



Trump deserves credit for talking about S. Korea troop deployment: Bandow

As Trump nears election, Doug Bandow of CATO reflects on issue of U.S. troop deployments in Korea

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It's a strange time to have non-interventionist views toward the Korean Peninsula.

Long a minority viewpoint, the idea that the U.S. should start pulling back from the inter-Korean standoff has an unexpected ally in Republican nominee Donald Trump. In stark contrast to other Republicans' calls to remain stalwart defenders of U.S. allies, Trump has openly declared that South Korea and others should bear more of the costs for their own protection, or the U.S. should start pulling back.

The irony of this is that Washington, in general, is particularly hawkish toward the North now, with sanctions bills that may have been low priority for previous sessions of Congress meeting overwhelming bipartisan approval this year. As such, normally dovish quarters such as the avowed democratic socialist Bernie Sanders and Gary Johnson, nominee of the Libertarian Party – a party particularly attuned to non-interventionist ideas – have declared North Korea the preeminent threat to America, if not global stability.

One long-time proponent of the non-interventionist line, especially as regarding North Korea, has been Doug Bandow, who served as an adviser to former President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Having long argued – through his writing at the Cato Institute, the *National Interest*, *Forbes* and elsewhere – that South Korea is more than capable of defending itself and that the U.S. can no longer afford to defend countries around the world, Bandow credits Trump for raising issues no other candidate is willing to. Yet he also indicates that there is room for doubt regarding Trump's temperament and willingness to follow through on his proposals.

Bandow also told *NK News* that Gary Johnson's approach to the North may sound more aggressive than among libertarians past, but that he is actually noting that China has interests in the peninsula that cannot be ignored. He also predicted that a Hillary Clinton administration would not be able to maintain the Obama administration's "strategic patience" approach should Kim Jong Un's weapons proliferation continue.

NK News: Do you think North Korea is getting more attention during this election cycle than in previous ones?

Bandow: Probably a bit more, though the focus has been much more so on Russia, ISIS, those sorts of issues, but I think the North Koreans have gotten mentioned.

NK News: Some of the attention Donald Trump has captured has been due to his Korea positions, whether it's his threat to reduce the U.S. commitment in that part of the world, or his suggestion of meeting Kim Jong Un. Do you think he'd follow through with those promises if elected?

Bandow: That of course is a big question, no one really knows. He's talked a lot over the years about the issue of South Korea taking advantage of the U.S. I mean, he's done the same about Europe, so that's something that seems very much a belief of his.

His comments on Kim were very interesting. Would he do that against the advice of everyone, would he look for people who shared his opinion? None of us have a good sense for that. But it does suggest he is willing to look outside of the conventional wisdom.

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NK News: Do you see the Clinton administration continuing the Obama approach on North Korea?

Bandow: That that would be the starting point but it would be hard for her to carry on a policy of essentially not engaging if North Korea continues to build nuclear weapons.

The Obama administration to some degree has said, "We won't talk to you unless you promise to start denuclearizing." If that's not going to happen, it's hard to imagine that Hillary Clinton would feel comfortable spending another eight years as a repeat of the last eight where North Korea simply continues with its weapons programs and at the end of another eight years perhaps they have probably another, who knows, 40 weapons or whatever one might estimate.

NK News: If last year's Iran deal pays dividends in the coming years, would a Clinton administration be more willing to focus on the North?

Bandow: Yes, though I think that everyone would view them as being different from Iran. Iran, at least as far we can tell did not have nuclear weapons, it was simply had a program that might create them. North Korea, having them, is in a very different position. So I don't think engaging the North, they'd have the same expectation of outcome.

The real interesting question would be (whether Clinton and Trump would) be interested in engaging China more. Trump has very explicitly said, "China could do this, I will make them do it," while I assume that Hillary Clinton would probably try to expand upon the current administration's attempt to get the Chinese more involved.

NK News: Meanwhile the Libertarian Party candidate, Gary Johnson, has been getting more attention than usual this year. His position on North Korea is different from that party's past nominees, in that he indicates that the U.S. and China can cooperate to end the North Korean threat.

Bandow: Well, if you want to engage China, the only way you are going to be able to do so is certainly if you promise that U.S. forces would not be on the Diaoyu (the Chinese name for the disputed islands which Japan calls the Senkaku). And in practice, it probably would require a commitment to have those forces out of any re-unified Korea.

Engaging China requires us to acknowledge their interest – it doesn't matter whether we like them or not – the point is China does have what it views as a pretty substantial interest in terms of not turning a unified Korea into a containment vessel for the United States and is concerned about collapse, among many things. We'd have to engage that; I think a big part of that is a question of America's role in a re-unified Korea.

Johnson is right that we have to bring that into it; that simply telling them what we want isn't going to get us anywhere; that we have to be talking about these other things that clearly bother them, concern them, have an impact on their policy.

NK News: Do you think the U.S. should consider a one-on-one summit between the U.S. president and Kim Jong Un?

Bandow: I certainly wouldn't start there. To me, you get a one-on-one summit if, in fact, you have come to announce you are giving up your nuclear weapons. I think that engagement should be much more at a diplomatic level, before even a (U.S.) secretary of state (meeting). If there was something substantial potentially achieved, you might send a secretary of state there as we've done before. I think that a president-to-Kim Jong Un summit would be at the end. (Chinese President) Xi Jinping has yet to meet Kim Jong Un!

I would not hold out at the start the U.S. having a summit like that. What I would hold out is let's start talking and if things develop, we can go from there and see where it goes. I wouldn't preclude anything, but I certainly would not lead with that.

NK News: Do you think the U.S. should start insisting that its allies pay more of the cost, or else Washington starts reducing its support?

Bandow: I would, frankly, turn it around. My view is the U.S. over time should withdraw, in which case I think they are very likely to increase their share of defense spending.

To my mind, we live in a world, 60-70 years on – and of course it's not just Asia, it is Europe – where the U.S. is defending countries who are able to do substantially more if not everything on their own defense. They don't have an incentive to do so as long as we do it for them. And trying to badger them, insist, demand; that poisons a relationship that's so very hard to achieve. You see that in Europe where it's kind of (an) incremental step up, same thing in Japan, slight movement up maybe with the recent election, (with) South Korea the same thing.

So Trump understands there is an important issue there. I don't think he has the mechanics, the solution right, but to his credit, he does recognize it as a problem.

NK News: Are there steps in between full withdrawal and the status quo that you'd find acceptable?

Bandow: I think you do it over time, that is, you don't leave tomorrow. What you do is you make it clear to our allies that their security really is up to them. I think you get the important issue is that you keep the nuclear umbrella.

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Some of these things aren't just particularly easy to sort out, but I don't see any reason, for example, for a ground deployment on South Korea. South Korea has a larger GDP and population than the North, I fail to understand why they cannot match if not over-match conventional forces from North Korea.

The issue of China is going to remain extraordinarily difficult but that's again, about who should be worrying about and defending the Senkaku islands, the Diayous, whichever you want to use, or other territories. For the United States to be at risk for essentially everyone around the globe is a burden that made sense after World War II or after the Korean War, (but) it does not make sense 60-70 years on.

The U.S. simply can't afford that kind of burden, especially in the coming years with the issue of entitlements, the baby boom generation retiring; the U.S. faces extraordinary fiscal problems that will make it very difficult to maintain advanced deployments around the world with the ability to project power against a great power in its own neighborhood. That's extraordinarily expensive and dangerous.

NK News: But would the U.S. still play a role in the security of those areas?

Bandow: Certainly the U.S. should make clear and it should watch – in the sense of an offshore balance, in the sense of being concerned about the region – for problems which its friends and allies are not able to contain. The U.S. does not want a kind of hegemonic power threatening to the United States, to dominate Asia or certainly Eurasia, I think that's what the Cold War was fundamentally about.

We certainly wouldn't want to see that with China. At the moment I don't see that as being a significant danger from China. China is surrounded by countries with which it has fought wars; I mean, it has been at war at one time or another with Russia, with India, with Vietnam, in Korea, with Japan, its security environment is not an easy one. So a lot of this I think is a question of a regional balance and countries kind of, if not quite containing at least constraining Chinese activity, where the U.S. can be a back-up to that but should not be on the front lines for that.

An easy (first step) would be to withdraw our ground forces and leave air and naval unit status, make clear to them that the U.S. is going to play a role on the power projection side. But in terms of any kind of a ground defense for either country, that really should come from those countries themselves. They are capable. That puts an unnecessary burden on the U.S. where our relative advantage, our comparative advantage I would argue, would be navy and air, and there is no reason to provide ground forces where they in fact could do so.

NK News: South Korea's Park administration has had some success recently in firming up ties with some of the North's partners in Africa and elsewhere, in some cases causing them to break off cooperation with the North. Do you think that pressure is going to pay off later, in terms of changing the North's behavior?

Bandow: I think it's a long-term strategy and they have made some success with the African allies to the North. (But) all of this strikes me as being a bit marginal, that is, the Kim regime will not rise or fall based upon whether it has a relationship with Uganda or whatever other country might float along.

Nevertheless, there is an advantage in the sense of making North Korea pay a price; that it's not going to be so easy, they are going to see their options constrained – they certainly seem quite concerned about and irritated by the United Nations.

The advantage of that is, again, it brings in more than just the usual suspects. I mean, the UN theoretically is representative of all nations, having it as an another level of criticism that is harder for the North to dodge in a way they can say, "Well, that's just the U.S. and its lackeys" or something. I wouldn't oversell it, but I think it's a useful policy.

NK News: Do you see any reason for optimism?

Bandow: I don't see much reason – I suppose – for optimism. I would say there is pessimism that there is much of a chance at all of convincing them to give up their nuclear weapons. And I think there's a fairly common feeling that the ship has sailed. Whether it was ever available, ever a possibility, it's hard to imagine Kim would ever give that up.

And along with that is the concern about some of the unique aspects of this kind of government. Certainly, Kim seems younger, more impulsive and certainly more ruthless. I don't think that makes him suicidal, but I think it makes people nervous about the question of a mistake, of misjudgment that could be there. And especially the sense of whether his objectives in terms of North Korea in terms of aggrandizement. He seems fully committed to continuing forward with all the weapons programs at the same time as talking about improving the economy. So the one hope is he is serious on the economic side.