



THE US AMBASSADOR'S MISPLACED PRIORITIES?

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Recent remarks by US Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris regarding negotiations about sharing the costs of maintaining United States Forces Korea (USFK) have surprised many security experts in South Korea. When Harris was appointed, there was widespread optimism that his military background would bring a fresh approach to current issues on the Korean Peninsula, but his narrow focus on the cost-sharing issue has undermined such hopes.

The appointment of Ambassador Harris in July 2018 was unusual in several ways: he is the first military officer in the post without experience as a professional diplomat; the first to have previously led US Pacific Command (now the Indo-Pacific Command) which includes the Korean Peninsula; the first ambassador to South Korea of Japanese descent; and was initially designated US ambassador to Australia before being reassigned to South Korea. All these factors complicate his position.

In working-level talks on cost-sharing, known as the Special Measures Agreement (SMA), the US has requested almost a doubling of the South Korean contribution, and for this to be reviewed every year, instead of the present five-year arrangement. An agreement has been reached, after a period of deadlock. Harris has spoken publicly on related issues several times and published an op-ed article in *Chosun Ilbo* on Jan. 17, 2019, a right-of-center newspaper that strongly supports the US-ROK alliance and has been

skeptical about the recent political and military rapprochement between North and South Korea.

Some South Korean policy analysts and scholars have been profoundly disturbed by Harris' vehement insistence that South Korea pay more for the US presence in Korea. For example, his remarks at a congratulatory dinner hosted by the ROK-US Alliance Foundation, and attended by many distinguished figures in South Korea, caused considerable embarrassment. Harris' remarks appear to discount the considerable geostrategic benefits the US derives from the ROK-US alliance, which is unfortunate given the ongoing geostrategic realignment, with China rising, the US declining, Europe becoming self-absorbed, and Russia making trouble wherever it can.

From South Korea's perspective, the most important issue of the moment is making progress on the Korean Peninsula peace initiative, following three North-South summits in the past year and the historic summit between the US and North Korea in Singapore. There are clear indications that South Korea, North Korea, and China all support making a declaration that the Korean War has ended, but the US is dragging its feet. Gen. Robert Abrams, current commander of USFK and ROK-US CFC, has proved recalcitrant in negotiations over various matters with the ROK Ministry of National Defense, and the issue of transferring wartime operational control from the US to the ROK. The necessary restructuring of the ROK-US CFC command chain remains in abeyance.

Although popular opinion in South Korea is divided, there is a groundswell of support for continuing the rapprochement between North and South. North Korea's failure to live up to its promises of denuclearization are regrettable, but are not, so far, seen as reason to abort the peace process. Koreans are not in the mood to be told to toe the line: not by China, and not by the US. The administration of South Korean President Moon Jae-in is determined to chart its own course, and Ambassador Harris' recent remarks have not changed this policy. In fact, they are more likely counterproductive and may ultimately damage US interests in the region.

Given general distrust of President Trump, especially the empty posturing toward North Korea, together with popular support for improving relations between North and South Korea, some gaps have opened between USFK and the ROK military. Political supporters of the alliance have lost some influence on the ROK's foreign policy and military strategy, and the left-leaning factions represented by President Moon are urging major steps to rehabilitate North Korea by offering economic and military cooperation.

It would be wise for Ambassador Harris to reconsider his stance in several ways. First, Harris has effectively delivered the message about what President Trump wants from South Korea, but he has been far less successful at listening to the needs and requests of his host nation and conveying them back to Washington. This is disappointing since his military experience and his familiarity with the region should give him the skills necessary to bridge gaps between South Korean concerns about its sluggish economy and the US "America First" policy toward South Korea.

Second, Harris should work toward integrating political, military, and diplomatic solutions to the current challenges of the Korean Peninsula. South Korea has a four-star US Army general responsible for maintaining the Armistice Agreement which halted the Korean War, who also operates as a field commander for the United Nations Command to monitor the truce. Harris should act as a neutral coordinator, adopting a two-track approach that incorporates both military and diplomatic channels to advance relations among the two Koreas and the US.

Third, as former commander of US Pacific Command, Harris should understand the reality of the Korean Peninsula and make every effort to convey the facts on the ground to President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Washington and the Pentagon have a different perception of Korean Peninsula affairs from the US military deployed here; Harris should work to narrow this gap.

Fourth, Harris must recognize the wider geopolitical situation. South Korea is in a delicate strategic predicament: Chinese President Xi Jinping is happy to use North Korean nuclear weapons to unsettle US regional hegemony, and may use the Belt-and-Road

Initiative to provide political cover for North Korea to string out denuclearization indefinitely. Meanwhile, President Trump's understanding of foreign affairs is limited to transactional diplomacy driven by his "America First" principle, which is a clear threat to the ROK-US alliance. Harris' priority should be preserving regional peace and stability. To this end, he can be a valuable channel of communication between Trump and Moon. Besides preventing Trump from destroying the ROK-US alliance, Harris should encourage him not to interfere with the North-South rapprochement, which is gradually dissolving tensions lingering from the Cold War and may ultimately benefit all regional stakeholders.

It is Harris' job to liaise between an autocratic US president and a left-leaning South Korean administration. Moreover, the impact of the candlelight protests that removed a corrupt president and advanced Korean democracy through the power of the people is still affecting South Korea. Harris should tell Trump, clearly and often, that undermining his South Korean ally will not promote US interests. Instead of simply acting as Trump's mouthpiece, Harris should reflect back the views and understanding of the South Korean government to inform policy making in Washington.

There are few examples in history where a nation with a well-developed nuclear weapons program has been persuaded to give it up. No progress will be made toward denuclearization if the US continues to treat North Korea's nuclear bombs and ballistic missiles as a purely military issue. Any conceivable diplomatic deal will involve some give-and-take, including significant economic aid for North Korea. Harris can help square the circle of how to verify North Korean compliance with any denuclearization process while gradually lifting economic sanctions. A second summit between Trump and Kim Jung Un has just been announced, and Ambassador Harris should work to ensure that this one achieves something more substantial than the photo-op and platitudes of the first summit.

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