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## Toward A New Allied Relationship With South Korea

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South Korean President Moon Jae-in is heading to the U.S. later this month. His agenda will likely be his standard ask: greater security cooperation with America, increased opportunity to deal with North Korea. Although the Republic of Korea desires the presence of U.S. troops, defense dependence comes at a price. Washington inevitably dominates the relationship, putting South Korean interests second, if that.

If the South took over its own defense it could set its own policies. That would be more costly, to be sure, but would allow Seoul to chart an independent course toward North Korea. The U.S. and South Korea then could cooperate as equals on matters of mutual interest.

For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic remains deadly and disruptive. The ROK handled the initial infection wave better than America. However, Washington has had greater success with vaccinations. So far only about 6.5 percent of South Koreans have received at least one vaccination shot, compared to more than 40 percent in America. Virologist Paik Soon-young warned that “We need to admit herd immunity is probably unattainable at this pace.”

This month Seoul faces what it calls a “dry spell” while waiting for more drug shipments. So South Korean officials have asked the U.S. for help. The South would like a vaccine “loan,” receiving doses now to be replaced after South Korea acquires more.

In late April ROK Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong told journalists: “We have been stressing to the United States that ‘A friend in need is a friend indeed’.” His nation, he added, sent its assistance, “in the spirit of the special South Korea-U.S. alliance.” So, “We are hoping that the United States will help us out with the challenges we are facing with the vaccines, based on the solidarity we demonstrated last year.”

Of course, the South is not the only country calling Washington for assistance. India is in desperate straits. Europe only recently began to ramp up inoculations. Many other nations have barely begun vaccination campaigns. However, the ROK stands out for several reasons. The country's population, 51.3 million, is small enough for the U.S. to make a significant difference. South Korea has demonstrated that it could put any aid to good use.

The Free Trade Agreement arguably encourages bilateral cooperation on the issue. Assemblyman Park Jin argued that the pact "stipulates the two countries' commitment to promoting the development of, and facilitating access to, pharmaceutical products." Whether or not his reading of the FTA is convincing, Seoul has another, better reason. As Chung intimated, the ROK helped when Americans were in need. The South was noteworthy last year in providing the U.S. with personal protective equipment and test kits.

The Biden administration has begun to feel significant pressure from other nations to engage in "vaccine diplomacy." It recently announced that it supported suspending drug patents. The administration apparently hopes to get credit by putting the burden on private companies rather than bear the cost of acting itself—by, for instance, negotiating to purchase patent suspensions.

Alas, the proposal is pure political posturing. Patents are largely irrelevant to the current shortage. The problem is production. Melinda Gates, whose Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation plans to contribute vaccines to needy countries, observed, "We don't have enough raw materials, we don't have enough manufacturing in the right places, so it is not allowing the nations that have manufacturing in place to hoard their vaccines, so we got to fix that piece."

Moreover, suspension requires approval of the World Trade Organization, but European governments rejected the proposal. They dismissed the administration's political quick fix since it would forfeit the economic incentives which encouraged companies to develop vaccines so quickly. European governments recognize that Washington's myopic approach would hamper efforts to cope with a future pandemic; pharmaceutical companies might be reluctant to undertake the enormous risks if their return could be effectively confiscated at any moment by vote-hungry politicians.

As for the ROK, its problem is not producing vaccines tomorrow but receiving them today. South Korea's vaccine supply is rapidly running out. However, Seoul expects about 14 million doses by the end of June. The South needs help to bridge the gap.

The U.S. could do that, easily. Washington has about 60 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is not approved for use in America. Unfortunately, the go-ahead appears lost in the labyrinthine Food and Drug Administration bureaucracy and vaccines have a limited shelf life. At the same time, Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson are ramping up vaccine production.

After its inexcusable delay, the White House finally has begun to move. Press Secretary Jen Psaki recently affirmed that four million doses have been sent to Canada and Mexico, another 10 million will be shipped overseas “in coming weeks,” and the rest will be readied for transfer.

Washington should address the lack of foreign inoculations as the crisis it is and offer to send 10 million doses now and another 10 million as soon as possible thereafter to the ROK. That would still leave tens of millions of doses to share with Europe and India, or elsewhere as appropriate. However, 20 million doses would allow a vast expansion of South Korea’s vaccination campaign. Seoul then could redirect future supplies to the U.S., for use domestically or transfer to other needy nations, at Washington’s direction. The South is good for repaying any vaccines “borrowed” because it will be manufacturing the AstraZeneca vaccine domestically.

The Biden administration also should offer 10 million doses to North Korea. The latter’s population is half that of South Korea and even more vulnerable to COVID-19, given the lack of anything approaching an adequate healthcare system. Moreover, the two million doses Pyongyang was expecting from the international COVAX initiative have been delayed until the latter half of the year. Washington should treat the North, with a desperately at-risk population, as a humanitarian emergency. Acting generously would have the additional benefit of encouraging Pyongyang to engage the Biden administration.

The president has placed a significant priority on “restoring” and “strengthening” alliances. However, assuming that whatever alliances have been must always be is a significant mistake. The U.S. should maintain good relations with as many nations as possible. But the form of those relationships should change along with circumstances.

Washington is long overdue in shifting responsibility for the ROK’s defense onto Seoul. Whatever the status of the alliance, however, the U.S. and South Korea should maintain a robust, friendly, and cooperative relationship. Providing mutual assistance in a crisis such as COVID-19 is an obvious example.

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