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Doug Bandow

Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute

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Let the Koreans Take Care of the Koreans

It has been weeks since the South Korean ship Cheonan sank in the Yellow Sea near the disputed boundary between South and North Korea. As yet the cause is unknown--some government critics suspect a cover-up--but after raising the wreck South Korean officials said the explosion appeared to be external. Which implicates Pyongyang.

If the cause was a mine, a North-South confrontation still could be avoided. The mine might have been left over from the Korean War. Or if of more modern vintage it could have broken loose from its moorings.

If a torpedo was used, however, the threat of conflict rises. The Republic of Korea could not easily ignore a North Korean submarine stalking and sinking one of its vessels.

Seoul has promised "a firm response," though, argues Han Sung-joo, a former ROK foreign minister and U.S. ambassador, "that doesn't mean a military reaction or an eye-for-eye response." In fact, the South did not retaliate after earlier provocations, such as the terrorist bombing of a South Korean airliner and assassination attempt against former president Chun Doo-hwan which killed 16 ROK officials.

A military reprisal then could have triggered a full-scale war. Responding in kind this time also could spark a dangerous escalatory spiral with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

However, Seoul has spent the last decade attempting to pacify the DPRK, providing aid, allowing investment, and hosting summits. To do nothing would seem to be abject appeasement, undermining ROK credibility and encouraging the North to act even more recklessly in the future. If the word "firm" has any meaning, the South Korean government would have to do more than protest.

Still, the decision, though difficult, shouldn't concern the U.S. The South has gone from an authoritarian economic wreck to a democratic economic powerhouse. With a vastly bigger and more sophisticated economy, larger population, and greater access to international markets and support than the North, Seoul long has been able to defend itself. Pyongyang retains a numerical military edge, but its weapons are old, troops are undertrained, and industrial base is shrinking.

Thus, the South should be able to decide on the action that best advances its security. However, Seoul long chose to emphasize economic development over military preparedness. As a result, the ROK remains dependent on America.

Some 27,000 U.S. personnel are stationed in the South. The U.S. retains formal command of all forces, American and South Korean, during a war. Seoul expects substantial U.S. air

and naval support and ground reinforcement in the event of war.

Which means that ROK retaliation against the DPRK would draw the U.S. into any conflict. So Washington cannot help but pressure South Korean decision-makers to act in accord with American as well as ROK interests. In fact, that's what happened in 1983, when the U.S. insisted that Seoul not retaliate militarily after the bombing attack on President Chun.

The current situation also means that the destiny of America is essentially controlled by the North's Kim Jong-il. Ordering an attack on a South Korean ship could end up forcing Washington to go to war. Although the bilateral U.S.-South Korean defense treaty does not make American intervention automatic, it is unimaginable that an American administration would stand aside in a conflict.

This is a ludicrous position for both the U.S. and South Korea, six decades after Washington saved a far weaker ROK from a North Korean invasion in the midst of the Cold War. Neither country is well-served by Seoul's continuing defense dependency on America.

Unfortunately, the policy incongruities only are likely to worsen. The ROK desires to wield increasing influence beyond its own shores. While relying on American military forces to defend its homeland, the South Korean government is crafting its navy for more distant contingencies and deploying ground personnel in the Middle East and Central Asia. Yet Seoul found that when the enemy struck at home, assuming the Cheonan was sunk by the North, the South Korean military was ill-prepared to defend its own personnel.

At the same time, with the threat of a North Korean invasion dramatically diminished--whether or not Pyongyang was responsible for the ship sinking--Washington looks increasingly at other "dual uses" of American forces stationed in the peninsula. However, Seoul is unlikely to assent if the U.S. tries to turn the ROK into an advanced base in a regional conflict, particularly against China. Indeed, the South Korean government would be foolish beyond measure if it allowed Washington to turn the South into a military adversary of the ROK's increasingly powerful neighbor, a nation with a long memory.

What value, then, is the alliance?

Some proponents view it as a useful tool of nonproliferation, discouraging South Korea from developing a nuclear weapon. However, that possibility remains remote. Although nuclear negotiations with the North hardly look promising, China might yet forcefully weigh in to halt the North Korean program. Moreover, the U.S. could maintain a nuclear umbrella over the ROK without keeping conventional forces on the ground in South Korea, which only act as nuclear hostages vulnerable to DPRK intimidation.

Moreover, the most powerful incentive for Beijing to apply significant pressure on the North to denuclearize (and not just return to the Six-Party talks) is the threat of further proliferation. The People's Republic of China does not fear a North Korean atomic bomb. The PRC might not worry unduly about a South Korean weapon.

But Japan and even Taiwan might consider joining a growing nuclear parade. That possibility should raise more than eyebrows in Beijing, encouraging a vigorous response to halt the process at the start. The best way to keep the ROK and neighboring states non-nuclear is to make the North non-nuclear. The best way to make North Korea non-nuclear is for the PRC to use its full array of diplomatic and economic tools on Pyongyang.

Should it become clear that the DPRK was responsible for sinking the Cheonan, Seoul will be under pressure to act. Ryou Kihl-jae, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies, predicts the government's response will be "to supplement the current military defense system in a crisis situation."

But that should have been done long ago. The lesson of the Yellow Sea incident for both the U.S. and South Korea is that it is long past time for the ROK to take over responsibility for its own defense.

Whatever the two nations' military relationship in the future--their cultural and economic ties will remain natural and vibrant regardless--it should be based on global cooperation in areas of shared interest. The old Cold War mission of America protecting South Korea from the DPRK should be gracefully retired.

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