



Even With Seoul Paying More, America Can't Afford to Defend South Korea

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The Biden administration has finally ended the contentious negotiations begun by its predecessor with Seoul over the Special Measures Agreement, which governs host nation support for the U.S. military presence in South Korea. The South Korean government has agreed to increase its payment to \$1 billion annually, a 13.9 percent increase.

That seemingly sizable increase is a great deal for the South, which would have to spend tens of billions of dollars more on its own defense without U.S. support. No wonder the South Koreans were happy, given how much of a climbdown that was from the position of former U.S. President Donald Trump, who began the process by demanding \$5 billion annually. South Korea's foreign ministry announced: "By smoothly addressing the key pending alliance issue early on after the launch of the Biden administration, South Korea and the United States demonstrated the robustness of the firm alliance."

In contrast, the result is a bad deal for the United States. The agreement merely offsets some deployment costs. It does not address the much larger expense for Americans of adding force structure to protect the South. Every additional military commitment requires a bigger military—additional carriers, air wings, infantry and armored divisions, Marines, and more.

Obviously, Washington must spend on its own behalf. However, defense is reasonably easy for a country blessed with oceans to the east and west and pacific neighbors to the north and south. Deterring attack is simpler for the United States than for most other countries. Most of America's military budget goes for what is effectively *offense*, to defend scores of other states, many prosperous and populous, others irrelevant to American security. Despite the Biden administration's mantra about "strengthening alliances," not all allies are equal or even worthwhile. Even good relationships should not be forever amid changing circumstances—witness the breakup of the "united nations" that won World War II.

To his credit, Trump challenged the bipartisan foreign-policy establishment's treatment of alliance as a sacred cow. Unfortunately, he proved incapable of addressing the issues raised with

even a modicum of civility, consistency, and intelligence, meaning his changes—even potentially good ones—were swept away.

The election of President Joe Biden convinced some countries that the good old days had returned. However, the world has changed. Populist political passions still swirl about the United States. Moreover, America's current financial travails demonstrate the importance of adjusting foreign policy to circumstances. The United States is functionally broke.

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) released its latest fiscal assessment in early March. The CBO predicted a deficit of \$2.3 trillion this year, following \$3.1 trillion last year. Red ink in 2021 alone would amount to 10.3 percent of GDP. Although deficits will drop as the pandemic's impact recedes, the fiscal relief will only be temporary. As the agency says, "Deficits increase further in subsequent decades, from 5.7 percent of GDP in 2031 to 13.3 percent by 2051—exceeding their 50-year average of 3.3 percent of GDP in each year during that period."

Unsurprisingly, the economic impact of the growing mountain of debt will be significant. According to the CBO: "By the end of 2021, federal debt held by the public is projected to equal 102 percent of GDP. Debt would reach 107 percent of GDP (surpassing its historical high) in 2031 and would almost double to 202 percent of GDP by 2051."

The best-case scenario is bad: sharply increased interest payments. Much worse would be financial crisis. Warned the agency: "Debt that is high and rising as a percentage of GDP boosts federal and private borrowing costs, slows the growth of economic output, and increases interest payments abroad. A growing debt burden could increase the risk of a fiscal crisis and higher inflation as well as undermine confidence in the U.S. dollar, making it more costly to finance public and private activity in international markets." Imagine a repeat of the 2008 financial or 2020 coronavirus crises, but without any room for Washington to borrow to meet emergency needs.

Yet just a few days after the CBO released its report, Congress passed the COVID-19 relief bill. The agency reported that the legislation would raise this year's deficit by \$1.2 trillion, for a total of \$3.3 trillion. A half-trillion dollars would be added to the 2022 deficit, and lesser amounts in following years. Those numbers will rise further as the president tries to make good on the many expensive campaign promises he made to win election.

The United States cannot continue piling costly obligation upon costly obligation. Priorities will need to be set; tough decisions will have to be made. That will require policymakers to rethink security commitments once regarded as sacrosanct. The American public is tired of needless wars of choice in the Middle East, and so, eventually, after much pain and loss, the Defense Department appears to be ditching them. When forced to choose between shoring up America's major social programs, such as Medicare and Social Security, and underwriting the defense of allies around the globe, Americans are likely to turn further inward. Europe's widespread indifference to defense already triggers irritation and anger in Washington.

Then there is South Korea. After the Trump hiccup, both sides have reaffirmed their commitment the status quo, essentially asserting that whatever has been must ever be. The alliance is to go on as ever before.

Yet everything has changed dramatically since 1953, when the Mutual Defense Treaty was signed. Most dramatically, South Korea has raced past its neighbor. With more than 50 times the GDP and twice the population of North Korea, as well as a dramatic technological edge and far more international partners and friends, South Korea is well able to handle its conventional defense—to deter a North Korean attack and defeat such an effort if attempted. Without historical ties, who in Washington would be lobbying to forge such a defense pact today? Inertia more than interest causes Washington to station nearly 30,000 personnel on the peninsula.

Of course, proposals to adjust the alliance to reflect reality horrifies South Koreans, who understandably enjoy their cheap ride. However, the United States should stop treating allied defense as a foreign welfare program that Washington provides because it can. Rather, allied support should be a form of domestic defense that Washington supplies because it must.

There are no special circumstances that require the alliance to be preserved as is. The South is not nearly as vulnerable to attack as it was in 1950. Beijing and Moscow might still offer a degree of economic and political support for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, but neither would back another invasion or rescue the North from an attack gone bad, as they may have 70 years ago. Nor does the peninsula have special status today. For instance, no one views U.S. defense of South Korea as being the key to preventing Russia from overrunning Europe.

Belief that the U.S. garrison has a dual use, defending both the South and the rest of East Asia, is an American fantasy and a South Korean nightmare. There are few serious military contingencies not involving China in which the United States might intervene, and none of them, such as Myanmar's worsening coup-induced imbroglio, warrants U.S. military involvement.

More important, Seoul, which refused to even criticize China over Hong Kong, is not going to make war on Beijing unless South Korean territory is directly threatened, which isn't likely. The South will not allow itself to be dragged into war by allowing America to turn the peninsula into a battleground. South Koreans know the United States will go home at some point, while China will be a neighbor forever.

Of course, there has been much discussion of cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin called alliances “force multipliers.” Regional collaboration could prove useful but does not depend on America's willingness to defend South Korea. Instead, the latter's improved capabilities have created new possibilities. Better the two countries work together as equal partners, which requires Seoul to handle its own defense, than as dominant and submissive participants, as over the last seven decades. If the only way for Washington to win extra cooperation is by paying to defend Seoul, then the price is too high.

Concern over “credibility” has become a catchall argument used to paralyze U.S. policy. What has ever been must ever be, it is argued, lest anyone anywhere doubt that the United States will

continue to defend them. Actually, such uncertainty is a useful prod for allies to do more for themselves: “Reassuring” Asians and Europeans while begging them to spend more is a confused, self-defeating approach that has left wealthy states unnecessarily dependent on America. Circumstances change over time, warranting adjustment in commitments. Other nations routinely change their policies. They should not begrudge the United States doing the same.

Doubts about the viability of the alliance will become acute if the North develops a survivable nuclear deterrent capable of hitting the United States. At that point, the present alliance will become untenable, irrespective of budget issues. Involvement in even what began as a conventional war on the peninsula would become far too risky for America. If the North found itself at the point of being overrun, as in the Korean War, it could threaten nuclear Armageddon unless Washington backed off. Any sane U.S. president would have no choice but to do so, as there is nothing at stake in the peninsula that would warrant sacrificing American cities.

Washington officials constantly talk of North Korea as a threat to the United States. It is not. North Korea is a threat to South Korea and the U.S.-South Korean alliance, which is very different. That can be easily remedied by the United States—by leaving the ever-stronger South to take over its own defense.

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