

The US-ROK Military Alliance: South Korea Caught in NATO's Web

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In recent years, the nature of the U.S.-South Korean military alliance has been undergoing a transformation. At the urging of the United States, the Alliance has adopted a more global perspective, in which South Korean armed forces provide support for U.S. military occupations. With the appointment of Ashton Carter as U.S. Secretary of Defense, South Korea can expect to be pressured into assuming a more active role in future U.S. invasions and bombing campaigns.

When South Korea signed an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program with NATO in September 2012, it committed itself to cooperation with NATO in a number of areas, including the euphemistically termed “multinational peace-support operations.” The text of the agreement has not been made publicly available, but it is probable that it is similar to the agreement signed between Australia and NATO. That document said the partnership “aims to support NATO’s strategic objectives,” including “enhancing support for NATO’s operations and missions.” Training and other joint activities would assist Australian military forces in Afghanistan “and any possible future NATO-led mission.” That language mirrors the text of NATO’s policy document on partnerships, which identifies increasing support for NATO-led operations and missions as a primary strategic objective.

Ostensibly formed as a defensive alliance for Western Europe, NATO has never acted in self-defense. Instead, the alliance has been steadily expanding and encroaching on former Warsaw Pact territory, and it now stands on Russia’s doorstep, provocatively tightening the military noose around its designated adversary. In 1999, NATO engaged in its first war of aggression, bombing every city and town in Yugoslavia and inflicting widespread death and destruction. That was followed by NATO support for the U.S. occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and a bombing campaign against Libya that succeeded in overthrowing the government and creating an anarchic free-for-all by Islamic militias.

Prior to its agreement with NATO, South Korea had already sent small contingents to Iraq and Afghanistan in support of U.S. occupying forces. In 2011, South Korea pledged half a billion dollars over a five-year period for Afghan government forces and development programs.

However, these support operations are not deemed sufficient by NATO. In November 2012, NATO official Dirk Brengelmann met with South Korean foreign ministry officials in Seoul, to “explore opportunities for expanding cooperation,” in the words of a NATO report.

At the seventh Policy Consultation between South Korea and NATO in October 2014, the two sides agreed to “strengthen and upgrade” their partnership. Only a few days earlier, a South Korean delegation met with U.S. officials in Washington. There, U.S. Secretary of State John

Kerry announced, "We were very grateful to hear from both Foreign Minister Yun and Defense Minister Han that South Korea intends to continue cooperating closely with us in regard to these international efforts, and in fact wants to step up its efforts in a number of regards." The joint statement issued after the meeting stated, "Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to further develop the Alliance into a global partnership."

Jeffrey Reynolds of the Strategic Engagement Team at NATO headquarters and Barry Pavel of the Atlantic Council co-authored an article in which they argue that NATO is already a Pacific power. The authors admit that NATO engagement in Asia "will create controversy." As NATO pursues an Asia-Pacific strategy, "pushback from other nations in the region will be a natural response, but the alliance should be prepared for that outcome and nevertheless stride ahead." In the view of Reynolds and Pavel, "A far riskier option for the alliance is to stay out of Asia. In doing so, it would lose the opportunity to play a constructive role in the security of the world's emerging basin of consequence." Considering NATO's impact on Yugoslavia and Libya, a fair-minded person would have to substitute the word "destructive" for "constructive" in the previous sentence in order to properly characterize what NATO has to offer Asian nations.

"America's pivot is a significant opportunity for NATO," Reynolds and Pavel continue. "NATO must be regional in character, global in stature and Pacific in direction."

The United States has been pushing its Asian allies for some time to establish a military alliance similar to NATO. "We must encourage our allies to move beyond bilateral alliances and towards an era of greater multilateral security cooperation," asserts U.S. Joint Chiefs Chairman General Martin Dempsey. However, as one unnamed U.S. military official admitted, "No one expects this region to move to a NATO-type security architecture anytime in the near future."

While it may take years to extend NATO into Asia or to build a counterpart in Asia, more immediate plans call for NATO's Asian partners to play a more active role in U.S. wars of aggression. U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter spelled out his vision back in 1999, as NATO was obliterating infrastructure in Yugoslavia. "NATO's principal strategic and military purpose in the post-Cold War era should be to provide a mechanism for the rapid formation of militarily potent 'coalitions of the willing' that are able to project power beyond NATO territory."

Moreover, Carter argued, NATO's partnership programs "should be enhanced beyond today's emphasis on peacekeeping." The objective "should be to prepare partners to operate alongside NATO members in 'coalitions of the willing' that cover the full range of NATO's new power-projection missions." Membership in a NATO partnership program "for non-NATO members" should be "as similar as possible to the experience of NATO membership."

In Carter's view, for NATO partners to limit their involvement to post-invasion support operations is inadequate. They must send combat forces to fight alongside NATO as it attacks its next hapless victim. In the coming years, South Korea, as well as other Asian nations such as Japan, Australia and New Zealand, can expect to face strong-arm tactics to adopt the type of role South Korea played in the U.S. invasion of Vietnam in years past. South Korea has nothing to gain from making itself a tool of imperialism, and it is to be hoped that it will resist pressure to do so. It is time for the peoples of the world to say no to military madness.

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