



Adapting U.S. Foreign Policy to a Changing World

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Cato Institute issued the following announcement on April 21.

The dramatic news that CIA Director Mike Pompeo met in secret with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un over the Easter weekend has renewed hopes that one of the world's most dangerous stand offs might be resolved without war.

President Donald Trump confirmed via Twitter that details for a summit meeting were "being worked out" and predicted "Denuclearization will be a great thing for World, but also for North Korea!" The good feelings continued during the week, with Kim announcing on Saturday that the North no longer needs to conduct nuclear or missile tests.

Americans should welcome such prospects, but South Koreans have reason to be wary. They have the most to lose from conflict on the peninsula, a real possibility if negotiations fail. After all, President Trump has an uneven track record when it comes to making promises and following through. And even as he boasts of his success in getting the North to the negotiating table, he has also said that he wouldn't attend the summit if he thought it wasn't worth it. Unsurprisingly, the South Koreans have also been engaged in direct talks with the North. South Korean President Moon Jae-in will meet Kim next week. There has even been speculation that talks could end the Korean War. For now, however, and thinking beyond secret meetings and high-level summits, South Korea's future, in a very real sense, still hinges on the decisions and actions of men and women living in the United States.

Although that has been the case for decades, it can't ever be a comforting feeling, and that sentiment informed an essay just published in the New York Times. As I note, the process mostly played out well, for both the United States, for South Korea, and for regional stability:

Under American tutelage, South Korea eventually evolved from a desperately poor autocracy to one of the wealthiest democracies on the planet. American taxpayers continue to spend billions of dollars a year to help maintain regional security. A similar process played out in other parts of Asia and in Europe, where the American security umbrella, including tens of thousands of military personnel, provided room for those countries' leaders to build strong democracies and economies.

American leaders argued that such policies served the cause of global peace and security. They also reasoned that the substantial costs would be tolerable. And, so long as American

productivity and workers' wages were rising, it seemed that Uncle Sam could ensure a decent standard of living at home and security around the world.

Of course, the costs associated with defending others were measured in more than American treasure. The Korean War Memorial in Washington, DC, honors the 5.9 million Americans who served in the military between June 1950 and July 1953, and especially the 54,246 who gave their lives in that conflict. The Vietnam Memorial, a short distance away, contains the names of 58,318 Americans who made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of a government in Saigon that struggled to command the respect of the people of South Vietnam, and that collapsed soon after the United States withdrew its support.

This pattern has persisted into the present day. When Iraqi troops were routed by Islamic State fighters in 2014, some took this as proof that U.S. forces should have remained in Iraq. Fear of government collapse in Afghanistan has led two successive U.S. presidents to increase the number of U.S. troops there. President Trump quickly walked back his suggestion that a few thousand troops in Syria would leave any time soon. Supporters of an on-the-ground – and de facto permanent – presence in such places often point to South Korea, Japan, and Germany as examples to emulate. By this logic, Americans win just so long as we never leave.

It is becoming harder, however, as I note in the Times:

for America to maintain this global posture. Eventually, it may become impossible, in part because we helped create the conditions that allowed other countries to prosper and grow....

Americans should be debating how to manage that transition in a way that avoids destabilizing the rest of the world. Unfortunately, if the current administration's maneuvers between the two Koreas are any indication, this is the last thing on the minds of policymakers.

But while many in Washington resist the suggestion that the United States should revisit its approach to the world, other countries' leaders are rethinking their dependence on others. As Constanze Stelzenmüller explained in a recent paper for the Brookings Institution, Europeans, in particular, have an "existential" interest in "preserving an international order that safeguards peace and globalization."

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