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Washington funds its Uyghur 'friends'

By Donald Kirk

WASHINGTON - The United States has stumbled almost unwittingly into the middle of ethnic conflict in western [China](#) from which there's no chance of coming out a winner.

Official American sympathy lies with the Uyghurs, seen as the victims of the long tentacles of Chinese power, exploited, impoverished and persecuted by Han Chinese. While the Uyghur cause is no doubt deserving, one thing is certain: the US is not going to go to war for them and is not going to finance militants among them to stage a revolt in the name of Uyghur freedom.

All the US can do on a formal level is to issue statements calling for restraint, deploring acts of violence, and talking about the

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democratic rights of oppressed minorities. Those words carry no threat, no suggestion that the US government can or will do anything to aid the Uyghur people.

No way can the US contemplate any form of intervention that would immediately be seen in Beijing as gross interference in China's internal affairs and have a ruinous effect on US-Chinese relations. Chinese authorities are already upset by the sympathy expressed in the United States for the rights of Tibetans. At least Americans have heard of [Tibet](#). You would have great difficulty finding anyone on the streets of any American city who had a

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clue about the Uyghurs.

If the United States is not openly on the side of the Uyghurs, there are plenty of signs of substantive support. One that's getting some publicity in Washington is the role of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which calls itself a private non-governmental organization but dispenses grants with money appropriated by the US [Congress](#).

As the Uyghur rioting simmered on, the NED was revealed to be dispensing more than US\$200,000 a year to support the World Uyghur Congress, blamed for triggering the unrest. A Uyghur woman, Rebiya Kadeer, now living in suburban Washington after having made it to the US with powerful assistance from the US State Department several years ago, seems to be the organizer - and the recipient of much of the largess.

Carl Gershman, president of the NED, notes that this grant, and others to recipients around the world, including several in South Korea, are far too small to be responsible for a popular uprising. He also makes much of the "transparency" of the NED, arguing that all that it does is announced and out in the open.

The last thing he wants is for NED to give the impression that it's a front for the Central Intelligence Agency or any other US government agency. Those who receive grants from the NED make no secret about them either. At least two groups in Seoul, one that aids North Korean refugees, another that broadcasts two hours a day of news and views into North Korea, have told me that NED is the source of some of their funding.

As NED grants in Korea indicate, the NED's role is that of a defender of democratic principles, an influence in the spread of freedom as interpreted by Americans. "In western China, we support minority rights," Gershman remarked when questioned after a talk that focused mainly on North Korea. "The work is always peaceful. It has to do with the rights of people."

Gershman spoke with conviction, but nice words can hardly cover up the sense that he and his colleagues are engaged in a high-risk, controversial mission in a world in which anti-Americanism can flare up anywhere, often unexpectedly.

It's very easy to accuse the NED, and the government whose money it is dispensing, of having a destabilizing influence, of exercising undue pressure, of intervening in the [politics](#) of sovereign nations. If the causes that the NED espouses seem worthy, imagine how terrible they might become if the NED falls into the wrong hands, if unscrupulous people take it over and try to manipulate it for their own purposes.

For now, the question is how is China likely to view the NED support for a Uyghur organization that actively opposes Chinese policies and Chinese control. Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute in Washington sees officials in Beijing as responding by lack of cooperation with the US on restraining North Korea.

Upset that the United States might play a role, however small, on behalf of Uyghurs, the Chinese already see North Korea as a buffer against the United States and Japan. Although China may not want North Korea to test missiles or explode nuclear devices, the Chinese may also be asking themselves what's the point of pressuring North Korea to stop what it's doing when the United States seems to be our enemy.

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United States support of the Uighur cause, on top of support of Tibetan dissidents may be all the more disturbing to China in view of the large ethnic Korean minority across the Tumen River in Manchuria. Might ethnic Koreans some day rebel against rule from Beijing? And would the United States stand by them, possibly extending them funding?

China already is under heavy pressure to view defectors from North Korea as true refugees rather than round them up periodically and send them back to face execution, torture, beatings and imprisonment in the North. Any sign of US intervention in Manchuria is sure to drive China closer to North Korea.

The result could be Chinese refusal to enforce the resolution adopted by the United Nations Security Council after North Korea's nuclear test on May 25. China could ignore, or partly ignore, sanctions imposed against North Korean firms that stop them from exporting missiles, nukes and their components. The gulf between China and the United States would deepen with the Korean Peninsula caught between these lumbering national giants.

Gershman downplays the suggestion that the NED might be responsible for China's hardening its policy on North Korea. "China is not going to be influenced by a few grants that NED makes," he remarked. "China needs to be a player" - playing the role of influencing North Korea to abandon an increasingly confrontational policy.

It might seem unfair to suggest maybe the US Congress should stop funding NED just because China objects to some of its activities. The problem remains, however, that the US response to Uyghur protest may have an adverse impact on US-Chinese relations. Under the circumstances, China may be all the more reluctant to talk some sense into the North Koreans at a time when Chinese pressure is needed.

In fact, the NED may have vastly more influence than the size of its grants. The money it dispenses really may make a difference. Gershman seems uncertain whether to deny such an outlandish notion - or take a bow.

Either way, he's sticking to his guns. "You have to support human rights and democracy," he said. "You wait for the moment." As for the Uyghurs, "we're close to our Uyghur friends."

Did none of them give a clue as to the unrest that was about to erupt - the inspiration financed, in small but significant part, by the NED. "I did not," said Gershman, "have any sense of what was developing."

*Journalist **Donald Kirk** has been covering Korea - and the confrontation of forces in Northeast Asia - for more than 30 years.*

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