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Seoul Can Defend Itself

by Doug Bandow

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Any normal country would be embarrassed. South Korea has the world's thirteenth-largest economy, is a member of the G-20 and has pretensions of being a global power. But the government of the Republic of Korea just reaffirmed its helpless dependence on the American military.

Has no one in Seoul any shame?

South Korea has about forty times the GDP and twice the population of the North. On broad measures of military power, the matchup mimics the relative strengths of the United States and Mexico. The world would react with derision if Washington begged other nations for military assistance. Yet the ROK remains dependent on an American security guarantee and troop deployments.

That's not all, however. Since the Korean War, the U.S. military retains operational control (OPCON) *of both militaries* in any renewed conflict. The policy made sense sixty years ago. The ROK was a national wreck, with ill-trained troops and uncertain officers. An aggressive and disagreeable semi-dictator continually threatened to start new wars and continue old ones. Both nations benefited from American military control.

That was decades ago, however. The ROK has become a leading industrial state and developed a stable democracy. Seoul has raced past its northern antagonist economically, established relations with its old Cold War nemeses China and Russia, and staked a place among the world's top powers.

It is fully capable of defending itself. And it certainly is capable of controlling its own troops in any war.

OPCON long has been an irritant to South Korean nationalists. Only in 1994 was peacetime operational control passed back to the ROK. In 2007 the two governments agreed that wartime OPCON would go to Seoul in 2012, allowing a five-year transition.

The decision was roundly criticized, especially by South Koreans who worried that Washington might feel less inclined to subsidize the ROK's defense if U.S. troops could end up under Seoul's command. But America's military commitment grows out of the mutual-defense treaty, not OPCON. If South Koreans perceive that commitment to be unsure, it is because the security environment has changed dramatically since the treaty was inked in 1953.

Since foreign policy should retain at least a vague connection to global realities, a change in America's security guarantee is long overdue. The threats facing the South and the South's capabilities in responding are far different than they once were. Seoul's National Intelligence Service reportedly has admitted that even without U.S. support, the South's military is stronger than that of the North. Continuing dependency makes no sense.

But the relevance of the security guarantee is irrelevant to OPCON. Even if the alliance still made

geopolitical sense, American command control would not.

The more substantive yet more curious criticism was that the South Korean military wasn't ready. It makes one wonder what the ROK armed forces have been up to all these years. Even given five years to prepare for the transfer, the South would still be helpless. What is wrong in Seoul?

In fact, the issue is not capability. Larry Niksch, formerly of the Congressional Research Service, noted at a conference earlier this year:

Since the [Combined Forces Command] was formed in the late 1970s, U.S. and South Korean military personnel have worked side-by-side—physically side-by-side—in all of the operations of the command. It is difficult to believe that the South Korean command has not achieved a high level of preparedness over this 30-year period.

What apparently drove the delay in OPCON transfer was symbolism. After the apparent sinking by North Korea of the South Korean corvette, the *Cheonan*, in March and consequent deterioration in bilateral relations, there is much talk about shoring up deterrence. After ROK President Lee Myung-bak met with President Barack Obama at the G-20 Summit in Toronto the former explained that the delay “reflects the current security condition on the Korean peninsula and will strengthen the alliance of the two nations.”

Although it's not certain what Pyongyang thinks about any particular U.S. or South Korean policy, emphasizing ROK helplessness probably is not a good way of deterring the North. Presumably Kim Jong-il and his generals can discern the difference between the presence of numerous well-trained and well-equipped soldiers in the South and a shift in command arrangements which in no way affects the number of those boots on the ground. If deterrence is the issue, then Seoul should embark upon a major military build-up.

Indeed, what the Lee government really needs to do is fund the modernization initiatives already planned. Seoul's Defense Reform 2020 has fallen several years behind schedule. If the ROK does not feel confident about defending itself, it should take action. The proposed 7 percent increase in military spending for next year should be just the start.

For instance, South Korea's navy is bigger and presumably better than that of the North, yet it proved vulnerable to what was probably a North Korean mini-sub. Defenders of the alliance continue to point to Pyongyang's quantitative advantages in troops, armor and artillery: if the numbers matter so much, the South should match or exceed them. Fears also have been expressed about the possibility of a swift North Korean capture of the Seoul-Inchon area despite many allied advantages. If the North's forces have any hope of achieving such a success, then it is the responsibility of the Lee government to do whatever is necessary to prevent such an operation. In contrast, delaying the OPCON transfer does not make South Korea any more secure.

The ROK has much to be proud of. It arose out of colonial repression and military destruction. The transition was long and difficult, but the South now numbers among the world's most successful and important nations.

Yet South Korea remains a defense-welfare client, unaccountably dependent on America. No doubt, Seoul finds it hard to give up U.S. defense subsidies. Yet it is irresponsible for the Lee government to promote global military ambitions while leaving its own forces ill-prepared to defend the nation. And it is embarrassing for that same government to announce that the ROK is not even capable of commanding its own forces in wartime.

Whether or not the ROK is willing to change, Washington should take the lead. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently declared in Seoul: “We will stand with you in this difficult hour and we will stand with you always.” If that means be a friend, then fine. If that means defend the South, it makes no sense.

The American government is broke. The national debt exceeds \$13 trillion. The administration predicts at least \$10 trillion in new debt over the next decade. The deficit this year alone is \$1.6 trillion. A host of U.S. government agencies are running up more debts that Washington will have to cover: Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation and more. Then there are Social Security and Medicare, which currently have a combined unfunded liability of \$107 trillion.

Transferring OPCON was an important start, but only a start. For good reason Americans don’t like to leave their soldiers under foreign command. In this case, the 28,500 personnel on station should come home as the ROK takes over responsibility for its own defense. And there’s no need for American troops to go back to manpower-rich South Korea in any conflict.

Alliances shouldn’t be forever. Instead, they should respond to particular threats in particular geopolitical environments. The era that spawned the U.S.-ROK alliance is long past. South Koreans should take over responsibility for their own defense.

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