

WebMemo



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Supporting Our South Korean Ally and Enhancing Defense Cooperation

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Legislation pending in Congress to facilitate foreign military sales to South Korea would enhance the security of a key U.S. ally and strengthen the bilateral military relationship. The U.S.–Republic of Korea Defense Cooperation Improvement Act of 2008 (H.R. 5443/S. 1846)¹ would grant the same preferential treatment for foreign military sales to South Korea as currently applies to members of NATO, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand (“NATO+3”).

By recognizing the strategic importance of South Korea to U.S. security objectives in Asia, the bill would also remedy a long-overdue disparity in Washington’s characterization of its military allies. General B. B. Bell, the commander of U.S. Forces Korea, characterized South Korea’s absence from the NATO+3 list as “bizarre and strange” in his congressional testimony on March 12.² South Korea has been a stalwart defender of democracy in Asia and stands poised to assume a larger role in international counter-terrorism and peacekeeping operations.

Growing Need for South Korean Deterrent Capabilities. Despite perceived progress in the Six Party Talks to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear weapons, South Korea remains threatened by Pyongyang’s conventional military, chemical warfare, and missile forces. Pyongyang has yet to agree to negotiation terms for eliminating its estimated six to 12 nuclear weapons. North Korea has forward-deployed 70 percent of its ground forces within 90 miles of the demilitarized zone. In addition to three conventional corps alongside the DMZ, Pyongyang

has deployed two mechanized corps, an armor corps, and an artillery corps. Moreover, North Korea has an estimated 600 Scud missiles that can target all of South Korea as well as 200 No-Dong missiles that can strike Japan.

South Korea will assume a greater responsibility for its national defense as a result of the decision to return wartime operational command authority of South Korean forces from the United Nations Command to Seoul in 2012. The U.S. is decreasing its troop level in South Korea from 38,000 to 25,000 by the end of 2008. That will be accompanied by \$11 billion in U.S. force upgrades to compensate for any degradation in deterrent capabilities brought on by the troop decrease. Despite U.S. reassurances, Seoul remains concerned that Washington may contemplate further troop reductions below the promised level of 25,000 troops.

In a separate development, Seoul is pursuing an ambitious \$292 billion program to transform its military forces by 2020. Both of these developments will require extensive modernization of South Korean combat forces as well as reconnaissance and communication assets. These factors will drive a significant expansion of South Korean defense procurement.

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However, some have questioned whether a perceived shortfall in South Korea's defense spending will hurt its ability to meet current and future needs. Moreover, newly elected President Lee Myung-bak may reverse South Korea's long-standing opposition to participating in an integrated ballistic missile defense system. The previous two progressive administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun avoided participation because they feared it would aggravate North Korea and might undermine Seoul's engagement policy with Pyongyang.

Alleviating U.S. Restrictions on Allied Support. While South Korea's burgeoning military industry may fulfill some of its growing defense requirements, Seoul will still need to purchase extensive foreign weapons and support systems to fully address its security needs. South Korean purchases of U.S. military equipment would enhance the interoperability of U.S. and South Korean military forces and strengthen their deterrent capability.

In 2007, Seoul purchased more than \$3.7 billion worth of U.S. defense items—more than any NATO+3 member country. Indeed, South Korea is one of the largest customers for U.S. military equipment. During the past 10 years, it has spent almost \$7 billion on U.S. defense articles and services—more than any NATO country. Yet, for foreign military sales, South Korea is currently rated below the five former Warsaw Pact countries and three former Soviet states that joined NATO. Such treatment of a stalwart ally of 59 years is unconscionable.

In granting South Korea preferential treatment for U.S. defense sales, H.R. 5443/S. 1846 would raise the threshold for congressional notification from \$14 million to \$25 million and reduce congressional review time from 30 days to 15 days.

Conclusion. In recent years, South Korea has perceived that the U.S. valued its military alliance with Tokyo more than its relationship with Seoul. To some degree this was brought on by President Roh's statements and policies suggesting a decreased South Korean emphasis on the bilateral relationship. Yet the Bush Administration has repeatedly made statements that highlighted the importance of Japan, but not South Korea, to U.S. strategic interests.

U.S. policymakers should take advantage of the opportunity provided by the election of Lee Myung-bak as South Korea's president. Lee has advocated repairing the strained bilateral relationship, strengthening South Korea's military, and assuming a greater international role. South Korea's ministers of defense and foreign affairs, as well as its National Assembly, have formally requested an upgrade in its foreign military sales treatment for 11 years. This legislation presents an opportunity to enhance defense interoperability and send a clear signal that Washington values and recognizes the vital contribution of South Korea to peace and stability in Asia.

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1. H.R. 5443, The U.S.–Republic of Korea Defense Cooperation Improvement Act of 2008, is co-authored by Representatives Edward Royce (R–CA) and Ellen Tauscher (D–CA). S.1846 is authored by Senator Kit Bond (R–MO).
2. General B. B. Bell, testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, March 12, 2008.