

Fearing Trump, South Korea Prepares to Pay Its Fair Share

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The possibility of Donald Trump returning to the Oval Office has set off hysterical wailing across the Atlantic and Pacific. American allies used to cheap-riding on the U.S. for their defense fear a second Trump administration would either demand greater contribution or drop Washington's defense guarantee entirely.

Although European complaints about the possible loss of American military welfare have received the most public attention in recent weeks, South Korean officials are no less concerned about having to take over responsibility for their nation's defense. Hence the imminent start of negotiations over the Special Measures Agreement, or "host nation support" for the U.S. garrison in the South.

The settlement won't take effect until 2026. The two governments are rushing the talks to lock in a sweet deal for the Republic of Korea in case Trump wins in November. During his administration, he set off a tsunami of South Korean whining and whinging by threatening to withdraw American troops if the ROK didn't contribute substantially more for Pentagon protection. Negotiations broke off and the newly installed Biden administration immediately took Seoul's side, preserving the generous U.S. defense subsidy. Undoubtedly, American taxpayers will again get a raw deal.

Unfortunately, the alliance costs more than money, and the risks for America are steadily increasing. The Korean War was a terrible, bloody affair. But at least the battlefield was an ocean away from the U.S. Until recently, a renewed conflict would also have been fought "over there," limiting Americans' exposure. Despite the near certainty that the allies would prevail, casualties probably would be very high, much greater than in the Iraq or Afghan campaigns. Nevertheless, the U.S. homeland would remain secure.

No longer. First, diplomacy on the peninsula is dead, having suffered an apparently mortal wound with the failure of the 2019 Trump-Kim summit. Since then, talks between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and both Washington and Seoul have ceased. The Biden administration's desperate begging for Pyongyang to engage have been contemptuously rebuffed. Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un's sister referred to a statement of President Joe Biden's as a "nonsensical remark from the person in his dotage." (Which, in truth, characterizes most of what the president says these days.)

Even worse has been the DPRK's treatment of South Korea. Pyongyang long viewed the Koreans as one nation, with the peninsula's southern lands to be eventually "liberated." Kim recently

abandoned settled policy and proposed revising the North's constitution to define the ROK as his nation's "primary foe and invariable principal enemy." Although Kim disclaimed any intention to initiate hostilities against the South Koreans, he set "national policy to occupy their territory in the event of" an undefined "contingency."

If the issue was only bluster, no one would take much notice. North Korea has long been the world's number one in issuing insults against its foes. Yet Pyongyang now can count on Chinese support. Although Beijing long opposed the North's nuclear ambitions, it evidently sees Washington's containment policy toward the People's Republic of China as a greater threat. Thus, the PRC has shown no willingness to back U.S. sanctions or other coercive measures, despite the Biden administration's pious claims that they are in Beijing's interest. Indeed, Biden's repeated statements that he would defend Taiwan has given China a possible reason to back North Korean military action against the South.

Perhaps even worse, the North has gone all in with Russia, reviving a relationship that was near moribund in recent years. North Korea is thought to have provided substantial shipments of artillery shells for Moscow's use in Ukraine. In return Pyongyang can expect Russia to shield it from the impact of sanctions and reward it financially. Much more is possible, including technical aid in missile and nuclear development. Such assistance would be highly provocative, but the U.S. and its European allies have provided advanced weapons to Kiev that have caused tens of thousands of Russian deaths. Moscow might believe that turnabout is fair play.

As tensions have risen, so has talk of war. Some Korea scholars fear that Kim might be planning military action of some kind, contending that "the situation on the Korean Peninsula is more dangerous than it has been at any time since early June 1950." Their fears have gone mainstream. Reported the New York Times: "That new drumbeat of threats, while the United States and its allies have been preoccupied with the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, has set foreign officials and analysts wondering whether the North's leader, Kim Jong-un, has moved beyond posturing and is planning to assert more military force."

Provocations appear on the rise. In February, Pyongyang staged an artillery exercise near disputed islands west of the peninsula, triggering a South Korean drill in response. The actions revived memories of a deadly North Korean assault in 2010 that killed four ROK civilians.

Despite the perhaps predictable fear-mongering, Kim appears to be fully rational, if sadly brutal. The North's Supreme Leader explained, "As long as nuclear weapons exist on Earth, and imperialism and the anti-North Korean maneuvers of the U.S. and its followers remain, our road to strengthening our nuclear force will never end."

War would be a wild gamble for his regime and dynasty. China has shown no interest in fomenting armed conflict, Russia wouldn't benefit from doing so and is busy in Ukraine. The U.S. remains capable of massive retaliation and, as yet the DPRK probably can't target the American mainland. Most importantly, Kim is unlikely to empty his ammunition stocks for Moscow's war if he is planning one of his own.

Still, no one should feel comfortable. Kim claimed that he “does not want war, but will not avoid it.” And Kim has set forth a formidable arms development program, topped by plans to deploy tactical nukes, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and multiple independently targeted reentry vehicles (MIRVs). If successful, Kim will possess an arsenal that will allow him to both use nuclear weapons on the battlefield and target the American homeland.

Washington can ill afford to add to its current defense burdens. The U.S. faces manifold social problems, lagging domestic investment, burgeoning entitlement programs, and rising federal deficits. It still possesses the world’s most powerful military but will find the cost of acting as globocop and dispensing defense welfare to populous and prosperous allies around the world ever tougher to bear.

Moreover, in a few years any war would no longer likely remain on the Korean peninsula, or at least in Northeast Asia. Any American president would have to ask whether South Korea was worth risking the American homeland. Of course, Washington retains an overwhelming nuclear deterrent, so a first strike on the U.S. would result in the DPRK’s destruction. However, Pyongyang could threaten to inaugurate Armageddon if Washington entered a Second Korean War and threatened to defeat and occupy the North, overthrowing the Kim regime. The DPRK might even use tactical nukes in battle and dare the U.S. to respond. Would an American president decide that the ROK’s defense was worth the loss of one or more U.S. cities and hundreds of thousands or even millions of Americans?

Recognizing that South Koreans are understandably skeptical that the answer is yes, Washington has been desperately trying to convince them that so-called “extended deterrence” remains viable. Last year the two governments issued the so-called Washington Declaration, by which U.S. officials promised to allow the immolation of America’s cities and slaughter of America’s citizens if things go bad on the peninsula. It’s a hard sell because even South Koreans recognize that this is an irrational policy. How many of *them* would voluntarily risk *their* territory and population to save the U.S.? The policy makes no more sense for Americans.

Although Trump’s push for a dramatic increase in host nation payments, to some \$5 billion annually, was better than the status quo, it wouldn’t justify the current one-sided “Mutual Defense Treaty.” American military personnel shouldn’t be rented out, even to wealthy friends. Washington should put its money and people’s lives on the line only when Americans have something vital at stake. They don’t in Korea. That doesn’t mean a conflict wouldn’t be truly awful, a humanitarian tragedy, economic disaster, and geopolitical challenge. But Americans would remain secure, though unsettled. The impact of the war wouldn’t justify the costs of intervening, especially against a nuclear North Korea.

As unsettling as this conclusion might seem, there is good news: the ROK. It required aid to survive North Korea’s initial invasion and later threats, but took off economically in the 1960s; today it enjoys a GDP more than 50 times that of the DPRK. The South also has a vast technological edge, twice the population, and far greater international support. Obviously, the ROK could defend itself from the North if it chose to do so.

Fear of North Korea, concern about China, and worries over U.S. abandonment have spurred Seoul to spend more on its own defense, even under the previous, liberal Moon administration. Although the North enjoys a quantitative edge, South Korea possesses an increasingly competent and sophisticated military. Today the ROK is among the world's top ten military spenders. But it could do much more.

The most complicated issue is nuclear deterrence, but there is strong public support in the South for developing its own nuclear weapons. There also is increasing political backing. In fact, last year ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol observed that “if the issue becomes more serious, we could acquire our own nuclear weapons, such as deploying tactical nuclear weapons here in ROK.”

This possibility triggers hysteria among nonproliferation advocates, but it is more important for America to end extended deterrence, and the resulting nuclear threat to the U.S., than it is to enforce nuclear nonproliferation. Washington has declared failure in the past—regarding India, Israel, and Pakistan, most obviously. Rather than imperil relations in a hopeless quest to reverse the irreversible, the U.S. has accommodated new international powers. North Korea is an acknowledged, if not formally recognized, nuclear power. Why not accept the South into the club? This might not be a good solution, but it increasingly looks like the best available.

Which ties back to the latest SMA negotiation. Instead of forging ahead, as if the alliance is immutable and permanent, the U.S. and ROK should transform it into a cooperative agreement between equals. After which America's troop presence would be phased out. Host nation support should be adjusted accordingly, starting high and dropping to zero when the last American comes home.

There is much to criticize about Donald Trump's presidency. Nevertheless, he had a better understanding of the Korean peninsula than did his predecessors or successor. It was stupid not to engage the North for decades. It was equally stupid to subsidize the South for decades. Before the onset of the latest SMA negotiations would be a good time to rethink the alliance's future. And stop expecting Americans to defend South Koreans.

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