

Don't Rely Too Much on the Recent Korea-U.S. Honeymoon



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The Cato Institute is a famous conservative think tank, even more rightwing than the Heritage Foundation and representing the views of Americans who support "small government" and libertarian ideals. It published a report just before the U.S. and South Korea launched a joint naval exercise in response to North Korea's sinking of the South's Navy corvette Cheonan, titled "The U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Outdated, Unnecessary, and Dangerous."

As the title suggests, it urges the U.S. government to focus on alliances that have not lost their *raison d'être*. Citing the Cheonan incident, it says, "There no longer is any cause to maintain a defense commitment that is all cost and no benefit to the

United States." The think tank calls for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea, saying their presence only complicates a solution to the North Korean nuclear impasse and proposed the scrapping of the Korea-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty.

The author of the report is Doug Bandow, a former aide to President Ronald Reagan. In a recent seminar on the Korean peninsula, Bandow also insisted that it is time for the U.S. to pull out of South Korea.

The report represents the views of a small group of people in the U.S., including some lawmakers, but at present there is no chance that the administration will heed these calls. U.S. President Barack Obama has placed relations with South Korea at the top of his list of priorities, even dispatching his state and defense secretaries to the South at the same time. But the situation could change if the White House falls under the leadership of people who think otherwise. Many South Koreans remember the 1970s, when there were calls within the Carter administration to pull U.S. troops out of South Korea.

In fact, many U.S. officials wonder whether the Seoul-Washington alliance can continue forever. Some officials in Seoul may believe the alliance has reached new heights with the recent "two plus two" meeting between the foreign and defense ministers, but not many in the U.S. feel that way. It is important to realize that the recent show of unity was triggered by temporary circumstances in Northeast Asian diplomacy. America's ties with Japan remain tense, while its relations with China have deteriorated since the start of the Obama administration, increasing the importance of ties with South Korea.

The tasks that lie ahead for South Korea are evident. There is no need to recall memories of the previous administration, when tense relations with Washington led to conflict between parties in the South. South Korea needs to grasp the potential causes of problems in relations with the U.S. and deal with them. At the same time, it must be aware that no alliance in history has been permanent. If unexpected events occur involving North Korea or strained ties between the U.S. and China, Seoul must realize that it cannot rely on other countries to overcome them. That is the best way to ensure a long-lasting and effective South Korea-U.S. alliance.

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