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Optimizing the United States–South Korean Alliance: A New Approach to Burden Sharing

By Thaddeaus Webb

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an era of multipolarity, the United States' foreign policy faces insolvency. America remains tethered to military commitments across Europe, the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, and Latin America. Many of these commitments could result in large-scale wars if the United States is faced with enforcing them. The U.S. military, however, is no longer designed to fight multiple major power conflicts simultaneously. If the U.S. military is decisively engaged in a large-scale conflict, then Washington risks defaulting on other security commitments.

To help address this gap between means and commitments, U.S. decision-makers should look for ways to shrink their overseas security obligations responsibly. Reimagining America's responsibilities in the U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance is an important step toward making U.S. foreign policy solvent again. In a future Korean Peninsula crisis or conflict, South Korea's latent power potential allows Seoul to defend against and defeat any conventional North Korean attack through its own strength. Pyongyang, however, has a monopoly over Seoul on nuclear threats and dilutes South Korea's military preponderance over North Korea. Seoul is likely unable to overcome this nuclear imbalance without the support of the United States.

This paper recommends America's obligations in the US-ROK alliance resemble Great Britain's formal obligations to Japan in the 1902 British-Japanese military alliance. This unique alliance was not focused on deterring an armed attack on Japan, but rather on preventing horizontal escalation. America's treaty commitment to South Korea should solely consist of solidifying its nuclear deterrence posture (vertical escalation) while placing the conventional defense of South Korea on the shoulders of the ROK military. Burden sharing through a division of labor at the macro-strategic level will help reduce American military commitments abroad while offering Seoul a greater sense of security.

Thaddeaus Webb is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Strategic Studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. Before attending graduate school, he served in the United States military as an Army intelligence officer, serving overseas in South Korea and the Middle East.

The paper is laid out in three parts. First, it will show how the Korean Peninsula contributes to U.S. foreign policy insolvency. Second, the paper will use Glenn Snyder's mixed balance of power concept to understand and examine the security competition between South and North Korea. Even though current military figures would suggest South Korea is outgunned, the country's advantages in latent power give it ample resources to out-compete with North Korea on the military front. Seoul enjoys advantages in key military enablers like population size, industrial strength, and financial institutions. Third, the paper recommends the United States relinquish its responsibility to defend South Korea from a conventional attack, and instead, commit to a nuclear response if the North attacks the South with nuclear weapons. To clarify this shift in the United States' commitment to extended nuclear deterrence, the U.S. Congress should amend the US-ROK treaty alliance to reflect America's unwavering commitment to preventing nuclear escalation on the Korean Peninsula.

A Warning from the Past: Lippmann and Foreign Policy Insolvency

Walter Lippmann, one of the most influential American political thinkers of the early 20th century, provides U.S. decision-makers with an important formula for how to diagnose the health of their foreign policy. In a short book entitled *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* he lays out his ideas for what constitutes a sound foreign policy.[1]

He considered the fundamental principle of any foreign policy "consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation's commitments and nation's power."[2] A good statesman, regardless of where they come from, according to Lippmann, is chiefly concerned with bringing their ends and means into balance, no different than a household balancing its finances.

Commitments: Lippmann viewed commitments as obligations outside the nation's boundaries, "which may in the last analysis have to be met by waging war."[3] These obligations are usually solidified through treaties, agreements, or declarations to defend or support a particular area overseas.

Power: The term power, for Lippmann, describes the force necessary to prevent a conflict over the nation's commitment and win if prevention fails. He believed the means of power included the nation's military forces "which can be mobilized effectively within the domestic territory," and obtaining military reinforcements from dependable allies.[4] He suggests nations should look to make strategic alliances with the world's "principal military powers."[5] Principal military powers could resist and defeat other great military powers.[6] In other words, good allies are net security exporters rather than security importers.[7]

Lippmann warns statesmen that when their foreign policy does not keep "its purposes within its means and its means equal to its purposes," the nation's strategy will become insolvent.[8] Additionally, if a nation continues to ignore this imbalance between commitments and power, it will lead to disaster.[9]

Lippmann considered early American history a good example of a solvent foreign policy. Though the United States was militarily weak during this period, the Founding Fathers made good use of alliances and partnerships with European powers, first allying with France to secure American independence and then later in 1923, through its silent concert with Great Britain to uphold the Monroe Doctrine.[10]

America's power and commitments were balanced until the United States acquired the Philippines in 1898, followed by a commitment to an Open Door Policy for China the following year. This placed the United States in direct competition with Japan. Washington felt neither compelled to strip itself of its Asian commitments nor provide the means necessary to uphold them, according to Lippmann.[11] As a result of nearly half a century of strategic insolvency, the United States found itself stumbling into the Second World War.[12]

The Return of the Lippmann Gap: America's Insolvency

Today, the United States finds itself facing a similar imbalance between its power and commitments, as Lippmann forewarned. Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States enjoyed a period known as the "unipolar moment" where American power was unmatched, and Washington could easily uphold its geographically dispersed commitments.[13] This unipolar moment is now devolving into a multipolar world with several great and regional powers competing with the United

States for influence.[14]

This emerging multipolarity and America's weakening position is echoed by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence's (DNI) National Intelligence Counsel, who cautioned that power in the international system will "expand and redistribute," likely at the expense of the United States. [15] Within the next 20 years, the DNI warns, "no single actor will be positioned to dominate across all regions and in all domains, offering opportunities for a broader array of actors and increasing competition across all issues."[16]

Despite the relative decline of U.S. power now and possibly into the future, American overseas commitments have not decreased; rather, they have expanded in certain regions, like the Middle East and Europe.[17]

U.S. Commitments

The United States maintains seven defensive treaties across the globe. These include the Rio Treaty, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), bilateral treaties with Australia and New Zealand (ANZUS), and bilateral defense treaties with the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea. These treaty obligations cover approximately 1.4 billion people and over a quarter of the world's nation-states. Though some of these obligations (for example, the Rio Treaty) do not place a significant levy on American military power, the United States is, nonetheless, obligated to defend these countries if they come under threat.[18]

America also has developed a series of "quasi-allies" that have not received a formal U.S. security commitment but will likely receive some level of military support.[19] This would include geopolitical hotspots like Taiwan and certain partners in the Middle East. Though the United States does not have an obligation to defend these quasi-allies directly, Washington may feel compelled to protect its partners in the Middle East given the U.S. military installations they host.[20]

This list of formal and quasi-alliances is further compounded by American presidents' expressed commitment to defend the global commons and the freedom of navigation regardless of where the infraction may have occurred. [21] This stance has placed the United States in the middle of political disputes in the South China Sea and the waters around the Middle East.

In recent years, the United States has found itself actively supporting and defending its allies and partners in places like Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Bab-el-Mandab Strait. Since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the U.S. military's presence in Europe has swelled to over 100,000 servicemembers, with many of them spread out among Eastern European NATO members to alleviate their fears of a Russian invasion.[22] Additionally, the United States has supported Israel with military aid in its war against Hamas and the U.S. Navy actively participated in the defense of Israel during a reprisal attack from Iran in April 2024.[23] Finally, as an outgrowth of the Israel-Hamas war, the U.S. military conducted airstrikes against Houthi rebels in Yemen to prevent them from threatening Israeli commercial shipping.[24]

U.S. Power

At the beginning of the Cold War, the United States developed a force posture design that allowed it to fight two major conflicts simultaneously. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) 1997 *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review,* authored by Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, highlights the importance of a two-theater war standard as essential for maintaining credible deterrence. "A force sized and equipped for deterring and defeating aggression in more than one theater ensures the United States will maintain the flexibility to cope with the unpredictable and unexpected," according to Secretary Cohen.[25] This force posture design gives U.S. decision-makers the confidence to engage directly in international crises without fear of defaulting on other commitments.

In 2018, the long-held two-war standard was jettisoned in favor of fighting one major war while maintaining deterrence in other regions, according to the U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS) Commission–a bipartisan congressional commission responsible for evaluating America's defense strategy.[26] "The U.S. military has largely abandoned the longstanding 'two-war' construct for a 'one major war' sizing and shaping construct," according to the NDS Commission.[27]

The shift to a one-war standard creates strategic risk for U.S. decision-makers and the country's security commitments abroad. When the U.S. military is heavily committed in one part of the world, revisionist powers in a different region may be tempted to take advantage of the situation. This reduction in conventional capacity

creates uncertainty in America's allies and partners about the U.S. military's ability to help defend their interests. As a result, Secretary Cohen warns that a one-war capacity could "inhibit the United States from responding to a crisis promptly enough, or even at all, for fear of committing the bulk of our forces and making ourselves vulnerable in other regions."[28]

The one-war standard design has continued with the Biden Administration's national defense strategy. To overcome this deficiency, the Biden Administration says it will increasingly rely on U.S. nuclear forces and allies to deter aggression in a secondary theater. In the 2022 NDS Nuclear Posture Review, the DoD writes:

> "To deter opportunistic aggression elsewhere, while the United States is involved in an all-domain conflict, the Department will employ a range of risk mitigation efforts rooted in integrated deterrence. These include coordination with and contribution of allies and partners, deterrent effects of U.S. nuclear posture, and leveraging posture and capabilities not solely engaged in the primary warfight–for example, cyber and space."[29]

The U.S. one-war standard is very likely a permanent feature for the foreseeable future. The Heritage Foundation estimates the U.S. military will require 50 Army Brigade Combat Teams (BCT) and 400 naval ships to deal with multiple fronts simultaneously. The U.S. military currently only has 31 BCTs and 297 vessels.[30] With military enlistment applications reaching historic lows–629,000 applications in 1984 versus 205,000 in 2020–and the U.S. military failing to meet its recruitment goals for the last three years, it is hard to envision the all-volunteer force reaching this standard.[31] Even the U.S. Army which is on track to meet its recruitment goal this year, was only able to do this after shrinking the service's organizational structure by 24,500 billets.[32]

The Korean Peninsula as a Source of Insolvency

The problem of America's foreign policy insolvency extends to its strategic alliance with South Korea. The 2022 NDS sees great power adversaries like China and Russia as the source of major wars.[33] However, regional adversaries like North Korea can also create a severe drain on U.S. military manpower and resources. In a conflict with North Korea, U.S. allies and military bases critical for other military contingencies within the Indo-Pacific are at risk from nuclear attacks. Additionally, South Korea's ability and desire to support the U.S. military in a broader military contingency in the Indo-Pacific is doubtful.

Drain on Military Resources

Americans view the U.S.-ROK alliance as a worthy and sustainable commitment. A 2022 survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that 55 percent of Americans support the use of U.S. troops if North Korea invaded South Korea.[34] With only an estimated 28,500 U.S. servicemembers deployed to South Korea, the peacetime levy on U.S. military forces is considered a relatively small price to pay to support a long-time ally.[35]

A future war on the Korean Peninsula, however, would likely absorb a vast majority of American military power. According to the ROK Ministry of National Defense's 2016 Defense White Paper:

> "The U.S. augmentation forces to be deployed to the Korean Peninsula in the event of a war to support the defense of the ROK, consist of 690,000 ground, naval, and air force troops, 160 vessels, and 2,000 aircraft."[36]

The U.S. military could theoretically support the agreed augmentation force, having approximately 1.35 million active-duty servicemembers, 297 vessels, and 2,900 aircraft; however, Washington could not help other treaty allies if a second conflict was to emerge.[37] There is also the potential for high casualties among U.S. military forces. The U.S. DoD estimates casualties for ROK and U.S. forces between 200,000-300,000 in the first 90 days.[38] Even if U.S. forces accounted for only a quarter of these estimated casualties, it would still exceed the entire number of combat deaths in the First Korean War.[39]

U.S. Indo-Pacific Basing Network at Risk

A second Korean War would not only exhaust America's single-war capacity, but it would also put at risk military bases and allies outside the Korean Peninsula that are important to a Chinese military contingency.

North Korean nuclear-capable missiles like the Scud Extended Range, the No-Dong, and the Hawasong-10 are capable of striking U.S. military installations in

Japan, Okinawa, and Guam.[40] These bases are critical logistical hubs for the U.S. military to support the war effort but are also legitimate targets for North Korea. Damage inflicted on the American Indo-Pacific basing network, either temporal or permanent (in the case of nuclear strikes), could severely jeopardize the U.S. military's ability to project power in support of its other allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific.

This risk also extends to America's critical Indo-Pacific ally, Japan. If Tokyo agrees to facilitate U.S. troop movements into the Korean Peninsula, Pyongyang may seek to ruin the U.S.-ROK strategic rear area through a series of nuclear strikes on Japanese cities. Japan's two largest metropolitan areas account for nearly half of the country's population.[41] Making these two cities uninhabitable would put into question Japan's ability to act as a bulwark against China.

A Net Security Exporter?

As Lippmann observed, an increase in a state's power can occur when it receives dependable reinforcements from an ally. South Korea has in the past provided substantial reinforcements to U.S. interests outside of the Korean Peninsula. During the Vietnam War, more than 300,000 South Korean troops rotated through Vietnam.[42] Some observers say that South Korea can be a net security exporter by participating in the strategic containment of China.[43]

However, the prospect of South Korea as a principal contributor to a future U.S. military coalition against China is doubtful. Unless North Korea joins China in a war with the United States, Seoul is likely to remain neutral, as it is uncertain about the outcome of such a war and is well within striking distance of Chinese military forces.[44] An extra-regional war with China could decisively shift the military balance on the Korean Peninsula in favor of the North Korean military.

The ROK Minister of Defense Shin Won-Sik has echoed his country's unwillingness to support a U.S. military contingency over interests outside the Korean Peninsula like Taiwan. The minister said that if war broke out in the Taiwan Strait, the focus for his country's armed forces and the U.S. forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula would be to "firmly uphold the security of the Republic of Korea."[45]

A Step Toward Solvency: Optimizing the U.S.-ROK Alliance

It is unlikely the U.S. military in the foreseeable future can return to a peacetime two-war standard as a way to redress the insolvent U.S. foreign policy. This would mean U.S. policymakers should give their attention to the other side of Lippmann's equation. The United States will need to find ways to reduce its military obligations to bring its ends in balance with its means. Some commentators have argued for prioritizing the containment of China over Russia and have called for European NATO members to place the burden of deterring Russia on their shoulders. Harvard professor Stephen Walt argues that America's role in NATO should be "the ally of last resort" instead of being "Europe's first responder."[46] This will allow the United States, according to Walt, to focus its finite military resources on a potential conflict with China.

Though some attention has been given to this insolvency problem concerning Russia and the European theater, little attention has been given to how the U.S. military should reduce its other major war risks on the Korean Peninsula.[47]

Currently, the United States is unlikely to jettison its alliance with South Korea to help restore a solvent U.S. foreign policy.[48] There is, however, a potential way to reimagine America's obligations through the pursuit of a more balanced division of labor between these two countries. Deterrence theorist Glenn Snyder's idea of a security competition consisting of two distinct strategic balances is a helpful tool for evaluating the strategic situation between North and South Korea and for thinking about where America can best support its ally.[49]

All security competitions at their core are concerned with the balance of power between the competitors. While every security competition has a balance of conventional forces paradigm, others, as in the case of the Korean Peninsula, also have a second balancing act in the form of nuclear weapons.

A conventional balance involves measuring the physical capacity to take and hold territory. Equilibrium between countries occurs "when military capabilities and war potential on each side (are) roughly equal," writes Snyder, "so that neither side had the capacity to defeat the other in war and by so doing to change the territorial status quo."[50]

The purpose of nuclear forces is different from their conventional counterparts. Nuclear weapons cannot take and hold territory when employed, though they may help facilitate conventional forces in taking territory. Nuclear forces, according to Snyder, can only change the political status quo through political coercion "by a process of blackmail supported by the threat of severe punishment."[51] A nuclear balance is achieved when deterrence on both sides is believed.

The Conventional Balance in the Korean Security Competition

When comparing the conventional forces of North and South Korea, Pyongyang has a quantitative advantage over its adversary. North Korean armed forces have nearly triple the number of ground troops (1,100,000 vs. 420,000), almost twice as many artillery pieces (21,600 vs. 12,000) a greater number of battle tanks (3,500 vs. 2,500), and four times as many attack submarines (70 vs. 18) as the South Korean military.[52] Pyongyang also boasts the largest number of special operations forces in the world.[53] Though the South Korean armed forces likely have a qualitative advantage in equipment and training, as Joseph Stalin is alleged to have observed, "quantity has a quality of its own."[54]

However, this type of comparison of the conventional balance leaves out an important consideration. When comparing the latent power potential of the two Koreas, it becomes evident that Seoul has a large latent power advantage over Pyongyang. Critical latent power factors such as manpower, manufacturing, and finances point to South Korea's ability to out-compete North Korea in the conventional balance of forces.

Manpower

Measuring the level of manpower provides observers with a good sense of the wartime potential of a competitor. Not only does it speak to how many able-bodied people can fill the ranks of the armed forces but also how many can support war efforts behind the scenes–for example, factory workers and administrative personnel.

South Korea's manpower base is substantially larger than its northern neighbor. North Korea's population is only half the size of South Korea (25 million and 52 million respectively). The working-age male population (15-54 years of age) in South Korea constitutes over 15 million persons–larger than the entire male population in North Korea (12 million). When accounting for the working age of both sexes in South Korea, it exceeds the whole North Korean population by over 2 million.[55] Even when comparing the most physically capable demographics, 15-29 years of age, South Korea enjoys a nearly two-to-one advantage in manpower over North Korea, 9.3 million and 5.7 million, respectively.[56]

Manufacturing

A large and dynamic manufacturing base is key to equipping and sustaining military forces with weapons, ammunition, and other war materials. A well-established industrial ecosystem can be scaled up during arms races or conflicts.

South Korea is considered a leader in global manufacturing. Its share of global value-added manufacturing is three percent, tied with India for the fifth-highest in the world, just behind Germany, Japan, the United States, and China.[57] South Korea is also a world leader in producing automobiles, commercial ships, and semiconductors–critical latent industries that can produce military weapons and equipment.[58]

Data on North Korea's gross production or value-added manufacturing is unknown but is likely much smaller than South Korea's manufacturing base. However, data on steel production can provide an important insight into the gap between North and South Korea's industrial capacity. In 2021, South Korea produced 70.4 million tons of crude steel, while North Korea produced only 600,000 tons.[59] If steel is the baseline for judging the manufacturing base of the two Koreas, then South Korean manufacturing is 117 times larger than its adversary.[60]

South Korean manufacturing prowess is further strengthened by the fact the country maintains the domestic technical know-how to develop the weapon systems its military requires. As of 2020, over three-quarters of the weapons systems in the South Korean armed forces are indigenously designed and manufactured.[61] South Korea is also one of the world's top defense exporters and has exported military platforms like fighter aircraft, artillery systems, and warships.[62]

Financing

A final latent power advantage South Korea has over North Korea is its ability to tap into the international

financial markets. Wars are often run through the borrowing of money. Alexander Hamilton wrote that "in the modern system of war, nations the most wealthy are obliged to have recourse to large loans."[63] Not only in war but also in periods of increased tensions, a country can increase defense spending and military preparedness through issuing bonds.

South Korea, unlike its northern neighbor, has a treasury bond market that is open to domestic and international buyers, and is globally competitive.[64] Seoul has the financial space to increase its public debt without causing strain on its economy. South Korean government debt is 56 percent of GDP, while budget deficit spending for Korea's ten-year average is 2.9 percent of GDP.[65] Compare this to its neighbor Japan which has a government debt-to-GDP percentage of nearly nine times higher than South Korea and has an average budget deficit spending of 5.1 percent.[66] Even with this mountain of debt, Tokyo has found it necessary to double its defense spending by 2027.[67]

North Korea, on the other hand, has largely pursued autarky in its economic system to insulate it from international sanctions. However, Pyongyang still requires foreign international currency to procure military or civilian items from outside its border.[68] To produce this revenue stream, North Korea has organized a complex network of criminal enterprises that deal in arms sales, drug trafficking, overseas slave labor, and cybercrime.[69] Though it has managed to keep North Korea's nuclear and missile weapons program funded, it is a poor substitute for a labor-free and dependable treasury bond market.[70]

The Nuclear Balance in the Korean Security Competition

North Korea enjoys a preponderance of force as it relates to the nuclear balance on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea estimates Pyongyang has around 80-90 nuclear warheads.[71] The RAND Corporation estimates Pyongyang could have enough nuclear material to produce as many as 200 nuclear weapons by the year 2027.[72]

It is speculated that South Korea could develop its own nuclear weapons if it chose to. The ROK has a domestic civilian nuclear program and is building nuclear power plants for overseas markets.[73] The logic goes that South Korea has the nuclear technical expertise to enrich uranium and create its own nuclear weapons.[74]

Additionally, a vast majority of South Koreans are in favor of Seoul developing its own nuclear weapons.[75] This would prove to be significantly difficult to achieve given America's opposition to nuclear proliferation. The United States is a signatory and enforcer of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Washington in the 1970s prevented then-South Korean President Park Chung-Hee from pursuing a nuclear weapon after the U.S. intelligence community became aware of the country's clandestine nuclear weapons program.[76]

Seoul would very likely need Washington's endorsement of a future nuclear weapons program. Even if a clandestine nuclear program were able to achieve a "nuclear breakout," South Korea would remain numerically inferior to North Korea in the regional nuclear balance. It would require multiple years of intense production before South Korea could reach near parity with North Korea.[77] During this period of buildup, Pyongyang may feel compelled to take a preemptive strike on South Korea's nuclear program to prevent a dramatic shift in the nuclear balance. As a result of this increased threat, South Korea will likely need U.S. security obligations to remain intact for at least until equilibrium has been achieved. This dependency on the United States is strategic leverage that Washington can use to reverse Seoul's nuclear ambitions.

Washington, however, has not been tone-deaf to the nuclear imbalance on the Korean Peninsula. The United States has sought to restore equilibrium by pressuring North Korea to denuclearize. However, the policy of denuclearization through economic coercion has failed to convince Pyongyang to relinquish its nukes.[78] Though this policy remains in place, North Korea is unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons, because they deter foreign invasion and allow them to blackmail South Korea for political and economic concessions.[79] North Korea has made it publicly known it does not want to share the same fate of Gaddafi and Libya who relinquished their nuclear weapons program in 2003 for normalized relations with the West only to be toppled eight years later by the United States.[80]

As a result of the failure of denuclearization to restore equilibrium in the nuclear balance, South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol has threatened that his country will pursue nuclear weapons to address this challenge.[81]

The Biden Administration, in response to this warning, has shifted to bilateral confidence-building exercises in U.S. extended deterrence. These include the creation of a Nuclear Consultation Group and increasing the presence of nuclear platforms in and around South Korea.[82] However, it remains unclear if these actions have reassured South Korea of America's commitment to extended deterrence.

South Korean experts argue that Seoul wants an explicit guarantee for a nuclear retaliatory response if it is attacked with North Korean nukes.[83] Washington, however, remains resistant to provide explicit nuclear deterrence commitments. Adam Mount from the Federation of American Scientists argues that U.S. presidents want to reserve "the right to decide on nuclear employment in specific contingencies."[84] He further suggests that they "would almost certainly prefer to find an effective alternative to nuclear use."[85] This persistence in favoring ambiguity over clarity in U.S. extended deterrence will tilt Korea's balance of nuclear power in Pyongyang's favor.

Recommendations

Delineating the security competition between the conventional and nuclear balance provides the United States the framework for shifting its security obligations in a direction that reduces the overextension of the U.S. military.

South Korea has the latent power to defend and defeat a conventional armed attack by Pyongyang and does not require outside assistance to match and exceed North Korea's military strength. The US-ROK alliance unintentionally encourages Seoul to relax its military readiness and instead shift the security burden onto its ally.

On the other end of the security competition, however, Seoul is incapable of addressing the nuclear imbalance and the threat of North Korea's blackmail without the support of US strategic guarantees. This can be fixed if Washington makes clear that it will respond with nuclear weapons if South Korea is attacked with North Korean nukes.

To prevent the U.S. military from becoming involved in a major resource-intensive conflict on the Korean Peninsula while still helping South Korea improve its security posture, Washington must adopt a strategic model similar to the 1902 British-Japanese alliance.

The British-Japanese alliance was not designed to prevent war from occurring; rather its purpose was to prevent horizontal escalation. Only when two or more great powers had declared war on either Britain or Japan, did the alliance come into effect.[86] The treaty was designed to deter France, a strategic ally of Russia, from joining a potential war between Russia and Japan. Instead of preventing horizontal escalation, as in the case of the British-Japanese alliance, the US-ROK alliance needs to center on preventing a potential conflict from reaching the nuclear threshold. Under this type of alliance model, the United States would not be an active participant in a Korean conflict unless North Korea decides to use nukes. It would also mean South Korea takes responsibility for its national defense.
To achieve this shift in obligations, Washington must make clear to Seoul that the current commitment structure is unsustainable in today's complex strategic environment. U.S. leadership should not be afraid to signal its willingness to implement Article VI of the US-ROK mutual defense treaty and unilaterally withdraw from the alliance if Seoul is unwilling to cooperate with the transition.[87]

The United States should maintain conventional deterrence guarantees while South Korea goes through its version of "Vietnamization."[88] The necessary military capabilities and force size requirements can be incorporated into the conditions-based wartime Operations Control (OPCON) transfer plan already agreed to by both countries in 2013.[89]

Washington needs to provide strategic clarity on the issue regarding nuclear reprisals. A new treaty between the two countries should be drafted guaranteeing South Korea a nuclear response option if attacked with North Korean nuclear weapons. The new treaty commitment will need to receive its required two-thirds endorsement for ratification by the U.S. Senate, thereby forcing the hands of future administrations to maintain extended nuclear deterrence.

At the operational level, the United States and South Korea should use the recently created Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group to jointly develop a target list for potential nuclear strikes, as well as areas that are off-limits. Any future US-ROK exercises and war games should be exclusively designed around different courses of action during a nuclear war.

Using the jointly agreed-on strategic targeting list, Washington should allow the South Korean president to make the final decision on when and where U.S. nukes should strike. Given South Korea was the victim of the nuclear attack, it should be Seoul's decision on how they wish to proceed. The United States is merely providing the option for South Korea to respond with nuclear weapons. Empowering the ROK leadership to make the hard choices will place the onus on them to determine the direction of the war.[90]

Though the United States' formal obligation to enter into a second Korean War is triggered only when it reaches the nuclear threshold, such an arrangement does not prevent Washington from participating in the war at the conventional phase if U.S. decision-makers determine it to be necessary. Under this redefined treaty, Washington now has the freedom of choice, based on the circumstances at hand, whether it will participate in the war and to what degree. Similar to America's support for Ukraine in its war with Russia, the United States is free to tailor its participation in a way that preserves its combat forces.

Conclusion

The United States finds itself in dire straits. Its power is insufficient to uphold its numerous, globally dispersed commitments. As the British historian and strategist B.H. Liddell Hart wrote when your ends outstrip the means at hand, you must "adjust your ends to your means."[91] U.S. statesmen must find ways to reduce the country's security commitments in a responsible way that will bring U.S. foreign policy back to a place of solvency. Failure to address this gap between power and commitments will leave America stumbling from crisis to crisis and have U.S. allies and partners wondering when and how the United States will default on its security commitments.

Though this reimagining of America's obligations in the US-ROK alliance does not solve its insolvency problem entirely, it does help shrink the Lippmann gap and preserve the U.S. military for deterring adversaries it deems more important to U.S. national security. This approach to burden sharing through a division of labor between the United States and South Korea is also in keeping with the current U.S. National Defense Strategy of leveraging the power of U.S. allies and America's nuclear deterrence to shore up America's limited conventional means. A similar analysis of European, Middle Eastern, and Indo-Pacific theaters along the lines of two separate security balances may help Washington assess where American power can best be utilized while reducing obsolete or wasteful obligations.

Finally, by making South Korea responsible for its conventional security, it places the Korean people in the driver's seat of their own future. As with all sovereign nations, South Korea must be free to determine how it will interact with its neighbors. Being in charge of its national defense means Seoul chooses what relationship it will have with North Korea and what level of risk it is willing to undertake. It is outside the scope of America's national interest for Washington to make that determination for them.

Endnotes

1 For the political impact and influence of Walter Lippmann see Kenneth W. Thompson, *Masters of International Thought*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 128-141.
2 See Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic*, (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1942), 9.
3 Ibid., 9.
4 Ibid., 9.
5 Ibid., 100.
6 Ibid., 101.
7 Lippmann provides an example of a net security importer versus an exporter through the case of Brazil and Great Britain. Brazil is the largest state in South America and strategically located to cover sea approaches to the continent, yet this country lacked the military strength necessary to maintain a strong sea and air deterrence. It would require the support of the U.S. military to defend those approaches. On the other hand, Great Britain was a principal military power with a navy that could support the United States in closing off the Atlantic approach between Europe and South America. See *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 97, 122.
8 Ibid., 7.
9 Ibid., 10.
10 Ibid., 22-25.
11 Ibid., 40-41.
12 Ibid., 26.
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