

AT LARGE**How Much Longer?**

By Doug Bandow on 6.25.10 @ 6:07AM

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently visited Seoul and declared: "We will stand with you in this difficult hour and we will stand with you always." Always? Whatever for?

North Korea apparently sank a South Korean ship in late March in the Yellow Sea. At first observers heard the distant sound of war drums, as speculation grew about possible military retaliation.

But Seoul reacted with equanimity, even pusillanimity. It cut off all aid, which had mostly ended anyway, and trade, which mattered a little more. The government of President Lee Myung-bak also barred the North's merchant ships from South Korean waters, an inconvenience but little more.

The South threatened to restart propaganda broadcasts across the demilitarized zone, but then temporized. And President Lee left the joint industrial park in Kaesong -- a major source of hard currency for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea -- untouched. No military steps were taken,

Yet the South Korean people appeared to think even these measures were excessive. In the recent local elections the ruling party lost ground. The government didn't get the "rally around the flag" effect that it expected.

So if the government and people of the Republic of Korea don't care much about the DPRK committing an act of war and killing 46 South Korean sailors, why should the U.S. get involved? And especially pledge eternal solidarity?

After the sinking of a South Korean ship, U.S. officials rushed to support the ROK, demand international penalties against the North, and reaffirm the American defense guarantee. The White House announced: "U.S. support for South Korea's defense is unequivocal."

Then Washington promised to bolster the South's military defense and proposed joint military exercises "to ensure readiness and to deter future aggression." There were even discussions of an American carrier joining an exercise or being stationed near the peninsula.

It's been this way for 65 years.

A foreign policy should change to fit international circumstances. And international circumstances in Northeast Asia certainly have changed since 1945.

At the end of World War II in an almost Keystone Cops fashion the U.S. decided to divide the Korean peninsula, then a Japanese colony, with the Soviets. But Washington decided not to defend the new South Korean nation, either by providing it with heavy arms or leaving any U.S. troops. When North Korea predictably invaded, the Truman administration rushed back with American military forces and ended up fighting a bitter war with China as well lasting more than three years.

To prevent a recurrence of conflict, when the armistice was signed in 1953 the U.S. offered a security guarantee and deployed a permanent garrison. At the time only America prevented the DPRK, backed by the Soviet Union and China, from conquering the unstable and impoverished South.

But the balance of power since has shifted dramatically. The ROK took off economically in the 1980s, leaving North Korea far behind. The South now has an economy that ranks in the world's top 13 and is thought to be 30 or 40 times as large as that of the DPRK. South Korea has become a major industrial power and producer of hi-tech goods.

Seoul also has surpassed the North as a leading diplomatic player. Even North Korea's old allies, Moscow and Beijing, have recognized the ROK and formed close economic relationships. China has about 70 times as much trade with the South as with the DPRK. No Chinese troops are likely to come streaming forth on behalf of Pyongyang in any future war.

Only in terms of military forces does South Korea arguably lag. But it makes up in quality what it lacks in quantity. Moreover, there is nothing other than lack of will that prevents the ROK from expanding its forces. With a much larger population and industrial base, it can easily outmatch the North. Unfortunately, Seoul appears to have begun shifting its gaze to regional and international military missions, leaving it more vulnerable at home.

At the same time, the South spent nearly a decade shoveling money to the DPRK as part of the "Sunshine Policy." While engaging Pyongyang made sense, providing largely unconditional aid and other benefits did not. In effect, Seoul was subsidizing its major antagonist while seeking American military protection. "Curious" may be the most positive description one can provide this set of policies.

President Lee Myung-bak largely eliminated subsidies for the North when he took office two years ago. Nevertheless, he backed away from closing the Kaesong development as retaliation for the North Korean attack. Even hardliners in South Korea are squishy by American standards.

But none of that should matter in Washington. It is far past time for the ROK to take over responsibility for its own defense. It can decide how much to spend, how large a military to

maintain, and whether to emphasize domestic or international duties. Having become one of the couple dozen most important countries in the world, the South should play the part in its own defense.

The nuclear issue would remain, but without U.S. forces on station in the South, vulnerable to North Korean attack, Washington could step back there too. Creating a nuclear-free peninsula is most important for South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia. They should take the lead.

Washington could lend its support. But regional parties should do far more. And the recognition that the U.S. wasn't going to continue playing its thankless role would force them to do more.

The world has changed since 1953. Even if the U.S. government was not facing a flood of red ink, it no longer need be guarantor of last resort on the Korean peninsula. It's time to turn South Korea's defense over to the South Korean people.

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