

America Should Let South Korea Provide For Its Own Defense

By: Doug Bandow – December 13th, 2012

North Korea recognizes no limit on either the range or payload of its missiles. The U.S. restricts the range and payload of South Korea's missiles. Washington should stop weakening the Republic of Korea's defense.

The ROK has one of the world's largest economies but remains a security dependent of America. Only last month, Washington agreed to adjust the treaty restricting South Korean missiles to a range of about 186 miles and a payload of 1,100 pounds. These limits stood even as the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea developed nuclear weapons and long-range missiles.

Under the new accord, Seoul still is barred from deploying any missiles with a range longer than roughly 500 miles. The payload restriction on missiles also remains, though the limit was raised for drones. At least the South Koreans will be able to hit targets anywhere in the North.

Chun Yung-woo, South Korea's national security adviser, explained: "The most important purpose of revising the missile guideline lies in deterring armed provocations by North Korea."

Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. Steven Warren made a similar point: The "new missile guidelines are designed to improve their ability to deter and defend against (North Korea's) ballistic missiles."

However, the South Koreans still won't be able to defend themselves from more distant threats or employ more destructive warheads.

Washington has kept the ROK dependent for decades. America's restrictions might have made sense when a desperately poor South Korea had no choice but to rely on the U.S. But that world disappeared long ago.

For some time, Seoul has lobbied to revise the missile treaty. Hence the recent compromise. But Washington should have dropped all restrictions. There is no good reason for the U.S. to limit the South's ability to defend itself.

The most curious objection to relaxing the standard is that doing so will stoke an inter-Korean arms race. But Pyongyang already is racing, with a nuclear weapons program,

intercontinental missiles initiative, extensive artillery targeted on Seoul and an oversized military spring-loaded on the border.

Daniel Pinkston of the International Crisis Group warned that "anyone who thinks the North won't respond is either naive or foolish." North Korea will always find a pretext for its aggressive behavior.

Another concern is that Seoul might build a superior military and attempt to liberate North Korea. Indeed, one reason Washington refused to arm the ROK before the Korean War was President Syngman Rhee's threats to march north. However, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's ability to strike the South Korean capital is a significant deterrent, and there is no political support in the South for a reckless policy that would risk the future.

The third complaint is that other nations oppose any change. Shin Won-shik, a South Korean defense official, explained that the new limit was intended to avoid "unnecessary misunderstanding and friction with neighboring countries."

In particular, Beijing opposes the ROK's building of missiles that might reach Chinese territory. Potential aggressors should not be allowed to insist that their potential victims remain disarmed, however. Although Chinese military action against the South is highly unlikely, the best way to eliminate this threat is to ensure that Seoul has deterrent capability against even the People's Republic of China.

Moreover, China has done nothing, or at least nothing effective, to constrain the DPRK's development of missiles or nuclear weapons. So the U.S. is under no obligation to restrict its ally.

If Beijing wants to keep the ROK disarmed, then the former should offer something in return — such as taking effective action against the North's weapons development. If the PRC is bothered by the prospect of a better-armed South Korea, the former should do more to prevent a better-armed North Korea.

Finally, dropping the limit would help end Seoul's defense dependence on America. Daryl Kimball of the Arms Control Association complained that the ROK didn't need longer-range missiles because "these targets in the North can already also be destroyed by the United States." Why should the U.S. be expected to do South Korea's job?

The "Mutual" Defense Treaty between Washington and Seoul is archaic. The South has raced past North Korea: The former has twice the population, about 40 times the GDP, and a vast technological edge. The ROK no longer needs defense welfare from the U.S., especially since America is effectively bankrupt.

Lifting missile restrictions should be merely the first step. America's nearly 30,000 troops should come home. It is time for South Koreans, not Americans, to pay for the South's defense.

Washington remains locked in a 1950s mindset in Asia. The U.S. defends the ROK while limiting the latter's ability to defend itself. American policymakers should set South Korea free.