



REPLY TO PACNET 11

BY JAMES A. KELLY

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The last year's unfolding of history affecting the Korea Peninsula has been major and unprecedented. After tensions rose and rose, North Korea stopped—so far—its public testing of both nuclear weapons and long range ballistic missiles. The leaders of North and South Korea met three times in the last year and President Trump and Kim Jong-un met in Singapore last June.

A second Trump-Kim summit is impending, and major issues—denuclearization, sanctions, and North-South contacts and support—remain to be solved, even as longstanding alliance issues continue to be addressed between the US and the ROK. These latter issues include questions of how much should Koreans pay to support US military forces in Korea and how command relations (OpCon) should be organized. Both issues have been contentious for many years.

Experts have concluded for many months that the US-ROK alliance will be challenged for a year or more. Some of these difficulties were the focus of a recent PacNet by retired ROK Navy Capt. Sukjoon Yoon. Yoon touches on broad issues, but focused on the US request that the Republic of Korea contribute more for support for the stationing of US forces there. Yoon, however, personalized these issues with *ad hominem* criticisms of the US ambassador to the ROK, the highly respected retired admiral, Harry Harris.

The lead issue cited by Yoon is the Republic of Korea's annual financial support of US troops in Korea, the Special Measures Agreement or SMA.

This issue is by no means limited to South Korea, but applies to Japan and to Europe and—with much current controversy—NATO. As is well known, when President Trump ran for election in 2016 he frequently stated that allies were not paying enough to support the US troop presence; this has been an often cited position of his for decades and Trump was certain to press the issue. Ambassadors understand—and *are tasked*—to make sure that message reaches their hosts.

A short term US-ROK agreement has been reached. Given the controversy and the uncertainty of how the North Korean threat will be assessed and opposed by the ROK, a one-year agreement—with its renewal provisions—strikes this writer as prudent.

More seriously, Yoon's essay drastically misstates the role of an ambassador and it over-personalizes a US policy position that applies broadly. As reflected in the photos that are so conspicuous at any US embassy, an ambassador's mission is to execute the policies of the president whom he represents, with day to day policies instructed by the secretary of State. An ambassador will and should present US government positions, and public speeches on major topics as well as meetings with officials are all a part. The ambassador will indeed report on both official and other attitudes and positions in their host country, but these reports are not public. Yet Yoon criticizes Amb. Harris for reports to Washington of which he has no knowledge.

In addition, Yoon's criticism falls trap to the “victim” syndrome that has too often been apparent in US-Korean relations. Yoon seems to be angry about some of President Trump's policies and also concerned whether his own president's very popular pursuit of rapprochement with North Korea is going too fast.

Denuclearization was the product of last June's Trump-Kim summit, but the months since have seen neither progress or even definition of what that means. As the source of UN sanctions on the North, progress on a full and verifiable end to North Korea's nuclear program is the determinant of much more potential cooperation. The future is critical for Korea and of great importance to the US – and uncertainty is immense now.

One can argue US policy on its merits without reverting to the sense that South Korea is a victim. The United States is not telling its ally to “toe the line,” nor, in this writer’s 36 years of experience, has it done so. But too often in Korean-US relations, US intentions are portrayed as bullying and South Korea is viewed as a victim. Repeated invocation of this story line wears thin in the face of Korea’s economic success and extremely talented people.

Capt. Yoon does us a service by commenting on the multiple levels of complication – and opportunity – that present themselves on and near the Korean Peninsula. But he is picking on the wrong man. As Washington recognized, this key post needed an ambassador of exceptional experience and depth. The US is lucky that Harry Harris, who understands the array of events that are the foundation of US security policy and with a lifetime of exceptional service, was willing to come to Seoul to represent his country and its president.

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