

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Set South Korea Free

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For more than six decades, North Korea has threatened the Republic of Korea. In response, the United States fought one full-scale war and even today maintains soldiers on station. Yet Washington restricts Seoul's right to construct missiles for its own defense. The United States should set South Korea free.

America divided the Korean peninsula, then occupied by Japan with the Soviets at the end of World War II. After the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea invaded the South, Washington intervened to save its client state. Since then, the United States has maintained a one-sided "mutual-defense treaty," backed by a military tripwire, currently consisting of twenty-seven thousand personnel.

Yet Washington long has kept the ROK dependent. The Truman administration refused to arm the South with heavy weapons. It feared that irascible authoritarian President Syngman Rhee would act on his promise to march north in an attempt to reunify the country.

Rhee was eventually replaced by General Park Chung-hee, who still was not trusted with advanced technology. In the 1960s, Washington suppressed South Korean efforts to develop nuclear weapons. Although military rule formally ended in 1987, three years later ROK missiles were restricted to a range of 180 kilometers; the "agreement" was amended in 2001 to 300 kilometers and a payload of 500 kilograms. Seoul joined the Missile Technology Control Regime in return for American technical support.

Whatever the original justification for the restrictions, the missile treaty makes no sense today. For years, Seoul has pressed to moderate or eliminate the range limit. In March, President Lee Myung-bak raised the issue again. He complained that "the 300 km was set many years ago on the assumption fighting would happen around the demilitarized zone." Now, he contended, the South faces "new needs in its defense environment."

Enhancing Deterrence

Three years ago, Seoul proposed increasing the missile range to 1000 kilometers, which would reach all of North Korea and raise the payload to more than a ton. Last year, the two governments discussed the issue without leading anywhere. Apparently, the Pentagon opposes any change. Jonathan Pollack of the Brookings Institution explained: “It is my understanding that the U.S. believes this will make more complicated what is already a complicated situation.” China is said to fear that improved South Korean missiles would further destabilize the peninsula.

Both concerns might be real. Neither justifies current policy.

Today, North Korea could devastate the ROK capital of Seoul with its large arsenal of Scud, Musudan and Rodong missiles, used alongside massed artillery fire. Moreover, the North is attempting to develop intercontinental rockets.

So far, Pyongyang hasn’t had much success with the latter—its most recent “satellite launch” failed spectacularly—but persistence might eventually yield results. Moreover, if the North successfully develops nuclear weapons as well as materials and miniaturizes any bombs that it creates, it could eventually threaten South Korea and neighboring states like Japan with nuclear attack. Although North Korea isn’t likely to start a war that it would lose, it continues to spew inflammatory rhetoric, recently threatening to launch “special actions” against the South and turn the ROK government into “ashes in three or four minutes.”

The best response to the DPRK would be an independent South Korean deterrent. The ROK possesses around forty times the economic strength and twice the population of the North. Seoul’s technological edge over Pyongyang is vast. South Korea can more than match any weapons or units created by North Korea.

The South’s army is qualitatively superior despite its quantitative disadvantage. The ROK air force and navy have better equipment and are better trained. In April, Seoul deployed a new cruise missile—which is not covered by the missile treaty—with a range of around 1500 kilometers. It is a useful weapon, but, as an official with South Korea’s Agency for Defense Development noted, “a cruise missile, in general, is vulnerable to being intercepted by the enemy due to its low speed, and it is less powerful than a ballistic missile because of the light payload.” South Korea could create a deadlier and less vulnerable missile force—last year an official with the ADD admitted: “We have secured enough technologies to develop advanced longer-range missiles at any time.”

With the North constantly attempting to improve its strike force and ostentatiously flaunting its efforts, why deny the ROK comparable weapons? Cheon Seong-whun of the Korea Institute for National Unification reasonably contended that “we should have capabilities on par with North Korea’s to enhance our deterrence capabilities.”

While South Korean politics is unpredictable, no ROK government today would strike first. The South has much to lose—starting with the destruction of its capital, Seoul, which sits barely twenty-five miles from the border—and virtually nothing to gain from war. The ROK won the Cold War struggle and likely will absorb whatever emerges in the North once the Kim dynasty and communism pass away. Attempting to rush the process would be reckless beyond measure, and no political party in South Korea, irrespective of its position on the political spectrum, is pushing such an approach.

The Dragon Next Door

Some fear the ROK provoking China, Russia or even Japan. However, Seoul is even less likely to attack these nations than the DPRK. To all of these, argued Cheon, “we can persuade them given that they do have their own long-range missiles and we are not making any provocations or posing any threats to them.”

To Beijing’s presumed objection, the South could suggest that China solve the problem by ending its subsidies for Pyongyang, which enable the latter to survive and develop both missiles and nuclear weapons. Moscow is largely disengaged from the region and has few interests at stake. Tokyo would do better improving security cooperation with the ROK than in objecting to the latter’s efforts to defend itself from the North.

Indeed, increased South Korean military efforts would have the ancillary benefit of creating a modest deterrent against Beijing. Although China so far has been assertive rather than aggressive in East Asia, its behavior is more likely to remain moderate if the price of immoderation rises. The ROK’s ability to strike China—especially with longer-range missiles which could hit Beijing and Shanghai—would introduce a welcome caution to Zhongnanhai as its residents formulate future Chinese policies.

Close the Umbrella

Of course, some in Washington prefer that the United States continue to dominate the world, keeping even populous and prosperous allies in a permanent state of dependence. “We’re within an inch of war almost every day in that part of the world,” complained Defense Secretary Leon Panetta. But America’s interests in Korea do not warrant such risks. And this is an especially foolish policy today, with Washington facing a fiscal crisis. American taxpayers no longer can afford to underwrite the defense of countries well able to defend themselves.

If the North continues to expand its nuclear arsenal, Washington should also rethink its opposition to South Korean and Japanese acquisition of nuclear weapons. Pyongyang would face instant and complete annihilation if it ever attempted to use nuclear weapons against America. In practice, a DPRK nuclear arsenal would threaten its neighbors, not the United States. Yet maintaining a nuclear umbrella in East Asia would permanently entangle America in disputes not its own and create a real if admittedly small risk that local or regional conflicts could end up sacrificing Los Angeles for Seoul or Tokyo.

Better that Washington's democratic and responsible friends have their own small deterrents—against North Korea and China—than make the United States permanently responsible for their defense. The potential of proliferation among America's allies might also cause Beijing to do more to constrain the North, thereby shutting off proliferation before it begins.

Whatever Washington's future role in East Asia, it makes no sense to prevent U.S. allies and friends from defending themselves. The Obama administration should drop all missile restrictions on the ROK. South Korea should decide what arms it needs for its own defense.

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