

Ending U.S. Risk Exposure in Korea

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Even if the Trump-Kim relationship gets back on track after the collapse of the Hanoi summit and leads to productive negotiations, Washington's Korea policy is deeply flawed. U.S. leaders remain obsessed with the chimera of North Korea's complete denuclearization.

The United States remains on the front lines in a volatile region confronting an unpredictable adversary. Washington needs to pursue a more fundamental policy shift.

One key U.S. objective should be to eliminate the detritus of its seven-decade cold war with Pyongyang. Negotiations for a peace agreement formally ending the Korean War are important, and as a belligerent in that conflict, Washington must be a party to any accord. So too, bilateral negotiations are necessary to establish normal diplomatic relations and lift economic sanctions against North Korea. Those objectives serve America's national interests.

A quixotic crusade to get North Korea to return to nuclear virginity meets no such interest. Nor does maintaining U.S. military forces in and around the Korean Peninsula to shield the Republic of Korea from its troublesome northern neighbor. That commitment may have made sense during the Cold War, when the United States regarded both the Soviet Union and China as potential threats to the security of East Asia. U.S. officials saw North Korea as a potential pawn of those larger powers in a general communist offensive.

But the situation has changed beyond recognition over the past three decades. Neither Russia nor China show an interest in backing Pyongyang's disruptive behavior. Indeed, Moscow and Beijing have both established extensive economic ties with South Korea that would be jeopardized by another war on the peninsula.

Moreover, South Korea is no longer impoverished. The Republic of Korea is a modern, developed country -- one of East Asia's economic tigers and a major player in the global economy. Today, South Korea has twice the population and an economy at least 40 times larger than that of its adversary. Seoul is capable of building whatever military forces it deems necessary to deter or defeat North Korea. There is no longer a credible justification for keeping South Korea as an American security protectorate.

If the need to maintain a patron-client relationship with South Korea is falling, the risks to the United States of doing so are rising steadily. It was one thing to promise to defend South Korea when the North merely had a conventional military force armed with increasingly antiquated weapons. The North's development of nuclear weapons has dramatically changed the risk-benefit calculation for Washington -- especially when that achievement is coupled with long-

range delivery systems and missiles that may be capable of reaching all portions of the United States.

U.S. leaders now are putting American territory and millions of American lives at risk to keep defending South Korea. Such a policy is decidedly imprudent. Despite the demands of U.S. negotiators, it is unlikely that Pyongyang will ever fulfill a commitment for complete denuclearization. Indeed, North Korean leaders would be foolish to do so. They remember what the United States did to Libya once Muammar Qaddafi agreed to terminate his nuclear program and have no desire to leave themselves vulnerable to forcible regime change. A nuclear arsenal (even a small one) with a credible delivery system is their insurance policy, and they are not likely to relinquish it, whatever hints to the contrary they may offer during negotiations.

It would be wise for U.S. leaders to recognize that reality and move to limit America's risk exposure. Achieving a reasonably normal relationship even with a nuclear-armed Pyongyang would contribute to that objective, but phasing out both the U.S. troop presence in South Korea and the mutual security treaty with Seoul is even more important. The troop deployment is especially worrisome. The 28,000 U.S. troops in South Korea are not intended to be a serious combat force. They serve merely as a tripwire to guarantee full U.S. involvement in any conflict.

South Korea and the other East Asian nations that have far greater interests at stake should be in charge of managing relations with North Korea -- and incurring the risks of doing so. It is irrational and needlessly dangerous for the United States, a nation sitting thousands of miles away, to be incurring those risks. Diminishing America's risk exposure should be the primary objective for U.S. policymakers.

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