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## **Time for U.S. To Retire Outdated Alliance with ROK**

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South Korean Park Geun-hye recently met President Barack Obama in Washington. Nominally it was a meeting between equals. But Park reaffirmed her nation's continuing dependence on America. Although the Republic of Korea is well able to defend itself, its head of state sought enhanced security aid and approval for engaging North Korea.

The U.S.-ROK alliance is a testament to Public Choice Economics, which analyzes the interests of public bureaucracies and organizations. The treaty was inked in unique circumstances, the aftermath of the three-year Korean War, which left the South wrecked and vulnerable to Pyongyang, allied with both China and the Soviet Union.

That world is gone. Entirely. Completely. America's security commitment is an anachronism, a leftover from a distant era. But no matter. Like a zombie, the alliance staggers on.

There's no doubt why Seoul continues to support the security relationship. Despite sometimes feeling humiliated when Washington attempts to determine ROK security policy, the South nevertheless saves money and is safer relying on the global superpower for protection.

As Scott Snyder of the Council on Foreign Relations put it, the ROK is "at the epicenter of a geostrategic danger zone." Better to be cossetted than endangered. Added Snyder, the "alliance is vital to lessen South Korea's vulnerability to North Korea and rising Asian rivalries."

A related point was made by Van Jackson of the Center for a New American Century. Objecting to my contention that the South should defend itself, he argued that America's defense commitment helps deter the North from attacking the ROK. Of course, that is the usual point of defense: prevent a war from happening and win it if it occurs. But, notably, the U.S. guarantee acts as a deterrent for the South, not America, meaning the alliance serves South Korea, not the U.S.

America is not at risk from North Korea or even the other Asian powers Snyder cites. Washington does not need the alliance with Seoul to deter Pyongyang. Like most of America's alliances, the U.S.-ROK treaty is entirely one-sided. Americans do the defending. South Koreans

get defended. It's a nice system for the latter. And President Park did her best to ensure that Washington officials repeated their usual babble about "strengthening" the relationship, as they do with every alliance, no matter how antiquated or counterproductive.

If there was no cost to strewing U.S. personnel around the world and threatening war against potentially hostile powers in perennially unstable regions, there would be little complaint with Washington's policy. The president could merely declare the U.S. was willing to fight and all threats would recede. The lion would lie down with the lamb. Eternal peace would descend upon the earth.

Alas, it doesn't work that way. Military spending is the price of America's foreign policy. Commitments require force structure. The U.S. has ten carrier groups for a reason, and it is not to defend America. It is to project power abroad, often on behalf of "allies." Most of the Pentagon's efforts are devoted to protecting other nations rather than the U.S. Even though Seoul helps cover the cost of hosting the soldiers protecting its borders, it does nothing to help pay for raising and equipping the troops. As Washington's finances deteriorate--and they will worsen dramatically in coming years as the U.S. population ages--the American people may tire of their leaders putting the well-being of prosperous foreign nations first.

Moreover, Washington's constant promise to go to war creates a greater risk of conflict involving America. So far the U.S. has avoided too much trouble from accumulating allies like Facebook friends, but even Jackson admitted that "U.S. power has been insufficient to prevent low-intensity North Korean attacks." Deterrence frequently fails. Often in small ways as with the North. Sometimes catastrophically as in World Wars I and II.

Those protected also are more likely to be confrontational, creating a greater risk of conflict, as we've seen with Georgia and Taiwan. South Korea, too, has threatened to respond firmly to any North Korean provocations, likely more strongly than if U.S. forces were not on hand, risking a retaliatory spiral. If deterrence fails, the alliance ensures that U.S. will be drawn into an otherwise avoidable conflict.

And if things go wrong, they could go really wrong. Adm. Bill Gortney, commander of the U.S. Northern Command and the North American Aerospace Defense Command, opined: "We assess that they have the capability to reach the homeland with a nuclear weapons from a rocket." Who wants to bet on the continuing forbearance of Kim Jong-un? He almost certainly doesn't want war, but he may not be prudent enough to avoid it.

Of course, America has plenty of interests around in the world, including in the Korean Peninsula, but most are not worth the risk of war. One of the advantages of being a superpower is that most issues don't matter much. It would be far worse for South Korea for America to be conquered than it would be for the U.S. for the ROK to be conquered. Charity is no basis for foreign policy. After all, Washington could seek to deter all war by scattering American garrisons even more widely. In Azerbaijan and Armenia. In all of Russia's neighbors. On the

Senkakus and Scarborough Reef. Throughout Africa. On both sides of the China-Burma border. On both sides of the China-India border. In Saudi Arabia and Iran. Plus Yemen. And more.

Doing so presumably would enhance deterrence, as Jackson wishes. But for other nations. While costing America much.

Especially in the case of states such as South Korea, which, like Japan and Europe, is capable of protecting itself--both deterring and winning. Jackson curiously denies this, contending that: "the fact that South Korea is capable of self-defense does not mean it is capable of deterring North Korea on its own." Perhaps with Seoul's current capabilities, but there is no special gravitational field that prevents the country in the southern half of the Korean Peninsula from fielding a larger force.

Indeed, it beggars the imagination that a nation with a 40-1 economic edge, 2-1 population advantage, significant technological lead, dramatically larger industrial base, more resilient infrastructure, and vastly stronger international position could not build the military necessary to deter its far weaker antagonist. But then, essentially the same contention is made for Europe and Japan. If one is to believe advocates of U.S. hegemony, all of America's allies are helpless weaklings, incapable of doing much of anything on their own behalf. Only the U.S. can protect its most prosperous and populous of friends from death, destruction, and a new Dark Age.

Perhaps Washington should turn the tables on its allies. After all, America has only 14 times Mexico's GDP and 2.5 times Mexico's population. How can the U.S. be expected to defend itself from its potentially revanchist southern neighbor, which lost half of its territory to America in their last war? Surely Washington's allies should come to its defense.

Of course, U.S. officials prefer to proclaim primacy than weakness. In contrast, President Park's government continues a conscious policy of keeping the South dependent on America. More than six decades after the Korean War Seoul still cedes wartime operational control, or OPCON, of its military to the U.S. At South Korean insistence past deadlines for transferring that responsibility have come and gone. In contrast, the North manages its armed forces. No doubt some in the ROK prefer not to spend the money on the necessary military upgrades. However, some officials privately acknowledge that they most worry America might see less need to act if South Koreans took charge of their own defense. Better to feign helplessness than take the admittedly more expensive and less certain task of defending themselves.

Jackson also worried about U.S. credibility should Washington restructure a defense relationship a mere 62 years after forging it. What a flighty, irresponsible people, those Americans! Actually, credibility is at risk when one makes promises that one does not keep, not changes old promises to fit new circumstances. More important, Americans should worry about the sensibility if not sanity of policy makers who are afraid to make the slightest adjustment to commitments made in a different time and circumstance, whose relevance has almost entirely disappeared.

More interesting is Jackson's concern that insisting South Korea act as an adult nation might cause it to revive the nuclear program begun by President Park's father a half century ago. Nonproliferation is an important goal, but not one of unlimited value. Today Northeast Asia demonstrates the ill effects of an international version of gun control: only the criminals have guns. China, Russia, and North Korea possess the ultimate weapon. None of America's democratic allies are so armed. So America is expected to risk Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. to protect Seoul, Taipei, and Tokyo, plus maybe Canberra, Manila, and who knows where else? Washington needs a serious discussion whether the second best of a South Korean nuclear weapons is worse than the second best of an American nuclear umbrella. Especially since the possibility of proliferation to U.S. friends might cause Beijing to take the issue of North Korea's nuclear program far more seriously, halting the nuclear parade before it proceeds any further.

Unfortunately, President Park's visit, like previous such summits, was wasted. The ROK has begun to shift ever so carefully, as South Korea carefully embraces China. Yet at the latest talks both Seoul and Washington pretended the South is helpless, U.S. dominance is foreordained, and the alliance can carry on like before.

Instead, the two governments should discuss how to transform the alliance for the future--turning it into a relationship of equals in which the two governments cooperate over issues of genuine bilateral interest, including economic development, humanitarian and environmental endeavors, and international security. For none of these is a formal alliance, based on a U.S. defense guarantee and garrison, necessary. South Korea has reached the forefront of nations. It should act the part.

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