

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVELetting Go

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South Korean defense minister Kim Tae-young wants his nation to initiate a pre-emptive assault if it appears that the North is preparing a nuclear attack. The Republic of Korea "should immediately launch a strike," said Kim.

Such a policy makes obvious sense. However, it leads to the question: if the ROK is strong enough to initiate war, why does the U.S. continue to defend the South?

The U.S.-South Korean mutual defense treaty dates back to 1953, after the Korean War ended in stalemate. Only American military support then preserved the ROK's independence in the face of the heavily militarized Democratic People's Republic of Korea, backed by China and the Soviet Union.

However, that world long ago disappeared. There is no more Soviet Union. Today's China would not support North Korean aggression. And South Korea vastly outmatches the decrepit DPRK on virtually every measure of national power. Pyongyang has a bigger military, but the South's quality counterbalances the North's quantity.

Moreover, Seoul is capable of doing far more. With an economy ranked in the world's top 15, South Korea has roughly 40 times the GDP of the North, strong high-tech industries, and ample international credit; the South also possesses twice the population of its northern antagonist. In short, Seoul can easily outmatch Pyongyang.

Why are nearly 30,000 U.S. troops still on station?

The DPRK recently proposed signing a peace treaty with the U.S. to replace the existing armistice agreement. Washington demurred, explaining that normal relations were impossible until Pyongyang abandoned its nuclear program. State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley stated: "We're not going to pay North Korea to come back to the six-party process."

But a peace treaty should not be seen as a reward for the North. Rather, it would simply formalize the end of hostilities 57 years late. Whether Washington should open diplomatic relations or end economic sanctions are different questions.

Agreeing to discuss terms of peace would offer two benefits. The first would be to place the

U.S. and the DPRK, and perhaps also Seoul, in a simple negotiation where the outcome could benefit all sides. The issue is mostly symbolic -- the North obviously would remain a danger even if it signed such a treaty. But eliminating today's formal state of war might advance talks with Pyongyang.

Admittedly, the odds of reaching an enforceable denuclearization agreement are slim. Nuclear weapons provide the North with numerous benefits. The best hope is pushing for a "grand bargain" backed by China. Even then the odds that the Kim regime, facing a leadership transition, would give up its most potent weapon are slim at best. But given the lack of good alternatives -- military strikes could trigger a full-scale war while enhanced sanctions would require Beijing's consent -- the diplomatic effort is worth pursuing, despite the scant chance of success.

The second benefit of such an agreement is more particular to the U.S. There's no reason, even during a formal state of war, for America to defend the South. The argument for a U.S. defense guarantee looks even weaker if the parties officially end today's state of hostilities.

Washington already is reducing its role. U.S. troop levels have fallen from 36,000 to 28,500 over the last decade. In 2012 the Pentagon will turn over wartime operational command (OPCON) of Korean forces to Seoul.

It's time to finish the process, pulling out the rest of America's troops and ending Washington's security guarantee. Despite efforts to refashion and "strengthen" the alliance, its *raison d'être* has disappeared.

The protection of the ROK always was vital to the ROK. With the Cold War over, South Korea's security no longer is of great concern to Washington. There is no international communist menace behind a potential North Korean attack.

Moreover, threats against the South are fading: a decrepit North increasingly is incapable of winning a war. Neither Japan nor China has any interest in conflict; even a more aggressive and powerful Beijing is not likely to resort to arms against the ROK. And Seoul is capable of creating a potent defense.

America's security priorities are broader -- fighting terrorism and confronting potential hostile global hegemonic powers. But the first doesn't require large military forces and the second doesn't currently exist. Nor will bilateral military cooperation over such issues be easy.

South Korea is not threatened by Islamic terrorism and Seoul has little interest in the difficult task of creating a friendly government in Kabul. The South plans to dispatch 350 soldiers to Afghanistan, but for the purpose of buttressing U.S. support for continuing the alliance.

The plan is controversial in South Korea and of little practical value to America. In fact, it would be better if the ROK devoted its full resources to raising, equipping, and training adequate forces for action on the Korean peninsula. Seoul can do far more to defend itself than remake Afghanistan. The latter mission is a diversion.

Although willing to make a gesture regarding Afghanistan, the South is unlikely to cooperate with the U.S. against China, a Washington priority. South Korea doesn't want to become a permanent enemy of the colossus next door in service of America's broader geopolitical

interests. It is one thing for Seoul to seek U.S. aid in the unlikely event of attempted Chinese coercion of the South; it is quite another for South Korea to join Washington in a war to defend, say, Taiwan.

There are lots of other suggested areas of cooperation, such as international development and UN peacekeeping, but none of these grow out of today's bilateral relationship -- and especially America's essentially unilateral security guarantee. Whatever the future of ROK-U.S. relations, there is no need for America to defend the South.

That doesn't mean the two governments should not cooperate: both have an interest in a stable and prosperous East Asia. But their cooperation should be issue-by-issue, whether informal and bilateral or formal and multilateral.

U.S. policy towards South Korea remains trapped in the past. Adm. Timothy Keating, America's commander in the Asia-Pacific, recently announced: "We are prepared to execute a wide range of options in concert with allies in South Korea" against North Korea, if necessary. But shouldn't the ROK execute those options? Gen. Walter Sharp, U.S. commander in the South, said that allied forces are ready for "anything North Korea can throw at us." Shouldn't South Korea be ready?

There also has been discussion of an American military role in occupying the North should the Kim regime collapse, and even in combating any resulting insurgency. Why should the U.S. intervene in an area of primary concern to the increasingly capable ROK?

That coping with a North Korean collapse might be expensive and burdensome is true, but it is time for America's prosperous and populous friends and allies to begin coping with their problems. Washington remains very busy, facing an escalating and lengthy war in Afghanistan. Moreover, with annual deficits of \$1 trillion projected for the next decade, Washington is out of money. The U.S. should stop underwriting the security costs of other nations.

A South Korean policy of pre-emptive war makes sense -- for South Korea. But Seoul should accept the full costs of its own strategy. The ROK should be dependent on Washington no more.

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