

The Japan Times

Time for South Korea to defend itself

Doug Bandow
September 15, 2015

As South and North Korea exchanged artillery fire in late August, the United States rushed three B-2 bombers to Guam. The Obama administration hoped to deter the North from taking military action, but why is Seoul still a helpless dependent 62 years after the Korean War ended? Imagine a hostile relationship existing between the U.S. and Mexico. The Mexicans pour their limited resources into their military and threaten America with war. Washington responds by begging Europe and Japan to send military aid.

America would face raucous laughter. After all, the U.S. has more than 2.5 times Mexico's population. America's GDP is an even more impressive 14 times that of Mexico's. Yet the disparity between South Korea and North Korea is larger. The South enjoys a population edge of two-to-one and an economic advantage upward of 40-to-one.

Seoul has stolen away the North's chief military allies, China and Russia, which no longer would fight for the North Korea. On every measure of national power save military South Korea dominates. And it lags on the latter only out of choice.

Indeed, the South even has surrendered control of its armed forces to the U.S. Wartime operational control, or OPCON, goes to the American military. Decades have gone by but the South Koreans say they still aren't ready to manage their own troops. Some officials candidly admit that they fear taking control might encourage Washington to bring home its forces.

South Korean officials occasionally resent America's dominant role. Nevertheless, the South, like Japan and Europe, likes having a superpower pick up a big chunk of its defense tab.

The South's dependent relationship does not benefit America. The more defense commitments the U.S. makes, the larger the armed forces it must raise and deploy. The principal burden is not the cost of basing troops in the South, for which Seoul helps pay, but the expense of creating the units. The reason Washington accounts for more than 40 percent of the globe's military spending is that Americans must pay an exorbitant price to project power far from the U.S. even when they have no vital interests at stake.

Equally worrisome is the prospect of using those forces in a war. North Korea would lose, but the cost likely would be horrendous. Unfortunately, the Kim dynasty has made provocation and brinkmanship the core of its foreign policy. Mistake or misjudgment could turn a violent act into a general war. Opined Defense Secretary Ashton Carter: "Korea is one of these places that is a

tinder box. It's probably the single place in the world where war could erupt at the snap of our fingers."

Why is the U.S. still entangled in the volatile geopolitics of the Korean Peninsula? It's certainly not because the South is incapable of defending itself. Some analysts imagine American forces on the peninsula doing double duty, both protecting the South and serving other U.S. interests. However, there's no cause for garrisoning the Asian mainland. Other nations should do more for their own defense rather than rely on America.

An army division in South Korea wouldn't be much use in a war with China. Indeed, Seoul would not allow the U.S. to turn South Korea into a battlefield. South Koreans will have to live with China long after America goes home.

There are areas where the U.S. and South might want to cooperate militarily, but that only requires a shared interest, not a "mutual" defense treaty. On other issues, such as economic development and environmental protection, the military relationship is irrelevant.

South Korean governments have sought to "pay" the U.S. by participating in some of Washington's more foolish wars—Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the small South Korean contributions, especially in the latter two conflicts, do not warrant a permanent security guarantee and military deployment amidst the most volatile and dangerous military confrontation on earth.

The U.S. and South Korea have plenty of other ties, including commercial and family connections which span the Pacific. But trade and friendship do not depend on a military relationship.

What to do about the North would remain an issue, but it wouldn't matter much to the U.S. Pyongyang is threatening to attack America only because American troops target North Korea. North Korea's neighbors, including China, have far more at stake in stopping the North's nuclear activities.

Foreign policy should reflect global realities. The radical transformation of Northeast Asia over the last six decades requires a similarly radical transformation of the alliance.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.