

Washington's East Asian Allies May Learn the Perilous Cost of Security Dependence

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May 15, 2017

Washington has long encouraged its East Asian allies to rely heavily on the United States for their security. Despite occasional grumbling, the allies have willingly accepted that arrangement. The receptive attitudes are not surprising on either side. For the allies, depending on the United States for defense offered some important advantages and benefits. It reduced the need for large, expensive military establishments, thus freeing up financial resources for economic progress and an assortment of domestic needs. Today, the Republic of Korea (ROK) spends a mere 2.5 percent of its Gross Domestic Product on the military, while Japan still adheres to its self-imposed limit of 1 percent. The expenditures by Australia and the Philippines are equally modest.

In addition to the financial savings, it seemed highly beneficial to the allies to have a superpower guaranteeing their security. During the Cold War, that arrangement discouraged bullying (or worse) on the part of the Soviet Union or China, and East Asian populations welcomed the greater sense of security. There were always potential drawbacks and risks involved in being so dependent on the United States, but until recently the perils were not terribly obvious. Now, though, alarm bells should be going off in those East Asian capitals.

The advantages for the United States were always a bit subtler, but policymakers deemed them important. Most notably, U.S. security primacy reduced the danger that a current ally might someday become a challenger. That concern was especially acute with respect to Japan. The original draft of the Pentagon's 1992 policy planning guidance document contained language conveying thinly disguised worries that another nation (implicitly Japan) might seek to exercise independent power and influence in a way that would not benefit U.S. interests. The document asserted bluntly that Washington's policy needed to prevent any country from challenging America's regional or global preeminence.

In addition to that concern, U.S. leaders encouraged continued security dependence to reduce the risk that an ally might engage in rash action that could draw America into an unwanted crisis. As time passed, Washington did press Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia to do more for their own defense—especially to increase their defense budgets modestly. But there was no corresponding pressure for them to take independent security initiatives. Quite the contrary, the focus was on enlisting those countries to become more supportive in helping to advance U.S. policies in the region. Thus, over the past 15 years or so, Washington has sought to transform its alliances with Japan, the ROK, and Australia from purely bilateral arrangements to defend the homelands of those countries into broader arrangements to deal with “regional

contingencies.” The latter is little more than a code phrase for a subtle containment policy directed against China.

The nature of Washington’s alliance network was always based on the assumption that the United States was firmly in charge of policy decisions. The risk inherent to America’s allies from that arrangement is now becoming increasingly evident. The Trump administration’s erratic, often hardline statements regarding North Korea underscore the danger to America’s security dependents. South Korea and Japan would both have a tremendous amount to lose if an armed conflict broke out between Washington and Pyongyang. Yet the decision to escalate to that level would be made by U.S. leaders rather than South Korean or Japanese leaders. The United States might or might not show its allies the courtesy of consulting them and seeking their input, but the final determination would be made in Washington, not Seoul or Tokyo.

That point should have become apparent during the 1994 North Korean nuclear crisis, when Bill Clinton’s administration seriously considered launching air strikes to destroy Pyongyang’s embryonic nuclear weapons program. Fortunately, that crisis was averted when former President Jimmy Carter successfully negotiated the preliminary provisions of what became a few months later the Framework Agreement freezing North Korea’s nuclear program.

But the crisis could easily have resulted in war, and that would have been horrific for South Korea. The location of Seoul, the capital and largest metropolitan area, barely 50 kilometers from the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Koreas, would have guaranteed massive destruction and civilian casualties from a North Korean counterattack in the form of an artillery barrage. The situation may be even more perilous today, since Pyongyang has missiles that can strike targets throughout South Korea and Japan. Even if North Korea has not yet miniaturized nuclear warheads to place on those missiles, the damage could be considerable. And if the North has perfected that technology, the consequences to Japan and the ROK would be catastrophic.

A confrontation between the United States and North Korea is not the only scenario that could expose the perilous potential cost to the allies of an overreliance on Washington. The growing tensions between the United States and China are another source. Beijing’s increasingly assertive policies in both the East China Sea and the South China Sea, and the mounting tensions between the mainland and Taiwan, have produced expressions of grave concern in U.S. policy circles. Although there is no imminent danger of war between the two great powers, their policies seem to be on a collision course over the long term. Again, despite the potential hazards to their countries, the allies would have little ability to restrain their American protector if U.S. leaders decided on a confrontational policy to rein-in Beijing’s ambitions.

The benefits to the East Asian allies of their security dependence on the United States have been considerable. But there is a very substantial downside, and that aspect is becoming increasingly apparent and worrisome. The allies give up their decision-making autonomy when they rely on America for essential aspects of their defense. Decisions about war and peace in the region will be made in Washington, not the East Asian capitals, even though any adverse consequences of such decisions would be borne primarily by nations in the region. That reality should convey to America’s allies that free-riding on U.S. security efforts is not really free. Indeed, the price of continued security dependence could turn out to be ruinous.

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