

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Park Geun-hye Comes Calling

By: Doug Bandow – May 8, 2013

South Koreans are nationalistic and confident. In fact, their nation's evident success warrants pride. Six decades after the conclusion of the Korean War, the Republic of Korea has turned into a prosperous democracy with global influence.

Yet the ROK fails at the most basic task for any serious nation: defense. Seoul remains as dependent on America for its security as did the South when Park's father, Park Chung-hee, was president four decades ago. South Korea's military is significantly stronger, but the ROK continues to look to Washington for defense. Whenever Pyongyang moves into provocation mode, America is expected to provide the visible military might—most recently flyovers by B-2 bombers and F-22 stealth fighters—to deter the North.

In fact, Seoul's dependence runs far deeper. Wartime operational control of the South Korean military remains with the American military, an extraordinary sacrifice of sovereignty. Moreover, U.S. officials second-guess every ROK decision. For instance, the South is promising to retaliate against any North Korean military provocation, which could drag the United States into war.

The relationship obviously is a bad deal for America. The United States would not have been subject to the recent round of North Korean histrionics absent Washington's promise to go to war with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea if necessary. With the Cold War over and South Korea so far ahead of its northern rival, the "mutual" defense treaty between the America and the ROK has lost its *raison d'être* for Washington.

However, even Seoul suffers from the relationship. No doubt, the South Korean people enjoy not having pay for their own defense. Never mind the ROK having upwards of forty times the GDP of the North. Why buy weapons when you can purchase consumer goods instead?

Still, the alliance leaves an otherwise proud, self-reliant people dangerously dependent on the whims of American policymakers. The U.S. does not protect the ROK out of altruism. Washington got involved because it believed protecting South Korea was necessary for American security. The United States will continue to make decisions based on American security. And if that means sacrificing the South's interests, so be it.

The two countries may be close, but that does not mean they look at the world the same way. The ROK's single most important objective should be its own defense. In contrast, without the Cold War, South Korea matters little to America. There are important

economic and cultural ties and war on the peninsula would be a humanitarian catastrophe. However, U.S. security is not dependent on Seoul.

In fact, absent the alliance Washington wouldn't even notice the DPRK. North Korea is small and impoverished, a minimal factor in a region of large and important powers: China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea. Even a nuclear North would not be a pressing concern. The Pyongyang leadership does not appear to be suicidal, so an attack on America is out of the question. Proliferation is a greater worry, but Pakistan already ran a global Nukes 'R Us.

In contrast, Washington worries far more about China. Not so the ROK. While South Koreans have their own fears about their potentially overbearing neighbor, they also are unlikely to cooperate with America if doing so would put them on Beijing's enemies list. Forget going to war with China for the defense of Japan, the Philippines, or Taiwan.

The relationship faces more prosaic challenges as well. The Status of Forces Agreement grates on South Korean sensibilities since it was originally forged when the South was little more than a puppet state under American protection. Later amendments do not change the sense of inferiority imparted to the ROK, yet Seoul cannot complain if it wants to be defended.

Similar is the issue of host-nation support, embodied in the upcoming renegotiation of the Special Measures Agreement. So long as U.S. troops are deployed to defend the South, Seoul should pick up the tab.

Seoul can, of course, argue that the troops are stationed in the South for America's benefit, but what other contingency would warrant use of American forces? An infantry division would be of no use against China. The United States has no cause to intervene in secondary conflicts—say, Cambodia or Burma versus Thailand.

Even worse, the U.S. interferes with South Korea's ability to defend itself. Washington applied strong pressure on President Park Chung-hee to end his government's nascent nuclear-weapons program. Today an agreement with America—a purely bilateral undertaking—prohibits the South from reprocessing spent nuclear fuel. And even as the DPRK develops long-range missiles the United States limits the range and payload of South Korean missiles.

For the last fifteen years South Korea has attempted to appease the North, by one estimate transferring some \$10 billion in cash and other assistance to Pyongyang, even as the latter threatened to turn Seoul into a lake of fire. No surprise, U.S. officials and legislators are not pleased being expected to protect South Koreans from the enemy they are busy subsidizing. Money is fungible, and \$10 billion goes a long way toward developing nuclear weapons and long-range missiles.

Indeed, after the recent bout of North Korean saber-rattling Congress has gotten into the act, holding hearings on the issue. Seoul's obsequious attempt to negotiate after the DPRK closed the Kaesong Industrial Complex, which should have been shuttered by the South long ago, won no friends in America. Although the Sunshine Policy is dead, President Park is pushing "trustpolitik," which could evolve into something like the

Sunshine Policy. If Seoul still hopes to buy off the North, it should bear the consequences, instead of expecting Americans to step into the gap.

The U.S.-South Korean alliance is an example of a good idea gone bad. Washington essentially stumbled onto the peninsula by accident at the close of World War II. America ended up in an ugly war five years later, but the southern half of the peninsula remained free from Kim Il-sung's grip, resulting in the Republic of Korea we see today.

That very success, however, has eliminated the need for the alliance. The ROK has raced past the North in every measure of national power except military force, and the latter is the result of Seoul's decision to emphasize economic development. Now it's time for South Korea to emphasize security. And not by going global, as envisioned by ROK defense planners, but by defending their own territory.

At the same time, the American military should come home. Michael Green, who handled Asia for the Bush National Security Council, recently talked about "increasing our deterrent and our own defense." South Korea should increase *its* deterrent and *its* defense. And America should go back to being a republic.