

Forbes

Turn The North Korean Problem Over To North Korea's Neighbors

By: Doug Bandow – April 8, 2013

America once was a normal country. Then Washington wouldn't have been involved in the Korean Peninsula. And North Korea wouldn't have bothered to threaten the U.S. with death and destruction.

But today the U.S. finds itself entangled in the bitter rivalry between the two Koreas. And the target of Pyongyang's abundant invective.

America was drawn into the peninsula at the conclusion of World War II, which is over. The U.S. was pulled into a very hot conflict by the Korean War, which also is over. Washington stayed involved to safeguard the South during the Cold War, which is over as well. Yet 28,500 Americas remain stationed in the Republic of Korea, decades after any serious justification for their presence disappeared.

Indeed, it is hard to think of a more anachronistic military presence in the world. The so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea once appeared to be winning the competition between North and South.

However, the ROK took off economically during the mid-1960s under Park Chung-hee, the present South Korean president's father. A quarter century later democracy arrived.

As the Cold War ended both China and Russia formally recognized the South. Economic relations among them also flourished, especially between the ROK and the People's Republic of China. Moreover, the South pulled ahead of the DPRK internationally: Seoul's expanding trade attracted friends while Pyongyang's terrorist attacks repelled them.

The mismatch grew ever larger. When I visited the North some years back I watched an ox-cart plod down an otherwise empty street in Pyongyang, the country's capital and showcase. Only in military power did North Korea maintain an advantage.

The North conscripted more than a million men into its army, lined the so-called Demilitarized Zone with artillery, and accumulated more than 4000 tanks. But Pyongyang's lack of modern weapons, combined arms training, and air capability meant the DPRK had little hope of winning a war. North Korea could devastate the ROK's capital of Seoul, which sits uncomfortably close to the DMZ, but not conquer the South.

Although well able to deter North Korean adventurism, South Korea preferred to rely on America than to build up its own defensive force. Thus, a security guarantee which originally safeguarded Asia's Cold War boundary turned into a wasteful international dole. The ROK—which has soared into the economic stratosphere—became a foreign variant of the famed “welfare queen,” abusing the system and living off of American taxpayers.

Today Washington is essentially broke. The national debt exceeds \$16.5 trillion. Toss in all of Uncle Sam's obligations, including unfunded liabilities, and Americans are on the hook for more than *\$220 trillion*, about 14 times the annual GDP. Yet U.S. troops remain in South Korea. International welfare continues to flow.

And Washington's presence in the ROK has turned the U.S. into a target of North Korea's wrath.

In practice, Pyongyang's threats mean little. The North Korean leadership is evil, not stupid. Kim Jong-un & Co.—the regime is more like a collective family criminal enterprise than a traditional government—is focused on maintaining power over a population which is impoverished and malnourished. Ruling elites want their virgins in *this* world, not the next.

Nevertheless, mistake or miscalculation could lead to war. And today, with the U.S. promising to defend the South, war between the DPRK and ROK would mean war for America. Not a missile attack on Washington or even Honolulu, which the North is incapable of mounting. But a brutal, bloody, nasty ground war on the Korean Peninsula. It would be horrible. Especially for America, which would have no reason to be involved.

No one knows what Pyongyang is up to with its latest caterwauling. The North has spent the last six decades denouncing the armistice, promising war, and provoking its opponents. However, the North's latest fulminations are unusually violent.

Domestic politics may be the culprit. Perhaps the new leadership is continuing to feel its way or factions are jockeying for the military's support. Maybe the regime plans to stage a dramatic volte-face, suggesting new-found reasonableness in an attempt to yet again be bought off by the West. It's possible Kim and his associates simply enjoy watching the rest of the world wonder what they are up to. No one outside of the DPRK actually knows.

Whatever is going on, America should not be involved.

When North Korea's plump Kim Jong-un—*he* certainly isn't starving—rants about raining death and destruction down upon Americans, he brings to mind the invasion of the U.S. by the Duchy of Grand Fenwick in the Cold War novel *The Mouse That Roared*. However, the cascade of vitriol, as well as the underlying nuclear program, demonstrates that the regime recognizes and fears American power. When I visited the North my hosts boasted about rebuilding Pyongyang, which, they noted, had been destroyed by U.S. forces: they had experienced the business end of the U.S. military.

Without American troops on the peninsula, Pyongyang likely wouldn't worry much about the U.S. The North Korean regime would be left to rail against the treasonous South

Koreans, perfidious Japanese, and overbearing Chinese. If the Cute Leader, as some of us call Kim, hoped to gain recognition, money, and leverage, he would have to look to his neighbors, not Washington.

However, it is different with the U.S. there. If the North Koreans were foolish enough to attack America, their nation would disappear in the bright light of a retaliatory strike. But that is not their plan. Just threatening has gained Pyongyang worldwide attention, including above-the-fold newspaper coverage in America. Which is exactly what the North wanted.

Instead of responding to Pyongyang—moving U.S. forces about to rebut the North's threats and reassure South Korea—the Obama administration should take no public notice. The next burst of invective should be met with a yawn.

At the same time, Washington should give the South Korean government a phased but definite withdrawal schedule for America's forces. Which Seoul then could announce, in a demonstration of its confidence in its own defense capabilities. The faster America's military personnel came home, the sooner Washington could look forward to ignoring events on the peninsula.

In the meantime, the U.S. should use Pyongyang's professed belligerence in discussions with China over strategies to moderate North Korean behavior or even replace the Kim regime. If American troops were withdrawn, Beijing no longer would need worry about the U.S. military stationed on its border in a reunited Korea. China will act only if the residents of Zhongnanhai believe doing so is in China's interest.

North Korea is a genuine tragedy. The Cold War turned the Korean Peninsula into a battleground for Washington. But that era is long over.

The ROK, Japan, Russia, and especially China should handle the international dilemma otherwise known as the DPRK. The best way to end the dictatorship in Pyongyang is to make it their problem.

Washington is broke. Worse, America is being threatened because it insists on guarding a nation which long ago gained the ability to protect itself. After nearly seven decades, Washington should turn responsibility for South Korea's defense over to the South Koreans.