



South Korea Must Play Bigger Role In Defense

by William M. Drennan and James J. Przystup

Fifty years ago, the United States and South Korea signed a mutual defense treaty designed to meet the “common danger” posed by North Korea to the survival of the South and to vital U.S. interests. The golden anniversary should be cause for celebration, but hold the applause. The alliance is in serious trouble, and possibly terminal decline, unless urgent steps are taken to revitalize it.

By any objective standard, the alliance has been a huge success. It has deterred North Korea from further large-scale aggression while creating an environment in which the South Korean people have built the world’s 12th largest economy and transformed authoritarian rule into vibrant democracy.

The problem today is not that the alliance has outlived its purpose – with its nuclear weapons and missile programs North Korea has only grown more dangerous – but rather the U.S. and South Korea no longer agree on the “common danger.”

In today’s South Korea, solidarity with the United States is being undermined by hyper-nationalism that emphasizes the “one-ness” of Koreans, North and South, ascribes a new, benign intent to the repressive regime in North Korea, and paints the United States as the principal obstacle to Korean reconciliation. The older “silent majority” of alliance supporters is giving way to younger generations determined to build a different relationship with the North, even at the expense of ties to the United States. This generational divide in Korean society runs the risk of splitting the alliance.

Looking ahead, three questions need to be addressed by South Koreans and Americans. Does the alliance have a future? If so, what should it look like? And how do we get there?

The short answer to the first question is “yes; it should.” The alliance continues to serve the broad national security interests of both parties. Besides addressing the clear and present danger posed by the North, the alliance provides vital reassurance to Korea, whose geographical setting among larger regional powers has historically made it the strategic prize in Northeast Asia.

The alliance is also critically important to the United States. The past century has underscored the fact that what happens on the Peninsula affects vital U.S. national interests. Today, the alliance is the cornerstone of stability in Northeast Asia. Weakening that alliance serves no one’s interests.

What should the alliance look like? The simple answer is “more equal.” Roles and responsibilities within the alliance need to be rebalanced. For the United States to be seen as more concerned with the security of South Korea than South

Koreans themselves is an unsustainable situation. With double the population of the North and a world-class economy, South Korea is fully capable of carrying more of the burden of its own defense. Doing so would bolster the pride of Koreans and help relieve pressure on the U.S. military increasingly engaged in the war on terrorism.

The recently announced plans for the future (3-5 years hence) redeployment of U.S. ground troops and headquarters to positions south of the capital of Seoul is a step in the right direction. Ultimately, “more equal” would involve South Korea moving from a supporting to a leading role in the defense of the South.

But these adjustments buttress only the alliance’s superstructure. Of even greater importance is the need to repair its foundation – the consensus among both South Koreans and Americans on the benefits of the alliance. The alliance partners should create a binational commission, broadly representative of their populations (including the successor generations), to review the alliance’s form and function, with the aim of creating a strong and sustainable platform for the future.

After half a century, the ties that bind the United States and South Korea are both broad and deep. But the foundation for the relationship remains the security alliance. If the alliance is to prosper, the consensus that has sustained it must be recreated for a new era. This is the central challenge for our political leaders, one that will require a commitment to educate our publics on the importance of the alliance and a readiness to the make the tough, national interest-based decisions that sustaining it demands.

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