program: "They've got other issues that are higher up on that agenda than North Korea right now."

Anything kicked into 2022, an election year, is unlikely to move very far very fast. A GOP congressional takeover would further slow administration activity. Ironically, any hangover from Afghanistan is likely to dissipate over time, especially as issues move further from Central Asia.

In the past, Pyongyang might have sought to pressure Washington with a provocative missile or even nuclear test. However, Kim has been on his best behavior since meeting Donald Trump three years ago. And the former continued to exercise restraint even after bilateral talks broke down.

It seems that North Korea, under almost complete isolation due to COVID-19, has remained barely afloat economically through food and energy aid from the People's Republic of China. Despite the latter's poor relationship with Washington, Beijing does not want to exacerbate tensions on the peninsula and at the moment appears to have sufficient leverage to insist that Kim behave responsibly.

The Afghan distraction might cause the Biden administration to ignore minor league disruptions, such as a short-range missile launch. However, a test of weapons able to reach the U.S. likely would receive exaggerated media attention and be treated as an outgrowth of America's loss of credibility. That could push the Biden administration toward its version of "fire and fury," including threats of preventative war. Which would be in no one's interest.

Still, some South Koreans are nervous. Members of the ruling party advocate taking new steps to strengthen the South's defenses. For instance, Rep. Song Young-gil argued: "The Afghanistan crisis should be used as an opportunity to further nurture the will and ability of a strong independent defense by recovering wartime" operational control of South Korean forces. Added Song: "We need not only the importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance, but also an attitude of self-defense that our country will protect itself."

The latter would be a positive development for both Seoul and Washington at any time. Such discussion further demonstrates the difference between Afghanistan and South Korea. Despite Americans' sacrifice of 20 years, thousands of lives, and trillions of dollars, the Afghan state and military remained Potemkin forces, ready, even seemingly eager, to be dismantled and dispersed

during the first military crisis in which American forces were not front and center. The ROK is very different.

Amid Afghanistan's shocking collapse, there was a tendency of some observers to treat it like a geopolitical tsunami was about to carry everything before it, including on the Korean peninsula. Yet it is increasingly evident that Afghanistan matters to Afghanistan, and not much more. Although the tragic humanitarian consequences will persist, there will be little change in Washington's military commitments elsewhere around the globe, including in South Korea.

Doug Bandow, now a new 1945 Contributing Editor, is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of several books, including 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.