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60 Years After The Korean War, The U.S. Must End Its Cold War Alliance With South Korea

Pyongyang urged the U.S. to “positively respond” to the former’s call for negotiations “without preconditions.” Washington refused to “engage in talks merely for the sake of talks” and insisted that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea commit to denuclearization. The diplomatic impasse on the Korean peninsula continues.



Republic of Korea (ROK) and United States (U.S.) soldiers monitor the Korean Demilitarized Zone from atop Observation Post (OP) Ouellette. View looking north from south. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

The current situation endangers everyone. The so-called Demilitarized Zone remains the most heavily armed border on earth. No one wants war, but mistake or misjudgment is possible. Although the U.S. and Republic of Korea would triumph in any conflict, the price would be extravagant.

The allies continue to focus on the North’s nuclear program. Last month the U.S., Japan, and South Korea released a joint statement announcing that the path “for the DPRK toward improved relations” is for Pyongyang to take “meaningful steps on denuclearization.” No doubt that is the best outcome. However, it remains the least likely.

North Korea has made acquisition of nuclear weapons a matter of national policy for two decades. In fact, Pyongyang has grown ever more determined to be accepted as a nuclear power, writing its ambition into the country’s constitution.

Ignoring this reality achieves nothing. The North recently declared: “The legitimate status of the DPRK as a nuclear-weapons state will go on and on without vacillation whether others recognize it or not.”

There’s nothing mysterious about North Korea’s program. The advantages of being a nuclear power are many. Most obviously, nuclear weapons offer an effective deterrent. Serbia and Iraq demonstrate the danger of becoming an

American target without nukes. Libya demonstrates the danger of becoming an American target after abandoning nukes.

As Henry Kissinger once reportedly observed, even paranoids have enemies. Pyongyang knows that the U.S. means it ill—President George W. Bush famously termed the DPRK a member of the “axis of evil” and said that he “loathed” Kim Jong-il, the current ruler’s father.

President Barack Obama has said less, but American policy remains largely unchanged. The U.S. maintains a defense guarantee with and nearly 30,000 troops in the ROK, has been tightening its alliance with Seoul, sent B-52s and B-2s to overfly the peninsula earlier this year, and conducts annual exercises with the ROK military.

This policy is not in America’s interest. Washington should disengage from the peninsula. That requires turning security for the South over to Seoul. Normalizing relations with North Korea while handing the nuclear issue to its neighbors. And leaving the two Koreas free to decide their future relationship.

First, the U.S. should end its Cold War alliance with South Korea. Six decades ago the Korean War ended. That conflict spawned the “mutual defense” treaty with Seoul, a one-way security guarantee backed by forces stationed in the ROK. Although the American garrison has diminished in size and the South talks of taking on increased security responsibilities, the alliance remains antiquated and one-sided.

Washington’s defense promise obviously benefits the ROK, but makes no sense for America. The Korean peninsula no longer is tied to a global military struggle, as during the Cold War. The likelihood of the DPRK’s Cold War allies, Beijing and Moscow, offering military support to the North in a rerun of the Korean War is vanishingly small. Finally, the South enjoys huge economic and other advantages over North Korea and is capable of defending itself.

Washington should end joint military exercises, give notice of its intention to terminate the security pact, and begin planning the withdrawal of U.S. military forces. The two governments then could negotiate, as equals, terms for future military cooperation. The focus would not be the DPRK, which would be Seoul’s responsibility, but broader regional and global activities in both nations’ interest.

Second, American officials should set aside the nuclear issue in order to engage Pyongyang. North Korea’s nuclear ambitions most directly affect its neighbors. The North lacks any means to attack the U.S.—other than targeting troops which should be brought home from South Korea. Even if the DPRK could act, confronting America would be suicidal, a quality not evident in Pyongyang. Washington should make the one genuine threat, nuclear transfers to non-state actors, a red line. Otherwise the U.S. should turn over the issue to the countries with the most at stake: China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia.

Then the U.S. should indicate its willingness to sign a peace treaty and open diplomatic relations. These long have been North Korean priorities: the North’s ambassador in Geneva, Sin Son-ho, recently held an unprecedented press conference denouncing the U.S. for “the hostile relations between the DPRK and the United States, which can lead to another war at any moment.”

Set aside his reflexive blame of America. Six decades surely is long enough to officially end the Korean War. Moreover, the U.S. government would benefit from a small window into DPRK society, direct process to handle mundane diplomatic matters, and official channel for more serious communication.

Third, American policymakers should make clear that it is up to the two Koreas to work out the peninsula's future. If the U.S. no longer was responsible for defending the South, it would have no reason to object to ROK initiatives such as the Sunshine Policy which subsidized the North. The future of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, the subject of ongoing inter-Korean negotiations, similarly criticized for benefiting Pyongyang, also would become a matter of indifference to Washington.

Reunification—whether and, if so, in what form?—would be entirely up to the Korean people. The U.S. would retain strong ties to even a reunited Korea given the abundant commercial and extensive family ties across the Pacific. However, Washington would not presume to dictate the ultimate inter-Korean relationship, which needs to evolve along with events on the peninsula. Most important, the U.S. would not attempt to turn the peninsula into a base for use to contain Beijing.

A more relaxed American approach offers numerous advantages. Leaving the ROK responsible for its own defense would reduce U.S. outlays by cutting America's troop requirements. Doing so also would make the South fully accountable for the consequences of its policies.

Eliminating Washington's military presence in South Korea and improving its relationship with the DPRK would take America out of the region's line of fire. There's no reason for the U.S. to be entangled in Korean disputes with minimal impact on America. Although the North currently lacks the ability to challenge the U.S., the former believes Washington's policies require doing so.

Moreover, if anyone can convince the North to abandon nuclear weapons, it will be its neighbors. This includes China, which would recognize that Seoul and Tokyo might develop their own nuclear weapons if America no longer maintained a "nuclear umbrella." Instead of expecting Washington to produce a miracle solution, other nations would be forced consider new strategies to address the DPRK.

Simultaneously stepping back militarily and advancing diplomatically would diminish the North's rationale for both its nuclear program and advanced conventional deployments, opening the way for possible reform. Yonsei University's John Delury recently suggested that "North Korea today resembles China in 1970: waiting for a security guarantee from Washington before embarking on real economic reform."

Of course, Mao Zedong, not Richard Nixon, was the biggest obstacle to change then. Pyongyang's complaints might be propaganda boilerplate and the government's belligerent policy might continue unchanged. The Korea Economic Institute's Nicholas Hamisevicz complained that Pyongyang's behavior made "it extremely difficult for countries such as the United States, South Korea, and Japan to engage North Korea and begin moving toward a more positive environment."

However, the DPRK long has criticized the combined military exercises, which don't look as harmless from the North. Moreover, the U.S. claims the

right to attack any nation at any time for any reason, and North Korea clearly is on America's "list." Pyongyang has reason to worry that the allies might attempt regime change if they believed they had a favorable opportunity to do so, as in Libya.

Amb. Sin said that dissolution of what formally remains the United Nations Command could be followed by "confidence-building measures." Last week Japan's TV Asahi reported that the Kim regime intends to demobilize 300,000 soldiers. Only the prospect of sustained peaceful engagement with America offers any chance, however small, of turning such possibilities into reality.

In any case, current policy is broken. Is there a genuine desire to reduce tensions hidden within the North's endless bombast? There's no way to tell without challenging Pyongyang by accepting its latest proposal for talks.

So long as North Korea is devoted to producing more nuclear weapons, it will not look or act like a "normal country." Nor will it be easy for the U.S. and DPRK to put aside fundamental differences, such as on human rights. But that doesn't mean the two governments cannot have a peaceful relationship.

Both sides would benefit from reducing the possibility of conflict. That's a good starting point for any negotiation.

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