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Ending the Anachronistic Korean Commitment, Part 1

by Doug Bandow

The United States has defended South Korea (the Republic of Korea, or ROK) for 50 years. But newly elected ROK President Roh Moo-hyun suggests that his nation might “mediate” in any war between America and North Korea (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or DPRK). Talk about one-way alliances!

The presence of 37,000 troops in South Korea is a Cold War artifact, resulting from the post-World War II division of the peninsula and subsequent Chinese and Soviet support for North Korean aggression. Today the Cold War is over and China and Russia are friendlier with Seoul than with Pyongyang.

Moreover, the South has raced ahead of the North, enjoying 40 times the GDP, twice the population, and a vast technological edge. The DPRK’s military is large, but decrepit. To the extent that the ROK’s military still lags behind that of its northern antagonist, it is a matter of choice, not necessity.

Although no U.S. forces are needed to guard against the bankrupt North, they are ubiquitous in South Korea, with some based in downtown Seoul. Thus occur purposeless violent altercations and tragic traffic deaths.

After the acquittal in military court of two soldiers charged in the accidental deaths of two children, demonstrations erupted. Americans have been barred from restaurants, jeered, and in a few cases physically attacked.

President-elect Roh has called for a more “equal” relationship and promised not to “kowtow” to Washington. Even the United States seems prepared to change the Status of Forces Agreement governing the treatment of American servicemen.

But the relationship between the two countries will never be equal as long as South Korea is dependent on Washington for its defense. And that inequality will weigh particularly heavily in dealing with the prospect of a nuclearized North Korea. Washington continues to dominate policy on the peninsula. Yet a misstep towards Pyongyang would be only bothersome for the United States; it would be catastrophic for the South.

It is time for Washington to move to the background. First, it should downplay the current crisis — thereby reducing the value of the DPRK’s nuclear card — and leave the surrounding states to

pressure Pyongyang to drop its program. More fundamentally, the United States should drop its security guarantee for South Korea and withdraw (and demobilize) its troops stationed there. The American protectorate over South Korea has lost its *raison d'être*. It's time for an amicable divorce rather than a much more bitter parting in the near future. Subhead: Whither inter-Korean relations?

Hopes for an end to the Korean cold war raced skyward when ROK President Kim Dae Jung visited Pyongyang in mid 2000. Since then relations have waxed and waned. But this should come as no surprise, since that has long been the pattern of inter-Korean relations.

In 1972 the two Koreas signed a reconciliation agreement and halted hostile propaganda. The accord, which endorsed unification, promised inter-Korean exchanges, and provided for a bilateral telephone hot-line, soon collapsed. A decade later the North Koreans attempted to assassinate the South Korean president, Chun Doo Hwan, during a state visit to Rangoon, Burma.

In 1990 the two nations' prime ministers met; soon thereafter they inked agreements on weapons disarmament and economic cooperation. The latter was even more detailed than the pledges made by the two Kims in June. But the nuclear crisis soon followed, with the U.S. government threatening (and, by some accounts, coming close to inaugurating) war.

In 1994 North Korea's Kim Il Sung and South Korea's Kim Young Sam planned a summit, only for the former die of a heart attack 17 days before the meeting. Relations rapidly soured, with the North returning to threats and aggressive action.

Since then positive changes have occurred, even though they have been frequently overshadowed — by a naval shootout, for instance, and most obviously by the recent nuclear announcement. Yet, argues William Taylor, president of TAI, a Washington, D.C., consulting firm, who has traveled extensively to North Korea, the intermittent process reflects the deep suspicions that continue to dominate much of North Korea's leadership and the lack of Western-educated technocrats to respond to the economic and political challenges of an opening to the West.

Moreover, the obstacles to increased trade and investment remain immense. The North has attempted to create a more inviting investment climate, and some North Korean officials evidence surprising knowledge of the outside world. But the DPRK remains an isolated totalitarian country: It lacks a rule of law, convertible currency, productive industry, and transportation network; business customs differ and even many companies which once intended to invest in the North have abandoned their plans.

Most important, the DPRK remains as capable, if perhaps not as willing, to threaten South Korea. Nearly two million soldiers still fill the peninsula. Although Pyongyang has pulled some FROG-7 rocket emplacements back to the rear and reduced naval activities, the bulk of its military remains poised near the border. Argues Karl Swanson, chief historian of U.S. Forces Korea, "Don't think of it as a heavily armed border — think of it as a fighting zone waiting for the attack to be launched." Although the South's qualitatively superior force would most likely triumph, Seoul, barely 25 miles south of the Demilitarized Zone, would almost certainly be destroyed in any conflict.

Unresolved problems

Thus, the past will not soon lift its heavy hand. Observes Robert Gallucci, dean of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, "There is a lot of history here — war, terrorism, nuclear ambitions, incidents at sea — that suggests the need for a lot of caution." And even more reason for the United States to leave the issues to the surrounding powers that should be most concerned about them.

What the 2000 summit yielded, then, was the first step in a long process of rapprochement. A huge, indeed vital, first step. But a first step nonetheless.

The Clinton administration responded with what Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon called "controlled exuberance," lifting economic sanctions. U.S. companies now can trade and invest in nonstrategic areas without a license and open direct communication and transportation links. One official told the *Los Angeles Times*, "It's not a reward, because we don't know if there's anything to reward yet. It's the U.S. trying to do what it can to support this positive movement by North and South Korea."

This step was long overdue. The 1994 Framework Agreement, negotiated in an attempt to halt the North's nuclear program, also committed Washington to improve bilateral ties. Although misbehavior by DPRK gave the Clinton administration a convenient excuse to do nothing, Washington had as much as the North to gain, if not more, from improving relations with Pyongyang.

But upon taking office President George W. Bush almost immediately changed course. Although his skepticism towards foreign aid for the North (in contrast to his enthusiasm for increased assistance everywhere else in the world) was understandable, his refusal to talk with the North was not. He and his advisors seemed to prefer isolation as a policy even though isolation had failed to transform Pyongyang over the previous 50 years.

It seemed to be an especially foolish policy, since along the way there have been a few signs of progress. Kim Jong Il and various North Korean officials continue to say that a return visit by Kim to Seoul is certain, though the timing is not. Indeed, in 2001 Pyongyang hosted a marathon, with Western advertising sponsors and some leading international runners. An executive for Italy's Fila Sport SpA told the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, "We're getting great exposure up there." An even more intriguing sponsor was the British newspaper, the *Financial Times*.

Kim Jong Il traveled to Shanghai and exhibited interest in information technology, another positive sign; Pyongyang claims to plan to open an information technology center and requested outside investment. The North opened diplomatic relations with a number of Asian and European states and began participating in regional organizations (such as the ASEAN Regional Forum). Moreover, the ROK and Russia have begun working on a rail link, which would dramatically increase the potential benefits of opening the line between North and South. This work continues despite a bitter debate in the ROK over how to respond to the North's ambitions.

Of course, the DPRK is hoping to benefit from the economic investment that will follow a political opening without having to bear the cost of the pressures for political reform that often follow economic growth. Explains Kim Chung Kyun of the Hyundai Research Institute in Seoul, "North Korea has followed a mosquito-net liberalization policy. They're trying to open the window to catch a cool summer breeze without letting in the insects." But the danger created for the North by successful enterprises will be enormous. Increasing contact with the West will almost inevitably have some corrosive political impact.

Alliance forever?

More important for Washington is the issue of its alliance with the South. Washington naturally denies that anything, even changing dynamics on the peninsula, should have any impact on American troop deployments. P.J. Crowley, spokesman for the Clinton National Security Council, said, “We don’t envision any change in the U.S. troops status.” Kenneth Bacon observed that the ROK expects the troops to remain “for a long time to come.”

Opined Clinton’s secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, “Our forces, when they are stationed somewhere, provide evidence of America’s interest.” In Korea, she claimed, they promote “stability.” Robert Manning of the Council on Foreign Relations epitomized establishment fears when he worried not only about South Korean “giddiness” but also about the “loose talk about the future of the U.S.-South Korean alliance and the U.S. military presence in Korea.”

The Bush administration took an even tougher policy. In fact, President Kim found himself badly deflated when he visited the United States in March 2001. President Bush was dismissive of the South’s efforts to engage the North. Subsequent discussions between Washington and the DPRK were perfunctory at best.

There is much for the two countries to discuss. Especially after the latter’s dramatic announcement that it had been pursuing nuclear research despite the Framework Agreement that was to have halted the North’s program in return for construction of two nuclear reactors.

But America’s policy discussion needs to begin with the ROK. After all, Washington has no intrinsic interest in what goes on in North Korea. An impoverished distant state surrounded by significant powers (China, Japan, Russia), the DPRK has no international impact and little regional influence, and it poses a diminishing danger even to South Korea. Put bluntly, it shouldn’t matter to the United States.

The only reason America cares is that the South is a U.S. protectorate. It’s time for that to change.

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