

Southern Growing Pains

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In July 27, 1953, the guns fell silent in the Korean War. The so-called “Forgotten War,” begun just five years after the end of World War II, was over.

After Japan’s defeat, the U.S. and Soviet Union divided and occupied the peninsula. A ravaged world began rebuilding domestically. Defeated states began slowly reemerging internationally. Victorious combatants began searching for normality.

The Truman administration withdrew U.S. troops and refused to supply the South Korean government with heavy weapons because President Syngman Rhee threatened to march north. Moscow demonstrated no such sensitivities in dealing with North Korea’s Kim Il-sung, who invaded the South. Although the Pentagon had written off the peninsula, placing it outside America’s “defense perimeter,” Truman rushed troops to defend the Republic of Korea.

With allied forces on the brink of victory, Chinese “volunteers” intervened. Washington’s hope of a quick victory went aglimmering, and two and a half years of war followed. After tortuous and torturous negotiations, an armistice finally took effect.

Some 37,000 Americans died in combat. Another 815,000 combatants were killed. More than a half million Korean civilians died, and millions were displaced. Much of the peninsula was wrecked, especially in the North, where little of value was not destroyed by the allies’ devastating bombing campaign.

With no peace, the peninsula suffered through its own unique cold war, which occasionally flared hot. For years the Republic of Korea (ROK) was economically and politically stunted, an impoverished dictatorship. Without American support for Seoul, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) would have realized its ambition and swallowed its southern counterpart, likely with enthusiastic Soviet and Chinese support.

Seventy years later, U.S. troops remain on station in South Korea. However, the world has changed dramatically. Most obviously, the Cold War is over, and the Soviet Union is gone. Mao Zedong’s reign is but a horrid memory. Although the recent downturn in U.S. relations with both Beijing and Moscow led them to increase their support for the DPRK, neither is likely to go to war on Pyongyang’s behalf. The People’s Republic of China, enjoying extensive economic relations with the South, views the DPRK’s survival as better than a united Korea allied with America on China’s border. Moscow is equally cynical, uncomfortable with a nuclear North but

unwilling to aid efforts by the U.S. and its allies to contain and denuclearize the Kim family dynasty.

In this world why does the military status quo of seventy years ago persist? Why are nearly 30,000 U.S. personnel still acting as a tripwire for war in the South? Why does Seoul not provide whatever forces are necessary to deter and, if necessary, defeat North Korea? And why do successive American administrations endorse “extended deterrence,” which now risks the destruction of U.S. cities in any war with the North?

Of course, South Koreans are not the only foreigners enjoying defense welfare at the American people’s expense. The Japanese devote an even smaller share of their GDP to the military. A gaggle of Mideastern countries rely on implicit U.S. security guarantees. The Biden administration has become even more submissive than its predecessors, bruited the possibility of issuing a formal defense commitment to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Europeans also have been living off the Pentagon. The worst defense leeches are countries with large economies but low military expenditures, most notably Germany, Italy, and Spain. However, even France and the United Kingdom have maintained militaries more to police their old colonial empires than to confront great power enemies, most obviously Russia. As for Poland and the Baltics, if they fear Moscow as much as they claim, they should devote far more than NATO’s official 2 percent of GDP standard to the military to create territorial defenses that would exact a high price on any attacker. Instead, the Europeans have preferred to cultivate their welfare states while leaving their security largely in Washington’s hands.

Alas, South Korea, though devoting a larger share of its wealth to the military, is also dangerously dependent on Washington. During the 1960s the ROK’s economy began to take off. The South soon left the DPRK behind, but Seoul did not increase its military outlays accordingly. When I first visited in the late 1980s and inquired why, I was told that South Koreans had social needs, such as education, which prevented them from doing more. Unmentioned were American concerns. U.S. forces were simply expected to remain on station, apparently forever.

As the ROK economy continued to grow, this policy began to look vaguely ridiculous, with the well heeled and highly populated South cowering before the economic wreck to its north. If South Korea’s economy grew to the size of China’s the Seoul government undoubtedly would still insist that Washington maintain its defense treaty and military presence. After all, one can never be too careful.

On the conventional side South Koreans are well able to defend themselves. Might China and even Russia back a new North Korean invasion? Absent a larger war, such as the South joining the U.S. to battle the PRC over Taiwan, it is difficult to imagine a plausible *casus belli* for either Beijing or Moscow, whether in support of Pyongyang or on their own. So long as the ROK does not join a military campaign against them, they have no reason to add Seoul to their enemies’ lists.

Are there other reasons for the U.S. to garrison the peninsula? Much of the foreign policy establishment wants to use South Korea to help contain the PRC. However, a Chinese attack on the South is highly unlikely, at least unless Seoul intervenes against Beijing on Washington's behalf. Allowing U.S. military forces to use ROK bases against the PRC would turn the entire South into a missile target in any conflict. Aiding Washington in a war over Taiwan would give China a reason to back Pyongyang attacks on South Korea. For its own interest Seoul likely would tell the US "no thanks" to war with the PRC.

What of the DPRK's burgeoning nuclear arsenal? North Korea is an unpleasant actor, but Washington survived Maoist China and Islamist Pakistan developing nuclear weapons. Indeed, the U.S. decided against striking Beijing's nascent program and ultimately accepted Israel, India, and Pakistan as nuclear states. The North's bomb would not threaten the U.S. if Washington were not entangled in what amounts to the continuation of the peninsula's civil war. Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un is not suicidal, hoping to leave this world atop a radioactive funeral pyre.

To increase America's security Washington should end its defense commitment to, and especially nuclear cover for, the South. Yet the U.S. foreign policy establishment is determined to maintain extended deterrence, that is, risking American cities to protect Seoul. Indeed, decades ago Washington foreclosed a South Korean defense, pressing President Park Chung-hee to drop his nuclear weapons program. This policy worked so long as Pyongyang did not have the means to threaten the U.S. homeland. However, the North's development of intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of targeting North America is transforming the issue. Nothing at stake in the Korean peninsula warrants risking the lives of hundreds of thousands or potentially millions of Americans.

The U.S. should set a certain departure date, while giving the ROK time to bolster its own military in response. Instead of maintaining its infamous nuclear umbrella, Washington should drop its objections to Seoul creating its own deterrent. U.S. disengagement wouldn't mean the two countries should not continue to cooperate to advance shared interests. But America need not subsidize the ROK's defense to do so. Washington's defense shield allowed South Korea to develop and succeed. Seoul should take over the responsibilities of a fully developed and sovereign state and provide for its own security, including against nuclear threats.

No doubt, America's endless war lobby would fight any withdrawal. However, Washington's fiscal irresponsibility is likely to force military retrenchment. America's national debt held by the public is almost 100 percent of GDP, nearing the historic record set in 1946, after the end of the world's worst conflict. With fiscal responsibility a rarity on Capitol Hill, that burden is expected to nearly double by mid-century. Eventually Washington will have to set priorities and make choices. Americans are unlikely to place the ease and comfort of purported "allies" such as the ROK above their own welfare.

After seventy years, it is time to bring America's troops home from the ROK. South Koreans are all grown up. It's time they act like adults in providing for their own security.

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