

Turkish FM: Russia must stop insisting on al-Assad's leadership in Syria

Hurriyet Daily News, 09.04.2017



Turkey remains committed to a cease-fire in Syria but Russia must stop insisting that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad should remain as the leader of the country, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said.

Speaking to local media, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said he told his Russian counterpart that Moscow had not taken the necessary steps in the face of breaches of the Syrian cease-fire. Çavuşoğlu had a phone conversation with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, late on April 7 and discussed the recent chemical attack on civilians in Syria's Idlib province.

Çavuşoğlu said he told Lavrov that Moscow had not taken necessary steps against the truce violations as a guarantor of the cease-fire in Syria and that the regime had ultimately used chemical weapons. Turkey is loyal to the process to maintain a cease-fire, but Ankara cannot remain silent against the "savagery," Çavuşoğlu said he told Russia's foreign minister.

"So you should leave your persistence on al-Assad and let the transition government begin," the minister said he told Lavrov. Çavuşoğlu also criticized the United States' recent rhetoric that the future of the Syrian regime should be decided by the people of Syria. This rhetoric has "further encouraged al-Assad," Çavuşoğlu said.

"If you try to legitimize a regime that kills so many people, commits crimes against humanity and commits war crimes, then that regime will continue to kill," he said. "If one considers they don't have any alternative to the regime amid the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), then the regime will suppose everyone will opt for it," he added.

"They don't have to prefer one of two evils. You can defeat ISIL together and the regime could be toppled," he said. International actors should launch a diplomatic initiative in order to coordinate efforts for peace in Syria, which would topple al-Assad and pave the way for a transition process under the leadership that "everybody will accept," he stated.

Recalling that Turkey supported the recent U.S. intervention, Çavuşoğlu stressed that Turkey was not in a position to make a choice between Russia and the U.S. but was continuing the relations in a balanced way.

Çavuşoğlu suggested that the U.S. and Russia were in a rivalry to avoid losing the People's Protection Units (YPG). But such a rivalry will not benefit the region, he said. "It's not acceptable that the two superpowers are competing over a terrorist organization," he said, identifying their situation as "incompetence."

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan asked Russia on April 7 to reconsider its support for the Syrian regime following the chemical weapons incident earlier this week and the U.S.' military action in response.

"It is our hope that this will not be limited to the U.S. action... We hope that Russia gets involved as well – that at least they stop defending [Bashar al-]Assad," Erdoğan said on April 8 in a televised interview.

The president said he welcomed Moscow's recent statement that "unconditional support is not possible" for the Syrian regime. "But let's speed it up," Erdoğan said. "Let's get rid of this trouble." Erdoğan said that while there was good progress in the Astana talks – carried out in parallel to the Geneva process – to reach a political agreement in Syria, "unfortunately it did not develop as we wanted."

On April 6, the U.S. fired 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian air base American officials believe was used to launch the Khan Sheikhoun attack that killed at least 100 men, women, and children and injured more than 500.

Turkish FM: Turkey seeks cooperation with Russia, US on Syria to leave differences aside

Hurriyet Daily News, 14.04.2017



Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has said he hopes U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's visit to Moscow will focus on the future of Syria rather than Washington and Moscow's own narrow interests, noting that Turkey wants to continue cooperation with Russia and the United States to resolve the Syrian crisis despite some differences of opinion.

In a televised interview, the minister said discussions between Tillerson and Russian politicians should focus on a "positive agenda" and the future of Syria while avoiding prioritizing their own agenda.

Çavuşoğlu said the Syrian issue was concerned not only with the U.S. and Russia, but also with all countries. "Of course, the role of the U.S. and Russia is crucial to solving such a big problem, but Turkey has also become the most important actor in Syria today," the minister said, stressing that Ankara wanted to continue its relations with all the countries for a solution in Syria by leaving differences of opinion on other issues aside. Tillerson held his first direct talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Apart from the Syrian crisis, Turkey also wishes to enhance its bilateral ties with Russia, the minister said, adding that Turkish ministers for the economy would visit Moscow later in April to discuss lifting restrictions on bilateral trade.

Çavuşoğlu refuted claims that Moscow would restrict charter flights between Turkey and Russia, while adding that Ankara wanted to further cooperate with Russian authorities on health tourism in Turkey. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the latest developments in Syria by phone on April 13 and agreed to support an investigation by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) into the use of chemical weapons in northern Syria.

The presidential office stated that the Turkish leader stressed that the use of chemical weapons “is the greatest crime against humanity.” The two leaders underlined the significance of joint efforts by Ankara and Moscow to continue the Geneva and Astana peace talks and agreed to work together to sustain the Syria cease-fire. Putin and Erdoğan also agreed that the normalization of ties between their two countries should be accelerated, according to the statement.

A suspected gas attack in Khan Sheikhoun in northwest Syria killed nearly 90 people. Russia subsequently demanded an examination by the OPCW in the area. A British delegation of the international chemical weapons watchdog said in a tweet that the organization’s director general has said its investigators are already testing samples and that the mission is expected to report its findings in three weeks. The OPCW’s fact-finding missions investigate alleged attacks but does not apportion blame.

Turkish FM: Turkey to make ‘final offer’ to EU on visa-free travel after referendum

Reuters, 13.04.2017



Turkey will offer a “final” deal to the European Union on visa-free travel after the April 16 referendum on whether to shift to an executive presidential system of government, Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu stated.

“We will submit our final offer to the European Union after April 16,” Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu said at a meeting in the Mediterranean province of Antalya, adding that Ankara wants to “resolve the problem that halted visa liberalization dialogue with the European Union.” “We will decide [after the referendum] how to proceed and make our decisions publicly known,” he said.



Turkey has the right to obtain the visa liberalization as “it was part of the migrant deal” signed between Ankara and Brussels, which also includes the readmission agreement on refugees fleeing to Europe, Çavuşoğlu claimed, noting that although Turkey is a candidate country negotiating for membership of the EU, Brussels has moved to lift visa procedures with other countries that are not even having membership talks.

Turkey and the EU will resume talks after April 16 aiming to upgrade Customs Union, the minister added, recalling that three rounds of discussions had been conducted so far. According to a European Commission report released last month, to get the visa waiver Ankara needs to fulfill seven outstanding criteria out of a total of 72, including “revising legislation and practices on terrorism in line with European standards.”

The March 2016 deal also envisaged a “one-for-one” formula under which failed asylum-seekers in Europe would be returned to Turkey, while Syrian refugees would be resettled in EU states under a quota system.

Turkey and the EU signed a refugee deal in March that aimed to discourage irregular migration through the Aegean Sea by taking stricter measures against human traffickers and improving the conditions of nearly three million Syrian refugees in Turkey.

The March 18 deal also allowed the acceleration of Turkey’s EU membership bid and visa-free travel for Turkish nationals within the Schengen area. Under the deal, Turkey agreed to take back illegal migrants and refugees leaving its shores for Greece in return for aid. The deal has slashed the number of migrants reaching the EU, but the visa-free deal has not been implemented due to Turkey’s anti-terror law, which is among benchmarks of the EU.

Turkey has rejected making changes to its anti-terror law, stating that it is under attack from the Fethullahist Terror Organization (FETO), the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Ankara has reportedly prepared a proposal of legislative changes to meet seven benchmarks of the EU, but is delaying submitting it to the EU until after April 16.

Turkish FM says Syrian gov't still has chemical weapons capacity

Hurriyet Daily News, 11.04.2017



The Syrian government still possesses a chemical weapons capacity, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said, urging measures to prevent Damascus' potential usage of the weapons.

“According to the information at hand, the [Syrian] regime still holds ... the capacity to use chemical weapons,” said Çavuşoğlu after a meeting of “like-minded countries” over Syria that was held on the sidelines of the G-7 foreign ministers summit. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government signed the Chemical Weapons Convention and agreed to turn over its chemical armaments in 2013.

But there have been repeated allegations of chemical weapons use by the government since then. Recalling efforts by international organizations to rid Syria of chemical weapons, Çavuşoğlu said the Syrian government either acted dishonestly and did not turn over all of its arsenal or that the countries and terror organizations that support al-Assad supplied the regime with new weapons.

“Aside from such risks not decreasing as long as the al-Assad regime stands, [the risks] are increasing,” he said. Apart from the G-7 countries – the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Italy, France, Japan – Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan attended the meeting in Lucca on Syria.

The U.S. launched 59 tomahawk missile strikes on a Syrian air base on April 7 in response to Syria's alleged chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun in the northern Idlib province. While Syria and Russia deny the claims, most U.S. allies blame the Syrian regime for the attack that killed at least 86 civilians on April 4.

Meanwhile, Çavuşoğlu conducted talks over the phone on April 10, talking to four foreign ministers in one day. Çavuşoğlu first talked to U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, during which they discussed developments in Syria, the struggle against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the political solution process in Syria and the situation surrounding al-Assad, Foreign Ministry officials told the Hürriyet Daily News.

Çavuşoğlu later talked to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who is due to meet Tillerson in Moscow on April 12 in the first face-to-face high-level meeting after the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump.

“Mr. Lavrov stressed that this act of aggression [the U.S. strike] was unacceptable and that it could only complicate the current tense situation and undermine Russian-Turkish efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis by diplomatic methods,” a statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

“Both parties said there was no alternative to the current intra-Syrian negotiating process as the only option for achieving peace in the Syrian Arab Republic,” it said. Çavu o lu later talked to his Iranian counterpart, Javad Zarif, over the latest developments in Syria, according to a Turkish diplomatic source.

Çavu o lu on April 10 also extended his condolences to Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry over two ISIL attacks on churches in the country, marking a rare instance of diplomatic interaction between the two countries since relations soured after the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

Misdirected coalition strike kills 18 partner forces in Syria: officials

Reuters, 13.04.2017



A coalition air strike accidentally killed 18 members of a U.S.-backed Arab-Kurdish alliance fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) near a key town in northern Syria, the U.S.-led coalition said on April 13.

The strike on April 11 occurred south of Tabqa, a strategically important town on the Euphrates River next to a dam and military airport, and close to the ISIL stronghold of Raqqa, which the Arab-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are trying to capture from the jihadists.”The strike was requested by the partnered forces, who had identified the target location as an ISIS [ISIL] fighting position,” a coalition statement read.

“The target location was actually a forward Syrian Democratic Forces fighting position.” SDF troops backed by coalition air power and other military assistance have been fighting for control of Tabqa since last month.

The town is considered an important waypoint ahead of the main offensive for Raqqa, the ISIL group’s last bastion in Syria. The coalition offered its “deepest condolences” to the members of the SDF and their families.

“The coalition is in close contact with our SDF partners who have expressed a strong desire to remain focused on the fight against ISIS despite this tragic incident,” the statement said. Officials were assessing the cause and would “implement appropriate safeguards to prevent similar incidents in the future,” the statement added.

The SDF is a local Arab-Kurdish force that the U.S.-led coalition is supporting with arms, air strikes, training and advice as they fight ISIL. The Kurdish forces of SDF are made up of the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Unit (YPG), which Turkey regards as a terrorist organization due to its ties with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

Meanwhile, SDF launched a new phase of their offensive around Raqqa on April 13, a statement said, but they have not yet begun to attack the militant group's stronghold of Raqqa city in an apparent delay in the operation.

Officials in the Kurdish YPG militia, a powerful component of the SDF, said last month that assaults on Raqqa city itself would start in early or mid-April. But the fourth phase of the campaign aims to clear ISIL pockets from the countryside north of the city, the SDF statement said. It did not say when the assault on Raqqa itself would begin.

"We aim to liberate dozens of villages in the Wadi Jallab area and the northern countryside ... and clear the last obstacles in front of us to pave the way for the operation to liberate Raqqa city," it said. The SDF have closed in on Raqqa from the north, east and west.

In surprise move, Iran's Ahmadinejad to run for president

AP, 12.04.2017



President Ahmadinejad stunned the country by unexpectedly filing to run in the election, contradicting a recommendation from the supreme leader to stay out of the race.

Ahmadinejad's decision could upend an election many believed would be won by moderate President Rouhani, who negotiated the nuclear deal. Though Rouhani has yet to formally register, many viewed him as a shoe-in following Supreme Leader Khamenei's recommendation in September last year for Ahmadinejad to stand down and conservatives' inability to coalesce around a single candidate.

Ahmadinejad's firebrand style could prove appealing for hard-liners seeking a tough-talking candidate who can stand up to U.S. President Donald Trump. His candidacy also could expose the fissures inside Iranian politics that linger since his contested 2009 re-election, which brought massive unrest.

Ahmadinejad previously served two four-year terms from 2005 to 2013. Under Iranian law, he became eligible to run again after four years out of office, but he remains a polarizing figure, even among fellow hard-liners.

Two of his former vice presidents have been jailed for corruption since he left office. Iran's economy suffered under heavy international sanctions during his administration because of Western suspicions that Tehran was secretly pursuing nuclear weapons. Iran insists its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election in 2009 sparked massive protests and a sweeping crackdown in which thousands of people were detained and dozens were killed.

Ahmadinejad described comments by the supreme leader suggesting he not run as “just advice” in a news conference shortly after submitting his registration. “His advice does not prevent me from running,” he said. “There is extensive pressure on me from dear people of different walks of life as their small servant to come to the election.” There was no immediate reaction from the supreme leader’s office.

Ahmadinejad said his decision to run was intended to help former Vice President Hamid Baghaei, a close confidant. Baghaei, who was imprisoned for seven months after he left office, registered alongside Ahmadinejad on April 12. So did Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, another of the former president’s close allies.

More than 120 prospective candidates submitted their names as candidates on the first day of registration on April 11, including six women and seven clerics. Registration remains open until April 15.

Under Iran’s electoral system, all applicants must be vetted by the Guardian Council, a clerical body that will announce a final list of candidates by April 27. The council normally does not approve dissidents or women for the formal candidate list.

The May 19 election is seen by many in Iran as a referendum on the 2015 nuclear agreement and other efforts to improve the country’s sanctions-hobbled economy. Under the nuclear deal, Iran agreed to curb its uranium enrichment in exchange for the lifting of international sanctions.

Since the deal, Iran has signed multi-billion-dollar contracts with airplane manufacturers Boeing Co. and Airbus. The benefits have yet to trickle down to the average Iranian, however, fueling some discontent.

Fox fights EU attempts to limit UK trade powers before Brexit

Bloomberg, 13.04.2017



The U.K. is battling to stop the European Union blocking Prime Minister Theresa May’s drive to forge new trade partnerships as the country prepares for Brexit.

Liam Fox is challenging the attempt to lock the U.K. out of the bloc’s ongoing trade talks. He’s also opposing efforts to limit Britain’s power to negotiate commercial accords with other countries before Britain leaves the EU. EU officials are reportedly pushing for the U.K. to be cut out of sensitive discussions because they are worried confidential information on trade deals would help May’s team negotiate favorable terms with the same countries after Brexit.



At the same time, Britain has been warned it can't line up its own free-trade agreements with non-EU nations until it has formally left the bloc in 2019. In an interview with Bloomberg, Fox hit back on both points. He insisted he has "certainly got greater freedom" to hold trade talks with other countries now May has formally triggered the Brexit process. And he declared Britain cannot be kept out of the EU's internal trade discussions while still a member of the bloc.

"We are a full partner in the EU until we leave and intend to play our full role," Fox said. "Clearly when the EU is discussing the U.K., that's a matter for the 27 and not the U.K. but we intend to exercise our full legal rights as one of the 28 members until such time as we stop being a member."

The question of third-country trade deals is a new flash point, with the EU and U.K. already at odds over the structure of the upcoming talks and the size of any exit bill. Such rows have sparked fears that the U.K. and EU won't reach an amicable divorce settlement and agree new terms for future trade in the tight, two-year window available for talks.

The European Commission warned last month there would need to be "a discussion about the treatment of sensitive information in the context of certain trade negotiations, which the U.K. would continue to have access to while it remained a full member," the Financial Times reported.

EU officials are concerned that by participating in conversations about talks with countries such as Australia, the U.K. might glean confidential information it can use itself when it tries to win post-Brexit accords.

In the interview, Fox said Britain wanted its own deal with Australia and would not give up its right to see the EU's private trade plans. "We think that the U.K. is a key liberalizing influence, and certainly from discussions I've had other countries welcome us continuing to play that role right until we leave the EU itself," he said.

Now that Article 50 has been triggered, and Britain is clearly on the legal exit path, there is no reason not to start talks with other countries about future trade agreements, he added. "We've certainly got greater freedom now that we are in the process of leaving," he said. "Obviously we can't sign any agreements while we are still members legally of the European Union but we can certainly begin to talk about what we want."

Russian, US ministers talk Syria in Moscow

Hurriyet Daily News, 11.04.2017



The foreign ministers of two major world powers, the United States and Russia, discussed the six-year-old war in Syria during their first face-to-face meeting in Moscow following the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump.

Russia's top diplomat, Sergei Lavrov, accused the U.S. on April 12 of carrying out an unlawful attack against Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces on April 7 as he opened a fraught meeting with visiting U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Giving Tillerson a chilly reception, Lavrov said Russia was trying to understand the "real intentions" of Trump's team.

He said Moscow had many questions about the "very ambiguous" and "contradictory" ideas emanating from Washington. "We have seen very alarming actions recently with an unlawful attack against Syria," Lavrov said, referring to the cruise missiles Trump ordered to punish al-Assad for allegedly using chemical weapons. "We consider it of utmost importance to prevent the risks of replay of similar action in the future."

Tillerson conceded the two world powers had "sharp differences" that have obstructed cooperation but voiced optimism that their talks could narrow those differences. "We both have agreed our lines of communication shall always remain open," Tillerson said.

Trump, meanwhile, told Fox Business News that the U.S. had no plans to become more deeply involved in Syria and only did so because of last week's deadly chemical weapons attack that killed dozens.

"Are we going to get involved with Syria? No," Trump said in the interview, which aired on April 12 in the U.S. "But if I see them using gas...we have to do something." "Frankly, Putin is backing a person that's truly an evil person," Trump said in the Fox Business Network interview, referring to al-Assad. "I think it's very bad for Russia. I think it's very bad for mankind."

Of al-Assad, Trump added: "This is an animal." And Putin, who U.S. intelligence agencies say tried to help Trump get elected, insisted that relations with the U.S. had only gone downhill since Trump took office in January.

"The level of trust at the working level, especially at the military level, has not become better but most likely has degraded," Putin said in an interview broadcast April 12 by state television channel Mir. French President Francois Hollande said in an interview with Le Monde published on April 12 that France and the rest of Europe must use last week's U.S. missile strike on Syria as a tool to revive peace negotiations between warring parties.



Hollande said intelligence suggested that the nerve gas attack which prompted the U.S. missile strike was tactical in nature and launched from an aircraft. Pentagon chief Jim Mattis said April 11 there was “no doubt” the Syrian regime was behind last week’s deadly chemical strike, while U.S. officials accused Moscow of waging a misinformation campaign around the attack.

A senior U.S. official said Moscow is trying to “confuse the world,” while Mattis said Washington is certain al-Assad is to blame. “There is no doubt the Syrian regime is responsible for the decision to attack and for the attack itself,” the new defense chief said in his first Pentagon press conference.

He reiterated warnings that further chemical weapons use will be met with fresh U.S. action: “If they use chemical weapons, they are going to pay a very, very stiff price.” The United Nations Security Council meanwhile was set to vote late April 12 on a resolution demanding the Syrian government cooperate with an investigation into the attack.

Russia on April 12 slammed as “unacceptable” the draft resolution put forward by Britain, France and the United States. “In its current form this project is unacceptable for us,” Russian Deputy Foreign Ministry Gennady Gatilov told Interfax news agency. “We, of course, will not vote for it.”

U.S. officials have hinted strongly they believe Moscow is at least partially complicit. “How is it possible that their forces were co-located with the Syrian forces that planned prepared and carried out this chemical weapons attack at the same installation and did not have foreknowledge?” said a senior U.S. official on condition of anonymity, according to AFP.

Samples taken from the site of a deadly toxic gas attack in Syria and analyzed by British scientists have tested positive for sarin or a sarin-like substance, Britain’s U.N. Ambassador Matthew Rycroft told the U.N. Security Council on April 12.

“The United Kingdom therefore shares the U.S. assessment that it is highly likely that the regime was responsible for a sarin attack on Khan Sheikhoun on 4 April,” Rycroft said. Meanwhile, Iran’s Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan warned April 12 that any new U.S. action in Syria “will not go unanswered,” after America threatened to follow up a strike last week with more attacks.

“The Americans will have to pay a heavy price if they repeat their action and they must know that their actions will not go unanswered,” Dehghan said during a telephone conversation with Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu. Dehghan accused American leaders of lying by saying they wanted to “fight terrorists”.

“Instead of bombing, the Syrian army and the Syrian people are being bombed,” Dehghan said, quoted in a statement on the website of his ministry. A deal to evacuate four besieged Syrian towns began April 12 with an exchange of prisoners between rebels and government forces, local sources and state media said.

Thousands of people, both civilians and fighters, were expected to begin leaving government-held Fuaa and Kafraya and opposition-controlled Madaya and Zabadani later in the day. The evacuations of the four besieged towns come under an agreement brokered by rebel backer Qatar and government ally Iran last month.

An AFP photographer in government-held Aleppo city saw 12 of the prisoners released by the opposition, nine of whom appeared to be suffering injuries, arriving along with eight bodies. Syrian state news agency SANA said the four children and eight women had been transferred with the bodies of “eight martyrs” from “terrorist groups in Idlib province.” It said the exchange of prisoners marked the start of the “implementation of the first phase of the agreement.”

SANA said that “19 militants” were transferred from Fuaa and Kafraya at the same time. A source in the jihadist Tahrir al-Sham alliance confirmed the exchange. Madaya and Zabadani are opposition enclaves surrounded by regime forces in Damascus province. The exchange marks the beginning of the implementation of the deal to evacuate the four towns, as well as part of the Yarmuk Palestinian camp in southern Damascus.

It's time for America to cut South Korea loose

Foreign Policy, 06.04.2017



Asia contains the world's two most populous nations, the country with the largest Muslim population, the two largest economies after America, and the next superpower and peer competitor to the United States.

But when U.S. Secretary of State Tillerson visited the continent, North Korea nearly monopolized his attention. Why is the US, which dominates the globe militarily, politically, and economically, fixated on this poor, isolated, and distant nation? Because America has gotten entangled where it does not belong. Washington has been deeply involved in the Korean Peninsula since the end of World War II.

Subsequently, the Cold War gave a zero-sum quality to international relations, with Washington's loss being the Soviet Union's gain. Having invested some 37,000 lives to save South Korea during the Korean War, America's credibility was also at stake. And with the “loss” of China to communism fresh on Americans' minds, nobody was willing to see another Asian nation go red. But that world disappeared long ago. The Korean Peninsula has lost its geopolitical significance, South Korea its helplessness, and America's Korea commitment its purpose.

The Korean Peninsula has lost its geopolitical significance, South Korea its helplessness, and America's Korea commitment its purpose. While there is much to criticize in the approach of Donald Trump's administration to the rest of the world, the president correctly sees the need for a foreign policy that more effectively protects America's interests. A good place to start shifting course is the region home to the world's newest and least responsible nuclear power. The Koreans are no longer a proxy battleground between superpowers. There was a time when U.S. withdrawal from a confrontation with a Soviet ally in Asia would have, analysts believed, signaled weakness a continent away in Europe.



But the Soviets are long gone and the cause for American commitment with them. An inter-Korean war would be tragic and the body count enormous, but absent American involvement the fighting would largely be confined to the peninsula. The continued presence of U.S. forces, by contrast, virtually guarantees the spread of conflict.

South Korea's defense no longer requires Washington's presence. The South's economy began racing past its northern antagonist during the 1960s. Democracy arrived in the late 1980s. By the 1990s, when mass starvation stalked Pyongyang as Seoul's economy boomed, the gap between the two Koreas was already huge and growing. The South's military potential is correspondingly great though as yet unrealized — in part because dependence on the U.S. presence has affected strategic choices.

Yet America's military presence has remained sacrosanct. Jimmy Carter's plan to bring home U.S. troops was opposed even by his own appointees. Ronald Reagan pushed a more muscular confrontation with the Soviet Union and other communist states.

With the end of the Cold War, his successors expanded alliance commitments, particularly in Europe, but also in Asia. Today, 28,500 troops remain in South Korea, backed up by U.S. forces in Okinawa and other Asian-Pacific bases, and highlighted by periodic decisions to overfly the North with bombers or send aircraft carriers to nearby waters whenever Washington wants to demonstrate "resolve" to Pyongyang.

One argument, advanced by analyst Robert E. McCoy, is moral, "since it was American ignorance that facilitated the division of the Korean Peninsula in the concluding days of World War II." Some Koreans malign America for this division. But this is the wisdom of hindsight; in the chaotic aftermath of global conflict, no U.S. official wanted to push the Soviets over a faraway peninsula.

The alternative was pure inaction, which would have resulted in South Koreans joining their northern neighbors in the Kim dynasty's new Dark Age. Perhaps inadvertently, Washington did a very good deed. For that it deserves praise, not criticism and claims that it must forever police the peninsula.

More practical is the contention of analysts such as the Heritage Foundation's Bruce Klingner that U.S. backing is "necessary to defend" the South. Yet, in contrast to 1950, there is no reason the South cannot protect itself — if properly motivated to do so by the departure of U.S. conventional forces.

With a bigger economy, larger population, and significant technological edge, as well as greater international support, Seoul could construct armed forces capable of deterring and defeating the North. Doing so would be expensive and take serious effort, but so what? The South Korean government's most important duty is to protect its people.

Taking on that responsibility also would force Seoul to treat Pyongyang more consistently. The "Sunshine Policy" begun under former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung resulted in the transfer of some \$10 billion in cash and assistance to the North, even as the latter was developing missiles and nuclear weapons.



That approach was viable only because Washington provided a military backstop (and if the new South Korean president, to be elected in May, revives the Sunshine Policy, as some have suggested, there's no telling if the Trump administration would be so forgiving). The South needs to bear both the costs and benefits of whatever approach it takes.

But even if South Korea couldn't defend itself, the argument would still fall short. American soldiers shouldn't be treated as defenders of the earth, deployed here, there, and everywhere. American soldiers shouldn't be treated as defenders of the earth, deployed here, there, and everywhere. The United States should go to war only when its most important interests are at stake.

South Korea's prosperity is not one of those vital interests, at least in security terms. A renewed conflict confined to the two Koreas would be horrific, but the consequences for the United States would be primarily humanitarian and economic, not security.

The cost would be high but fall primarily on the region. In contrast, direct U.S. involvement in another Korean War would be much more expensive than the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts, which have cost America thousands of lives and trillions of dollars.

Of course, the North's possession of what we assume to be a growing and at some point deliverable nuclear arsenal skews the peninsula's balance of power. However, this doesn't create a need for a conventional American military presence on the peninsula. Washington could still guarantee massive retaliation against any North Korean use of nuclear weapons, providing a deterrent against the North's threats.

But it is worth contemplating whether it would be better to allow South Korea to construct its own deterrent. In the late 1970s, South Korean President Park Chung-hee worried about Washington's reliability and began work on a Korean bomb — only to stop under U.S. pressure. Since then, support for reviving such work has periodically surfaced in South Korea. Encouraging such efforts might actually be in the best interests of the United States, even if America has to maintain its nuclear umbrella while the Korean bomb is developed.

Yes, encouraging nuclear proliferation is a risky path. But the United States would gain from staying out of Northeast Asia's nuclear quarrels. China, fearful that Japan would join the nuclear parade, might take tougher action against Pyongyang in an attempt to forestall Seoul's efforts. The South could feel confident in its own defense, rather than remaining reliant upon U.S. willingness to act.

A potpourri of broader claims is also made for maintaining U.S. forces. America's presence supposedly constrains China, promotes regional stability, and deters an arms race. Let's consider those claims in order.

What sort of constraint is allegedly being posed to China? If the idea is to coerce it into assuming responsibility for North Korea in the event of its collapse, Beijing has shown no interest in attempting to swallow a Korean population likely to prove indigestible. And if the calculation is rather that Washington can persuade South Korea to pressure China on non-Korean matters, it's easy to predict the unfriendly response Seoul's Blue House would give if invited by the White House to join it in warring against China to, say, save an independent Taiwan, counter Chinese moves in the South China Sea — or, horror of horrors, defend Japan.



Indeed, absent U.S. protection, South Korea and Japan might feel greater pressure to finally settle historical disputes so often misused by their nationalist politicians. As for the idea that the U.S. presence deters a regional arms race, building weapons so others don't have to is not the sort of charity America should engage in. Alliances can deter. But, as dramatically demonstrated by World War I, they also can act as transmission belts of war. Moreover, small nations often act irresponsibly — such as underinvesting in defense — when protected by big powers.

The U.S. security presence in South Korea is an expensive and dangerous commitment that America can no longer afford. Nor has it ever brought the United States much popularity in the country, where U.S. soldiers are a constant irritant to nationalists. The South is no longer a poor nation in need of protection from the specter of global communism but one more than capable of standing on its own two feet.



Announcements & Reports

Europe's Role in North Africa: Development, Investment and Migration

Source : Bruegel

Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2017/04/europes-role-in-north-africa-development-investment-and-migration/>

Maintaining Arctic Cooperation with Russia

Source : Rand

Weblink : http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1731.html

The unprecedented expansion of the global middle class

Source : Brookings

Weblink : <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-unprecedented-expansion-of-the-global-middle-class-2/>

Upcoming Events

Competitive Gains in the Economic and Monetary Union

Date : 25 April 2017

Place : Brussels - Belgium

Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/534-competitive-gains-in-the-economic-and-monetary-union/>

The Future of Capitalist Democracy: UK-Japan Perspectives

Date : 25 April 2017

Place : London - UK

Website : <http://www.chathamhouse.org/event/future-capitalist-democracy-uk-japan-perspectives>

13th Asia Europe Economic Forum (AEEF)

Date : 26 April 2017

Place : Beijing - China

Website : <http://bruegel.org/events/13th-asia-europe-economic-forum/>

Emerging Markets and Europe: Time for Different Relationships?

Date : 27 April 2017

Place : Brussels - Belgium

Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/524-emerging-markets-and-europe-time-for-different-relationships/>



What future for Europe's Social Models?

Date : 27 April 2017
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/526-what-future-for-europes-social-models/>

Challenges for Growth in Europe

Date : 27 April 2017
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/521-challenges-for-growth-in-europe/>

Global Governance of Public Goods: Asian and European Perspectives

Date : 28 April 2017
Place : Paris - France
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/529-global-governance-of-public-goods-asian-and-european-perspectives/>

The Future of the Welfare State

Date : 28 April 2017
Place : Berlin - Germany
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/541-the-future-of-the-welfare-state/>

Vision Europe Summit 2016

Date : 28 April 2017
Place : Lisbon - Portugal
Website : <http://bruegel.org/events/vision-europe-summit-2016/>