



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Ending the Anachronistic Korean Commitment, Part 2

by Doug Bandow

In the aftermath of the 2000 inter-Korean summit, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon explained, “We intend to remain a force for stability in that area as long as we are needed.” But U.S. forces weren’t needed even before the summit.

South Korea (the Republic of Korea, or ROK) has upwards of 40 times the GDP and twice the population of North Korea (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or DPRK). Although the North Korean regime survives, to the surprise of many observers, the economy is thought to have shrunk every year from 1990 to 1998, dropping almost in half. Even Pyongyang, the capital and national showcase, is reported to have suffered power outages. As many as two million people are thought to have died of starvation, with 200,000 or more illegally crossing into China.

Seoul has also won the foreign contest, accumulating the most international recognitions and effectively breaking the alliance between the North and its onetime communist allies, Beijing and Moscow. Both maintain more significant economic ties with the ROK. Moscow apparently has refused to commit to the large arms package the DPRK is reported to have requested; in contrast, Russia has begun shipping arms to the South to pay off its debts.

Leading indicators

Curiously, Gen. Thomas Schwartz, commander of U.S. forces in Korea, told Congress in March 2001 that “the threat is more serious today than it was last year.” He complained that the North has “the world’s largest artillery force for such a small nation,” and he hoped for acquisition of the Crusader howitzer and other artillery systems in response. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz similarly ranked the DPRK as the most serious threat against the United States: “We face enormous conventional threats from North Korea.”

But who is “we”? America does not face a conventional threat from Pyongyang. America’s ally, the ROK, does. The defense of the South obviously is not — or certainly should not be — as important to Washington as the defense of America.

Moreover, the threat is diminishing and Seoul’s ability to defend itself is increasing. For instance, the North’s forces are decrepit. The last new weapons arrived in 1990, ancient history in terms of weapons acquisition. There is no money for spare parts, maintenance, or training. The North’s air

force and navy would disappear within an hour of the commencement of hostilities. The army's mass of men and arms might reach Seoul; it would not get much farther, however.

Indeed, South Korea leads the DPRK in every measure of national power other than armed-force levels, and the latter is a matter of choice, not an inevitable consequence of geography. Seoul's military is qualitatively better and backed by a larger reserve, much stronger economic base, and network of friendly states. The ROK could match its northern neighbor tank for tank if it wished. As South Korea acknowledges in its own defense reports, for years it *chose* to focus on economic development at the expense of military strength, which it could do, secure in the protection by the United States.

Indeed, Seoul has indicated its willingness to respond to North Korean efforts to build uniquely threatening weapons. More than two decades ago only pressure from Washington killed the Park Chung Hee government's incipient nuclear program. And while the North's missile development has created a furor, Seoul has responded with its own missile program, including rockets allegedly intended for a nascent space program. In fact, South Korea has been working to extend the range of its surface-to-surface missiles, which raised American complaints that it was violating the two nations' missile-development agreement.

In such a world, there's no need for Washington to defend the South. The U.S. deployment is an anachronism, a Cold War leftover with no present justification. (The units should not just be withdrawn, but disbanded, since their role as well as basing facilities would be eliminated.)

Of course, some people back the U.S. presence in Korea for what Avery Goldstein, director of the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Asia Program, calls "dual-use" purposes. That is, North Korea provides a convenient pretext to maintain troops actually directed at other purposes — containing China, restraining Japan, and maintaining regional stability. Alas for supporters of American involvement, Goldstein worries that "rapprochement on the Korean peninsula will eliminate this line of argument and require the U.S. and its allies, including Japan, to offer new justifications for their post-Cold War military postures." Imagine, peace breaking out and ruining the argument for continued U.S. occupation! Poor Washington.

The "dual-use" arguments are outmoded, however. Whatever the future course of Chinese-U.S. relations, and Beijing is not an inevitable enemy, the forces in Korea (especially the lone Army division) would be of little use, since America would hardly be so foolish as to fight a ground war against China.

Moreover, Japan is not about to embark upon another imperialist rampage. Finally, the greatest threats to regional stability are internal — Muslim insurgency and political chaos in the Philippines; democratic protests and ethnic conflict in Burma; economic, ethnic, nationalistic, and religious division in Indonesia. There is little that U.S. forces stationed in Korea could do to solve any of these problems even if the American people had the slightest interest in Washington's getting involved in such irrelevant troubles.

Initiative grabbing

There were subtle indications that Seoul intended to grab the policy initiative away from Washington even before the recent election. And President Roh almost certainly will chart a more

independent course. Official fear over U.S. aggressiveness towards the North mixed with popular anger over American intrusiveness make a combustible combination. So, too, has Tokyo taken an increasingly active diplomatic role, including a summit with Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang despite Washington's concerns.

A new policy for a new age

Policy towards Seoul is simple. Withdraw America's troops. And end the defense guarantee. Leave the American and South Korean peoples to trade with one another and expand the abundant cultural ties that already exist centered on the large Korean community in the United States.

The North is more complicated. Although prior predictions of imminent collapse have proven false, North Korea seems destined for the great dustbin of history. The only question seems to be whether North Korea's communist government will fall peacefully.

The U.S. government should end all trade and investment restrictions, which would most likely accelerate the demise of North Korea's communist system, and initiate diplomatic relations. In the aftermath of Pyongyang's violation of the Framework Agreement, food aid should be left to private groups.

Washington should talk with the North about its demands — a final peace treaty, for instance — but Washington should reverse today's dynamic, under which the North misbehaves in the hope of receiving foreign-aid benefits. More important, the United States should let the surrounding states take the lead. China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea all have more at stake; all have an incentive to discourage a nuclearized North Korea; all have significant leverage over the DPRK.

Korea for the Koreans

In any case, their future course, whether together or separate, should be determined by the two Koreas. With the collapse of hegemonic communism and the DPRK's international support system, Washington and Seoul have increasingly diverged in their assessment of the threat posed by North Korea and the proper course to take towards the North. Understandably, the ROK is far less interested in increasing pressure and thus tensions on the peninsula.

The South (and surrounding states) has the most at stake and the most to gain. Outside the context of the Cold War, Washington's opinion simply doesn't matter. Of course, warmer relations between the two Koreas is likely to lead to less ROK reliance on Washington. That bothers not only American hegemonists who want to dominate the world, but also some Koreans. Complains Jeon Jae Wook, an advisor to the opposition Grand National Party, "This could open up a Pandora's box by triggering a surge of nationalism that could weaken our alliance with the U.S. and Japan." Some fear a tilt towards China, which dominated the peninsula in centuries past.

But today's quasi-imperial relationship is not good for either America or the ROK. The last revision of the Status of Forces Agreement, which treated Seoul with a bit more respect as an independent nation, obviously didn't go nearly far enough. The Korean War in the midst of the Cold War, with the persistent threat of renewed North Korean aggression, resulted in the

unnatural tie between Washington and Seoul. However necessary it might have been through the 1970s, since then the South has moved steadily ahead of the DPRK. The ROK has become a serious country; serious countries normally control their own destinies. By, for example, defending themselves.

Reducing America's role will create uncertainties, of course, but a changing defense posture is inevitable in a changing world. There may have been no better moment for such a shift over the last half century. Write Nick Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute and Richard Ellings of the National Bureau of Asian Research,

“There probably has been no previous period in modern history when animosities between all of the great powers of the Pacific were as attenuated as they are today — or when the international structure of security and economic relations so encouraged national advance through commercial cooperation and international economic integration among them.”

Engagement with North Korea is not appeasement; rather, it is a pragmatic strategy to maintain peace on the Korean peninsula until the communist regime disappears. But America's engagement only needs to be modest, since the South and its neighbors are capable of taking the lead. After a half-century of sometimes tempestuous patron-client relations, it is time that the United States acknowledges the existence of the North and forges a friendship of equals with the South.

Doug Bandow is senior fellow at [The Cato Institute](#) and serves as adjunct scholar for The Future of Freedom Foundation.