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Are U.S. troops in South Korea still necessary?

By John Glaser @jwcglaser January 22, 2014

U.S. soldiers during a live fire training exercise in the South Korean border county of Cheorwon on September 13, 2012. Some 28,500 U.S. troops are based in South Korea under a mutual defense pact to deter against the North Korean threat. Secretary of State John Kerry announced in January that the U.S. will be sending another 800 troops. Jung Yeon-Je/AFP/Getty Images

After meeting with South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry announced on Jan. 7 that the United States would send an additional 800 troops to join the nearly 30,000 American service members already stationed in South Korea.

“We remain fully committed to the defense of the Republic of Korea,” Kerry explained, “including through extended deterrence and putting the full range of U.S. military capabilities in place.”

A day earlier, U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel discussed with Yun “the importance of maintaining a robust combined defense of the Korean Peninsula as a strong deterrent against provocations from North Korea.”

But how necessary is it, really, to continue to fight on one side of a stalemated civil war that has lasted for more than 60 years? Politicians in Washington insist it is in our vital national interest, but that is far from the truth.

The Korean War erupted after World War II, when the defeated Japanese empire, which had occupied the Korean Peninsula since 1895 (and fully annexed it in 1910), retreated. The United States and the then-Soviet Union divided the peninsula in half, and two hostile states emerged. U.S. President Harry Truman intervened, without the consent of Congress, to try to defeat the northern communists. More than 2 million deaths later, an armistice agreement was signed in 1953, neither side the winner.

To this day, the U.S. backs South Korea. Washington has security guarantees with Seoul obligating the U.S to go to war against South Korea's enemies in the event conflict breaks out. Americans are told they must spend taxpayer money providing military aid and paying expensive operating costs for tens of thousands of U.S. troops so that South Korea is properly defended.

But Seoul can easily defend itself. South Korea's GDP is \$1.13 trillion, versus North Korea's paltry \$40 billion, with similar disparities in the sizes of their respective defense budgets.

The brutal authoritarian regime of North Korea is made out to be a major threat to its neighbors, but it is comparatively weak, lacking the kind of advanced industrial and technological military capacity of its southern neighbor and, certainly, the U.S. Experts consider Pyongyang unfit to fight an extended modern battle.

Contrary to the rhetoric that justifies continued U.S. meddling in a civil war that is none of our business, the U.S. military presence in South Korea is not about deterring North Korea. More accurately, it is about maintaining U.S. military dominance in the Asia-Pacific region.

As a January 2013 Congressional Research Service report (PDF) explained, the U.S. has sought "to have a world-wide, continuous global military presence," in order to preserve the extraordinary military and economic superiority it had at the end of World War II.

Throughout the postwar period, Washington has maintained a constant naval presence throughout the Asia-Pacific region as well as military bases in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Guam and, as of 2011, Australia. Washington even backed dictators in Indonesia and fought a disastrous war in Vietnam to help demonstrate its projection of power in the region.

The U.S.'s continued military presence in South Korea engenders geopolitical calculations by regional powers like China to prop up the North Korean regime.

As in the case of South Korea, these military postures came with their own specific justifications. But the real goal has always been to maintain military dominance and prevent the rise of so-called peer competitors, or great power rivals that would undermine U.S. hegemony in the region.

Ironically, the U.S.'s continued military presence and defense treaty with South Korea does nothing to weaken Pyongyang. Instead, it engenders geopolitical calculations on the part of regional great powers like China to prop up the North Korean regime.

China "has helped sustain what is now Kim Jong Un's regime and has historically opposed harsh international sanctions in the hope of avoiding regime collapse," wrote Jayshree Bajoria and Beina Xu in a 2013 report for the Council on Foreign Relations. But, it suggested, "China's patience with its ally may be wearing thin." Indeed, the execution of Kim Jung Un's uncle Jang Song Thaek was thought to be triggered in part by his involvement with alleged plans to push domestic reforms that China has long encouraged.

To Beijing, Pyongyang is something of a nuisance — a perpetually erratic regime with a hellish human rights record that is a constant source of aggravation to China, which is trying to avoid such negative attention from the international community.

China nevertheless endures this embarrassment and continues to safeguard the survival of the North Korean regime because it “is important to Beijing as a bulwark against U.S. military dominance of the region,” according to Bajoria and Xu.

“China has long feared that the United States and its allies seek to encircle or contain China and therefore wants to ensure the continued viability of the North Korean regime,” Julia Famularo, a research affiliate at the Project 2049 Institute, wrote in April for *The Diplomat*.

Indirectly then, Washington’s insistence that South Korea’s problems become our own is part of the reason the North Korean regime has lasted so long, despite seeming perpetually on the verge of collapse.

But there are other dangerous consequences of the U.S.’s interventionist policies on the Korean Peninsula. If a North-South conflict does break out or if, for example, North Korea finally collapses, the U.S. would inevitably be sucked into a potentially major war that would otherwise be of little consequence to Americans.

According to the Cato Institute’s Ted Galen Carpenter, “the current tensions underscore the pitfalls of Washington’s tendency to acquire allies or security clients in a promiscuous manner. At a minimum, such ties cause diplomatic headaches; at worst, they can entangle the United States in unwanted, even irrelevant, conflicts.”

If the recent history of U.S. foreign policy demonstrates anything, it is that its military and diplomatic postures are overstretched, in part because of a whole system of entangling alliances.

“America’s national-security elites act on the assumption that every nook and cranny of the globe is of great strategic significance and that there are threats to U.S. interests everywhere,” the international-relations theorist John Mearsheimer wrote earlier this month.

Contrary to what politicians in Washington persistently claim, Mearsheimer added, what happens in most of the countries the U.S. is allied with “is of little importance for American security.”

Instead of boosting our military presence in South Korea, the U.S. should bring the troops home and nullify the security treaty that says Korea’s disputes will be the United States’ war.

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