



U.S.-South Korea alliance is unhealthy for both countries

Ted Galen Carpenter

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During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, worries proliferated both in the United States and its alliance partners that Donald Trump's election would signal the resurgence of American "isolationism." Trump's statements certainly indicated that some major changes in Washington's alliance policies would be forthcoming. His denunciations of the lack of burden sharing on the part of U.S. allies in East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East often were quite pointed. Although most of his complaints were directed against NATO members, Japan, and other allies, they also applied to South Korea.

Fears that a Trump administration would repudiate America's security alliances proved to be overblown. The new president and his advisors quickly made statements confirming that all of Washington's commitments remained intact. The president also sent Secretary of Defense James Mattis on a "reassurance tour" to Japan and South Korea. Mattis assured the South Koreans that the United States remained determined to protect their country, even as the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) continued to build its ballistic missile and nuclear-weapons capabilities.

Nevertheless, the U.S.-South Korea alliance is in trouble — and for reasons that go well beyond standard burden-sharing controversies. The alliance no longer serves the best interests of either country. Indeed, it has the perverse effect of increasing dangers to both parties.

The accelerating pace of the DPRK's nuclear and ballistic missile programs highlights the growing risk to America that Washington's security commitment to South Korea entails. North Korea's most recent nuclear test was much larger than previous versions. Some experts even tend to believe Pyongyang's claim that it was a hydrogen bomb rather than an atomic bomb — which would be a major leap in capabilities. The DPRK's numerous missile tests over the past year likewise suggest growing mastery of that technology. The progress has been so pronounced that most experts conclude that North Korea now has the ability to strike the U.S. west coast. Following the test in late November, some experts speculate that Kim Jong-un's missiles can reach targets throughout the United States.

Those developments dramatically increase the risks associated with Washington's defense commitment to South Korea. It was one thing to provide such protection when North Korea had no nuclear capability and the range of its conventional weapons, including missiles, was decidedly limited. It is quite another consideration when the American homeland could be vulnerable. A particularly odd feature of the periodic crises involving North Korea is that the United States, a nation thousands of miles away, has primary responsibility for deterring Pyongyang and handling those crises. In a normal international system, North Korea's neighbors — South Korea, Japan, China and Russia — would take the lead in formulating countermeasures to deal with the DPRK's rogue behavior.

The reason the United States is on the front lines of such crises is because of Washington's military alliances with Seoul and Tokyo--and especially the presence of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula. Otherwise, it is unlikely that Kim's government would pay much attention to America.

As the risks associated with the security commitment to South Korea soars, U.S. leaders should conduct the reassessment of the alliance that should have taken place many years ago. South Korea is a sophisticated, first-tier economic power that has the capability to build whatever military forces it needs to deter North Korea, or if deterrence failed, to inflict a decisive defeat on the aggressor. Yet as my colleague Doug Bandow has pointed out on numerous occasions, South Korea is a flagrant security free rider. South Korean leaders have chosen to continue to rely heavily on the United States for their country's defense. Instead of "babying" South Korea by offering unconditional security assurances, Mattis and other Trump administration officials should have told the South Korean government to grow up and accept responsibility for building a more robust national defense.

South Korean taxpayers have saved tens of billions of dollars over the decades through free-riding on the United States, and both the government and people regard a superpower security guarantee as a great benefit. Ironically, though, it now could prove enormously costly to South Korea, not only in treasure, but in blood. A U.S.-North Korean war would cause extensive devastation and loss of life — especially to Seoul, located just 50 kilometers from the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Koreas.

President Moon Jae-in recently insists that his government has an "absolute right to veto" a decision by Washington to attack North Korea. If he believes that, he is being extremely naïve. Even other South Korean actions belie Moon's confident assertion. South Korean officials seem increasingly nervous about the Trump administration's intentions as tensions between Washington and Pyongyang mount. Seoul is now pressing for the U.S. to relinquish command of South Korea's military during wartime.

The South Koreans have reason to be uneasy. Trump administration officials stress repeatedly that all options are on the table regarding North Korea. Even more ominous, they have made it clear that there is no possibility of accepting a nuclear-armed North Korea and relying on deterrence.

If Washington decides to launch military strikes to eliminate Kim's perceived nuclear and missile threats to America's security, there is no indication whatsoever that Seoul could veto that decision. Once before, the United States came close to taking drastic action. Washington saw growing evidence in 1994 that Pyongyang was processing plutonium for a nuclear-weapons program. Bill Clinton's administration reacted in a thoroughly militant manner. In his memoirs, Clinton stated that. "I was determined to prevent North Korea from developing a nuclear arsenal, even at the risk of war."

It was not just bluster. Secretary of Defense William Perry later conceded that the administration seriously considered conducting "surgical strikes" against North Korea's embryonic nuclear installations. Fortunately, former President Jimmy Carter convinced Clinton to let him approach Pyongyang and conduct talks to resolve the crisis peacefully. But it was a close call. And at no time did Clinton or his advisers even hint that South Korea's wishes would have a major influence on Washington's decision about launching air strikes. Seoul certainly would not have had a veto over U.S. policy.

Today's crisis is eerily similar. And it is not just Washington's militant rhetoric. The Trump administration continues to deploy more and more military assets to Northeast Asia — including stealth jets and various nuclear-capable systems. Those moves indicate deadly serious intent.

South Koreans ought to reconsider whether their alliance with the United States is such a bargain after all. The financial savings and other benefits from free-riding won't mean much if Washington's actions entangle South Korea in a catastrophic war against the wishes of its government and people. At the same time, Washington should reconsider whether perpetuating a Cold War-era alliance is worth putting the United States on the front lines of crises that would otherwise have only marginal relevance to America. The U.S.-South Korea alliance is now like a bad marriage that no longer enhances the well-being of either party.

Ted Galen Carpenter is vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.