

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## Seoul Threatens Pyongyang with American Force

By: Doug Bandow – March 8, 2013

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Politics has gone from the sublime to the ridiculous in North Korea. One minute Great Successor Kim Jong-un is cavorting with American basketball great Dennis Rodman and telling President Barack Obama to call. Next the North Korean People's Army is threatening to abandon the six-decade-old armistice and use "lighter and smaller nukes" against the United States and South Korea.

Of course, the North's rhetorical barbs no longer sting, so long as Pyongyang relied on provocation and brinkmanship. Yet the latest outburst should remind American policymakers that the United States has different interests than South Korea regarding the Korean peninsula.

For decades Washington has played the dominant role in Korean affairs, yet America is an interloper, with no significant geopolitical stake in the Koreas. Washington's initial forays more than a century ago were essentially frivolous, as the emerging American republic sought to join the great imperial powers in Asia.

The defeat of Japan in World War II left the United States deeply involved in East Asia, including the Korean peninsula. Washington played its role badly and quickly found itself hopelessly entangled in the struggle between two antagonistic Korean states. The Cold War turned the peninsula into a global battleground, with the Demilitarized Zone becoming a celebrated boundary between totalitarian communism and the West. For years the Republic of Korea mattered more to the United States as a symbol than as a country.

The end of the Cold War then dramatically reduced Washington's stake in the Koreas. Americans have substantial family and business ties with the South, but none warrant military involvement in the peninsula. War between the two Koreas would be a tragedy that would unsettle the region, but not threaten U.S. security in any fundamental way. The mere fact that such a conflict would be highly undesirable does not mean that Washington must be prepared to intervene.

This is especially true since the intra-Korean balance has shifted dramatically. The ROK has raced past the North in virtually every measure of national power, while neither Beijing nor Moscow likely would intervene on the latter's behalf in any conflict, especially if begun by Pyongyang. The great Korean anomaly is not Kim Jong-un's Western fascinations, but Seoul's failure to use its growing wealth to create a stronger

military sufficient to deter the Kim family criminal enterprise that is otherwise known as the North Korean government.

In contrast to America, the ROK must deal with the North, a hostile state that in 1950 attempted to swallow South Korea. The South has no alternative since the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea sits next door, a fixture of geography. With China, Japan and Russia also nearby—all having at one time or another intervened in the Korean peninsula—the ROK is stuck in a bad neighborhood.

Tensions eased when the Cold War ended, and for a decade Seoul tried to appease Pyongyang through the “Sunshine Policy,” shipping cash and goods northward in an attempt to purchase cooperation. Alas, the DPRK grabbed the benefits while continuing to fulminate, threaten, and provoke. The election of Lee Myung-bak in 2007 shifted ROK policy back toward defense and deterrence, though Seoul maintains the Kaesong industrial park in the North. The one consistent policy, however, has been reliance on Washington for the ROK's defense. The South even resisted U.S. plans to return control over South Korean military units to the South.

Despite decades of military subservience, the ROK suddenly is breathing fire, if not quite threatening to turn Pyongyang into a lake of fire, as the North once suggested doing to Seoul. Major General Kim Yong-hyun, chief operations officer in the South's Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, responded to the DPRK's latest threats by insisting “we are all prepared.” Indeed, he explained: “If North Korea attempts a provocation that threatens the lives and security of our people our military will forcefully and decisively strike not only the origin of provocation and its supporting forces but also its command leadership.”

That most obviously means the North's army headquarters. But that also logically would mean DPRK civilian leadership, even though Seoul denied that Kim Jong-un was a target. After all, the Korean People's Army is answerable to the National Defense Commission, chaired by Kim. If the KPA initiated an act of war, it would presumably do so only with the assent of Kim and other civilian leaders.

General Kim's warning may reflect concern that after conducting rocket and nuclear tests the North Koreans are preparing to directly challenge newly inaugurated South Korean President Park Geun-hye. Two years ago Pyongyang sank an ROK naval corvette and bombarded a South Korean island. A new round of violence could be in store.

However, with what forces would General Kim attack? And defend against North Korean retaliation?

Seoul has a large and capable military which contains units that could “forcefully and decisively strike” against the North's presumably well-defended “command leadership.” However, South Korean officials insist that this fine, competent, and patriotic military is incapable of defending their nation. Six decades after the Korean War ended, they say, American troops are still needed.

So if the North struck back and things went badly for South Korea, President Park presumably would pick up the phone and call President Obama to request assistance. In this way, an ROK attack on the North's leadership could lead to general war involving

America. If Washington is going to guarantee South Korea's defense, it should have a say in Seoul's defense decisions. Indeed, the United States deserves a veto over the South's actions. If the ROK is going to depend on the American military, then its defense decisions must be dependent on America as well.

But this hardly seems appropriate for a prosperous, democratic and nationalistic nation that has achieved so much over the last two decades. The expectation that Americans should forever protect the ROK obviously is unfair to Americans. The U.S. government is essentially broke, yet dozens of Asian and European countries expect Washington to provide defense services gratis—apparently forever. The justification for doing so is hard to fathom.

At the same time, the current system also is unfair to the South. Washington's security guarantee comes at a high price.

Decades ago the United States pressured President Park Chung-hee, the current president's dictatorial father, to abandon his government's incipient nuclear program—which might have developed weapons that today would guarantee the South's security against North Korea, Japan and China. Washington currently limits the range and payload of missiles deployed by the South, which also could play a greater deterrent role. Moreover, U.S. governments do not just advise but insist on veto power when it comes to South Korean military decisions affecting the United States.

The DPRK sometimes has the appearance of a comic opera, but Pyongyang's willingness to use force is no joke. The ROK has no choice but to respond, which reasonably includes the threat to retaliate against the North Korean leadership.

Yet the U.S. need not endure the frustrations and accept the risks of confronting the North. After years of micromanaging South Korea's defense, Washington should say no more. The Republic of Korea finally should graduate from the U.S. defense dole.