

The American Conservative

Must South Korea Choose Between the US and China?

Doug Bandow

March 9, 2023

As the incipient Cold War between the U.S. and China slides toward a deep freeze, Washington is pushing its friends to choose. The People's Republic of China, too, is challenging nations that seek to balance relations between Beijing and Washington.

Perhaps no country is more uncomfortable than the Republic of Korea. American policymakers and advisors seeking to contain the PRC are unhappy with the slightest deviation from Washington's will. For instance, Francis Fukuyama, who once insisted that history had ended, now believes that destiny leaves the ROK with no freedom of action: "A democracy like Korea cannot pretend that it is somehow in between the United States and China. It has to make the decision that it is going to be on the side of democracy."

Alas, things are not nearly so simple. After all, Washington is only kind of "for" democracy, and only sometimes—when the U.S. doesn't have other important interests at stake. Moreover, it's easy for an American intellectual, living well half a world away, to tell Asian nations to stand firm against their much larger neighbor. Contra Fukuyama's apparent assumption, their chief responsibility is to their own people, not to Washington.

Especially with the U.S. thoughtlessly racing to confront Beijing on multiple fronts. China is much more robust than was the Soviet Union, a decrepit Third World state with nuclear weapons. The PRC is a true global power and potential peer competitor to Washington. Indeed, the former is well-integrated in the global economy, commercially much more important to its neighbors and many other nations than is America.

Containing China by force, no easy feat from halfway around the world, brings to mind the year 1905, when the Russian Empire sent its Atlantic fleet on a death ride into the Pacific, where its ships were promptly sunk by Japan. What most sets America apart from that experience is its local allies, which could aid Washington with their forces and especially bases.

It is one thing for American allies in East Asia to go to war against Beijing to protect themselves. It is quite another to take on China at America's direction for another state, one that they do not recognize, and which is a special PRC target. Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines all have toughened their rhetoric toward Beijing, but none has committed to back America in a war with China over Taiwan. And whatever officials say today in peacetime might not be what their populations would demand if war loomed.

Of course, as Fukuyama demonstrated, temporizing does not go over well in Washington. The ever-clamorous war party has made the PRC its principal *bête noire*. China must be unfriended diplomatically, isolated politically, crippled economically, and overpowered militarily, no easy task. Which is why Washington wants its allies and friends alongside in what for them could be a real rather than mythical *Gotterdamerung*.

Despite Washington's fear-mongering, China will not inevitably rule over anyone. It faces enormous challenges, particularly an accelerating demographic crisis. The PRC's population will shrink this year, potentially allowing India to grab the pole position; it will shrink more in the future. Moreover, while the mainland is essentially unconquerable, demonstrated by Japan's failed invasion during World War II, Beijing is vulnerable to any interruption in its ocean-bound commerce. Nor has China demonstrated any interest in ruling over non-Chinese populations, a nightmare project for a Han elite that frets about the slightest hint of ethnic diversity.

Moreover, Beijing's weaker neighbors could adopt its military strategy of anti-access/area denial against the U.S., raising the price for any attempted aggression. Indeed, despite widespread opposition to nuclear proliferation, the spread of nuclear weapons in Asia might be the most effective way to curb Chinese ambitions. The many problems with such a course are obvious, but dealing with the PRC ultimately requires choosing the best of bad options.

With the future uncertain, America's allies and friends can ill afford to turn Beijing into an enemy. All are dependent on the PRC commercially and vulnerable to it militarily. Beijing already has demonstrated its willingness to respond sharply to opposition. China will always be near, while the U.S. is far away and will eventually leave.

The ROK, which trades more with China than with the U.S. and Japan combined, is particularly vulnerable, having already suffered economically during the contretemps over Seoul's 2017 THAAD deployment. Protests continue against the missile system. Reported the New York Times: "For those who oppose it, it is a reminder of the dangers of being drawn into a rivalry between two major powers."

The security consequences could be even worse. Today Seoul and Beijing have no territorial disputes and no cause for war. The South's biggest military concern is North Korea, over which Beijing has some influence, and which the latter can use for good or ill.

Unfortunately, by all appearances, the PRC has largely abandoned efforts to press North Korean denuclearization. Beijing could turn actively hostile in a crisis. Today China almost certainly would oppose an invasion of the ROK. But if locked in a shooting war with America, the PRC might back a North Korean attack to distract Washington and divide allied forces. Moreover,

South Korean military facilities would be targeted by Chinese missile attacks to prevent their use by U.S. forces. If Seoul and other allied states committed to war on Washington's command, Beijing would have an incentive to strike preemptively if conflict loomed.

Hence ROK President Yoon Suk-yeol's refusal to make a firm commitment to Washington. He appears to have edged back from the U.S. on THAAD deployments, Quad membership, semiconductor chips, and Taiwan's defense. Though Yoon's promises and policies originally "seemed to make a hardline turn possible...nine months into his term," the Quincy Institute's James Park noted, "Yoon looks far from a China hawk."

That doesn't mean Seoul trusts China. Still, from America's standpoint, Fukuyama has a point. The badly overstretched U.S. government is defending a prosperous, populous ally that, seventy years after the conclusion of the Korean War, should be able to protect itself. With more than fifty times the GDP, twice the population, and a vast technological lead over North Korea, as well as a dominant global presence, why does Seoul clamor for American protection? Refusing to back an important U.S. security interest looks simultaneously cheap, churlish, and ungrateful.

But the alliance is Washington's main bargaining chip. To force the issue, a U.S. administration must put its support for Seoul in doubt. Otherwise, why should South Korean officials risk their own security? Despite the standard claim that the alliance is in America's interest, Washington is defending the ROK against indeterminate but potentially serious threats. The South is not defending America against anything. The U.S. would require Seoul's unlikely permission to use the latter's bases for any non-South Korean contingency, including conflict with China.

This has always been a problem with the "dual use" argument advanced by American policymakers to justify doing more to defend South Korea even if the latter did less in response. They believed the relationship extended Washington's reach and helped contain the PRC. But Seoul never agreed to that deal.

During the Cold War, especially as the South recovered economically and struggled politically after the Korean War, America emphasized the ROK's defense from the North. The Soviet Union showed little interest in the Asia-Pacific, which for it was a secondary theater. Mao's China possessed the will but lacked the ability to do much regional damage. Thus, the alliance focused on Kim Il-sung's legions. (Seoul also imagined America providing a shield against a revived Japan, but Tokyo had no appetite for another war of conquest against anyone.)

Although Beijing's rise added a serious new potential military contingency, the ROK remained an unlikely target. Attempting to occupy the peninsula would be a practical nightmare, resisted by both North and South. War also would destroy an important economic partner. No doubt, Seoul appreciates the U.S. military presence as an additional deterrent to unlikely Chinese aggression. But that does not mean the ROK is willing to turn itself into an enemy of the modern Middle Kingdom to assist Taiwan.

What, then, would be necessary to win Seoul's consent—in advance, so the U.S. could add forces, position materiel, and plan operations today? Certainly more than a request, and more

than a demand. Would an ultimatum, backed by a threat to withdraw U.S. troops and/or end the alliance force the South to submit? Or would such an approach drive the ROK away, perhaps with a plan to develop nuclear weapons? This would be a high stakes game of geopolitical chicken that could wreck a long-standing relationship.

Seoul is merely the most exposed U.S. ally determined to thread an ever-smaller needle and preserve both economic ties with China and security relationship with America. That is a common position in Asia. Even India, involved in deadly border combat with the PRC, is determined to avoid a rupture in relations with Beijing and eschews any formal security arrangement with America. Similarly, Europe, though growing more critical of Chinese behavior, has so far been unwilling to join in Washington's increasingly brutal crusade to gut the PRC economy, let alone wage war over Taiwan. Nor will Beijing be easily driven even from Latin America, despite Washington's continued political and military dominance in that region.

Washington's ability to force friends to follow its policies, especially against the PRC, will continue to diminish. Beijing has few international friends, but no one wants to be its enemy. The U.S. must prove that it deserves to lead and that it is in other nations' interests to follow.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.