49. *Weaning South Korea*

The U.S. government should

- withdraw all American forces from South Korea over the next four years;
- offer to sell Seoul whatever conventional weapons it wishes to purchase;
- announce its intention to terminate the mutual defense treaty by the end of the decade;
- continue improving relations with North Korea by meeting America's obligations under the nuclear agreement, formalizing relations belween the two countries, and lifting restrictions on trade and investment;
- offer to help mediate territorial disputes belween South Korea and neighboring nations;
- encourage South Korea to expand security cooperation with Japan; and
- promote South Korea's participation in regional political and security forums.

Washington continues to maintain a large military presence in East Asia despite the collapse of Soviet communism and the growing strength of America's allies. Particularly dramatic is the transformation of the Korean peninsula, where the United States spends between $15 billion and $20 billion a year to defend South Korea, a nation fully capable of defending itself.

In the aftermath of World War n, America's global interventionist foreign policy appeared to have a purpose: containment of the hegemonic threat posed by the Soviet Union and its satellites. Today, however, there is nothing left to contain. America's enemies are a handful of dismal, impoverished dictatorships.

In such a world, especially after the expenditure of more than $13 trillion (1996 dollars) on defense during the Cold War, one would expect Washington to reconsider its military policy. But no. In the Pacific and East Asia, explains the Defense Department, America's "bilateral commitments remain inviolable, and the end of the Cold War has not diminished their importance."

And not just commitments—*expanded* commitments. The United States is building security contacts with Singapore and seeking new multilateral ties throughout East Asia, though not at the expense of its bilateral commitments, the Department of Defense hastily assures us. Even North Korea, perhaps, if Pyongyang's recent comments to some American visitors are to be believed, would like American protection. Such is the lure of getting the globe's most trusted cop to walk yet another beat at his own expense.

The lack of an enemy should pose a problem for those committed to preserving and extending Cold War institutions. But as public-choice economists would have predicted, the collapse of hegemonic communism, a genuine threat to America, has spurred what the Cato Institute's Ted Galen Carpenter aptly calls a "search for enemies," and thus the development of a cottage industry generating new justifications for old policies and programs. That search is well under way in East Asia. In 1953 the Republic of Korea (ROK) was a wreck—impoverished, war-ravaged, and ruled by an unloved autocrat whose belligerence helped land his country in a disastrous war. Without an American security guarantee, South Korea would not have long survived. But fast forward four-plus decades. The South is prosperous and democratic. It has twice the population of North Korea and an economy 18 times larger. Its adversary is ruled by an eccentric, uncharismatic autocrat who lacks international friends. North Korea talks of avoiding absorption by Seoul, not of conquest. Why, then, are U.S. forces in South Korea still necessary?

Some ROK officials still point north. But there is no special gravitational field on the Korean peninsula that prevents those living in the South from constructing a military as powerful as—or even more powerful than—that possessed by the North. Rather, for years South Korea has *chosen* not to match the North's military effort; indeed, ROK defense outlays have been falling as a percentage of the government's budget and the country's gross domestic product. That is a curious way for a nation allegedly under siege to act.

Even many South Koreans recognize that to argue that the South needs Washington's help against the North is starting to sound ridiculous—

rather like the United States begging the Europeans for protection against Mexico. The growing implausibility of the old justification has led to a busy search for new threats requiring American attention. Not surprisingly, it didn't take long for Americans and South Koreans alike to find some: China and Japan, obviously, along with the ubiquitous demon of instability. Indeed, it has taken a century, but Seoul seems about to achieve its original objective in opening relations with the United States—finding a distant ally to guarantee its security from possible aggression by great powers in the region.

South Korea's Big Brother

South Korea's desire for a friendly big brother is understandable. After all, at different points in its history the peninsula has been dominated or occupied by Japan, China, and Russia. With the passing of the North Korean threat, a worried Seoul is again looking at its geographical position and for that distant ally. As the Ministry of National Defense stated in 1990, "The Korean peninsula is located in a strategically sensitive area where the interests of the four major regional powers—the United States, the Soviet Union, China and Japan—converge." Actually, America is not and never was a regional power in East Asia on the basis of geography, but that is what the ROK wants Washington to think. President Kim Young Sam told Congress during his trip to America in July 1995 that "to maintain peace in the Korean peninsula and to maintain stability in the Asia-Pacific region, the U.S. force in the Republic of Korea is necessary."

The ROK's desire for continued protection is certainly understandable, even though Seoul could build a military sufficient to make the cost of aggression too high for any of its neighbors. The pertinent question is whether South Korea's desire for protection is a valid basis for U.S. policy. In the absence of the hegemonic threat posed by Soviet communism, the defense of South Korea loses its connection to U.S. security, and the rationale for Washington to maintain a costly and dangerous military tripwire far from home disappears.

After all, it would be desirable, from America's standpoint, for South Korea to garrison South Florida. Japan could help patrol the Atlantic. German and French forces could guard Alaska. Britain could provide radar and air defense for the continental states. All of those steps would be beneficial, since they would allow Americans to devote more of their resources to other pursuits. Alas, the allies would probably not find an

appeal for such assistance a persuasive reason for subsidizing America's defense.

Benefits to America

The United States should view the four-decade-old defense subsidy to South Korea in the same way. At the most basic level, U.S. policymakers need to ask, Does intervention in Korea benefit Americans, the people who will be paying for and dying in any war? That U.S. political elites enjoy greater influence (and travel opportunities) because of such an alliance and troop deployment is not enough. Common people, too, should benefit, and benefit enough to warrant the expense.

That expense, in the case of Korea, and more broadly East Asia, is not minor. It involves the risk of war resulting from disputes that no longer have relevance to America's security. Maintaining the forces necessary to police the region runs upward of $40 billion annually, about half of which is attributable to the defense of South Korea. As a result, Washington's security guarantees impose an onerous tax burden on all Americans and put U.S. firms at an economic disadvantage in the international arena. Moreover, the Mutual Defense Treaty with South Korea is one of many commitments that have forced America to adopt imperial rather than republican policies; imperial policies range from an outsized military to a secretive national security bureaucracy.

What are we getting in return, if no longer genuine defense? The principal answer is allies. In fact, if the United States wanted, it could have as allies most nations on earth.

But alliances are supposed to serve a purpose—enhancing not undermining America's security. Maintaining rigid alliances, security guarantees, and troop deployments for the sake of keeping allies is, not Just costly, but dangerous, since the way we prove that we are a loyal ally is by participating in their conflicts, even those with no significant connection to U.S. security. Nowhere is that more obvious than on the Korean peninsula, the international flashpoint where the most Americans are at the greatest risk.

Another reason to preserve America's Cold War military posture in the region, explains the White House, is to contribute "to regional stability by deterring aggression and adventurism." But it would be dangerous to set stability as the lodestar for U.S. policy. It may conflict with other important goals, be irrelevant to American security, or be impossible to impose from outside. Or, in light of the changing balance of power, it

may be enforceable by other states in the region. In the end, the chimera of stability is likely to lead Washington to risk thousands of lives day in and day out, and spend tens of billions of dollars year after year, in hopes of preventing events that are not only purely speculative but also tangential to U.S. security.

Finally, America's military presence in and treaty with the ROK are supposed to yield a host of other benefits—national credibility, open trading systems, cultural exchange, democratic education, and the like. Whether or not those benefits in fact result from U.S. military deployments in South Korea is open to question, and even if they do, they are at best fringe benefits. They do not justify commitments that are simultaneously expensive and dangerous.

Of course, some say that disengagement may be the right policy, but not just yet. One argument is that cutting the number of U.S. forces in Korea should be used as a "bargaining chip" to gain North Korean arms reductions. Other pundits propose waiting until the North Korean nuclear issue is definitively resolved, or the North's communist regime has fallen, or South Korea has matched Pyongyang's military, or rapprochement has occurred between the two Koreas. However, there will always be another plausible reason to hold off for a few years. In practice, "not yet" really means "never." The reason for creating the U.S.–South Korean alliance has disappeared; the conditions that once warranted its continuation have disappeared. Now the bilateral treaty and troop deployments should disappear.

And disappear completely. Disengagement must be total—all forces, all guarantees. To do otherwise, following the Carter administration's plan of withdrawal-lite (withdrawing ground forces but retaining air units and the security treaty), offers little if any advantage to America. As Professor Earl Ravenal of Georgetown University explains, such a strategy "promises perpetual involvement but invites recriminations by allies. It is the typical middle position, with all the obvious contradictions of that position and with few earmarks of definitive choice." But the end of the Cold War and South Korea's dramatic economic growth call out for definitive choice.

America should, of course, consult with Seoul about the details of the withdrawal process, so that the ROK can smoothly adjust as the United States disengages. Moreover, Washington should offer to sell the South almost any conventional arms that it desires. That is especially important in the areas of air and naval forces, where the ROK has chosen to rely on U.S. capabilities. Although South Korea today possesses an advanced

domestic arms industry, the United States could ensure that the ROK has the opportunity to build whatever force it deems necessary to deter Northern adventurism.

An American withdrawal, even so configured, would undoubtedly worry many South Koreans. But today Seoul is capable of providing for its own defense—and of preparing for eventual reunification.

There's no doubt that many South Koreans hope for, and, indeed, expect, a North Korean collapse. To assume that will occur would, of course, be foolish. Still, the ROK should be prepared for such a contingency, since Romania proved that even the most brutal totalitarian system may actually be so fragile as to shatter after one good demonstration. Even under the best of circumstances (the "soft-landing" scenario) reunification will not be easy. In that endeavor the two Koreas are essentially on their own. The two superpowers may have been able to divide the peninsula after World War n, and the surrounding countries and the United States can help draw the North into the larger international community to maximize the chances of a soft landing, but they can't put the peninsula back together.

At the same time, Washington should help foster a more positive international environment in which the two Koreas could warm up today's very cold peace. First, the United States needs to improve its relations with the North, fulfilling the nuclear agreement, formalizing diplomatic relations, and ending restrictions on investment and trade. While promising Pyongyang a new nuclear reactor in return for abandoning the pursuit of an atomic bomb is hardly a fool-proof strategy, North Korea has so far kept its commitments, and critics have offered nothing better. The accord has the potential of keeping the peninsula nuclear-free, and therefore is worth its cost.

Second, opening full diplomatic relations and allowing private economic relations are relatively cheap steps that would simultaneously give America a window on the world's most closed society and reward the North for choosing a less belligerent course. Again, if such steps help induce Pyongyang to become a more normal member of the international community, they will be well worth taking.

Further, the United States should help encourage greater regional cooperation, particularly between the ROK and both Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. America's friends in East Asia have achieved dramatic economic success; now they need to forge stronger political and security ties. Washington's most important goal should be to encourage

Seoul and Tokyo, which have so many common interests, to cooperate. Unfortunately, Washington's seemingly permanent security guarantee has made it easy for both countries to behave irresponsibly, sacrificing the potential for improved military and political links to nationalistic squabbling over barren islands. The United States should emphasize the importance of nations in the region building multilateral agreements and institutions to deal with potential security threats, from whatever source.

Are there risks to American military disengagement from Korea and elsewhere in East Asia? Of course—anything is possible, however unlikely. But with the end of the Cold War, Washington need no longer take on the burden of other nations' mistakes.

In turn, South Korea would no longer have to help pay for America's mistakes. The ROK should ponder well the price of its continuing security dependence on the United States. Having such an "elder brother''—long Korea's goal—obviously has important advantages. But there are costs as well. First is the frequent negative social impact. The 1995 subway brawl between U.S. soldiers and Korean civilians may have been sensationalized, but it nevertheless illustrates an important cost of dependency.

Second is the question of respect accorded the ROK as a nation. ''Most people in South Korea are beginning to feel more prestigious and self-confident," says newspaper columnist Kil Jeong Woo. "These kinds of things should be respected by our American friends, not ignored." But they will be ignored so long as the South relies on what amounts to U.S. military charity to guarantee its defense. Washington will not treat South Koreans with respect as long as it remains the security patron.

This issue may have consequences beyond simply wounding the ROK's national ego. While Washington is generally benevolent, there is no reason to expect it to put the South's interest before its own. Nor is that ever likely to change: the United States has yet to establish a security partnership among equals. Washington believes in being either a big brother or a passing acquaintance. The former might seem to be preferable to many South Koreans, but when the issue involves war—whether, for instance, to impose sanctions on or launch military strikes against the North over its nuclear program—the cost to Seoul could end up being enormous. Decisions involving South Korea's security should be made in Seoul, not Washington.

South Korea's Ministry of National Defense has already acknowledged the importance of developing ''a future-oriented defense policy in preparation for the twenty-first century and the post-unification era." As South

Korea emerges as a significant international player in economic and political terms, it needs to begin planning to play an equally influential, and independent, military role as well.

In the end, however, Washington must take the initiative to terminate the Mutual Defense Treaty and return to its noninterventionist roots, and to do so on the basis of American interests. Seoul and its neighbors throughout East Asia will probably always want the United States to be prepared to fight to the last American for them. But Washington should risk the lives and wealth of its citizens only when something fundamental is at stake for their own political community. The lives of U.S. soldiers are not gambit pawns to be sacrificed in some global or regional chess game. It is time to bring American troops home from Korea.

Suggested Readings

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