

Policy Forum 05-41A: U.S. Can't Act Alone in North

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Joong-Ang Ilbo Editorial

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I. Introduction

This editorial appeared in the Joong-Ang Ilbo, a South Korean newspaper. The editorial states: "The United States probably knows full well that in a real emergency, it would be impossible to act without South Korea. Nor could we cope with an emergency in the North without U.S. support. South Korea and the United States must wisely resolve this discord in a spirit of alliance."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Report by the Joong-Ang Ilbo

-U.S. Can't Act Alone in North
by the Joong-Ang Ilbo

Vice Admiral Jonathan Greenert, commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, recently said that the Navy "would go in and help restore order in North Korea if there were instability or a regime failure." He added that refugees would try to get to Japan or escape elsewhere by sea; he called regime stability a "second-order problem," behind the North's military threat. These are very sensitive subjects that have implications for South Korea, as well as China and Russia.

Admiral Greenert's remarks could be interpreted as meaning that the United States will unilaterally send troops to North Korea if there is internal turmoil or a rush of refugees. As long as the U.S.-South Korea Combined Forces Command is in control, this is supposed to be impossible.

We wonder whether the admiral was referring to a U.S. intention to act alone, or whether he was speaking in more general terms. One can ask whether it was appropriate for a commander, who does not decide defense policy, to make such remarks, which could be interpreted in many ways.

The United States and South Korea have struggled over Operation Plan 5029-05, designed to cope with internal turmoil in North Korea. Seoul has objected to the plan, because for the United States, which has operational command during war, to lead an operation in response to internal turmoil in the North outside of a wartime context would infringe on Korea's sovereignty.

If the admiral's remarks were in response to Seoul's objections to that plan, then it is a matter of grave concern. This is not an issue like the recent conflict over South Korea's financial contribution to the U.S. troop presence. It is an issue that could shake the U.S.-Korea alliance to its roots.

Goh Kun, the former prime minister who served as acting president last year, has said "I learned that we have no means to have an effect on North Korea when there is a power vacuum in the North." It is extremely important that South Korea come up with a plan to cope with a possible crisis in the North. If an emergency actually happens, it should be managed on the basis of Korea-U.S. cooperation.

The United States probably knows full well that in a real emergency, it would be impossible to act without South Korea. Nor could we cope with an emergency in the North without U.S. support. South Korea and the United States must wisely resolve this discord in a spirit of alliance.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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