



China Must Confront Its North Korea Problem

Doug Bandow

April 11, 2016

Great powers usually have client states. Although a sign of influence, the latter often are more trouble than they are worth. North Korea increasingly appears that way for Beijing.

The Chinese-North Korean relationship was oft said to be like lips and teeth, forged in blood during the Korean War. But even then, the relationship was fraught with tension.

Today those look like the “good ol’ days.” There is little doubt that the so-called Democratic People’s Republic of Korea has lost the support of Chinese public opinion.

Academics and analysts outside of government also show little love for China’s one ally, which only takes and never gives. Top officials no longer attempt to disguise their frustration with the North’s behavior.

The Kim regime has returned ill-disguised contempt. Emissaries from the People’s Republic of China came and went as the North Korean leader failed to make even a pretense of listening.

So Se Pyong, Pyongyang’s ambassador to the UN in Geneva and the UN’s Conference on Disarmament, predictably denounced the United States and South Korea. When asked if the North felt pressure from the PRC after President Xi called for dialogue over the Korean “predicament,” So responded: “Whether they are going to do anything, we don’t care. We are going on our own way.”

While even great powers cannot always control their international dependents, few accept being publicly humiliated. Even though China provides the North with the bulk of the latter’s energy and food, Beijing’s counsel is treated with no more respect. The PRC has lost credibility.

Thus, it is in Beijing’s interest to end its business-as-usual treatment of North Korea. However, the United States and its allies, most obviously the Republic of Korea and Japan, should make it easier for China to effectively join America’s anti-Pyongyang coalition.

The PRC is reluctant to impose the kinds of penalties supported by Washington for good reasons, based on its own interests. China does not want millions of refugees running north or violent conflict bursting out to the south. Beijing would lose if reunification turned its buffer into an

advanced base for U.S. containment policy. The PRC wants to preserve economic preferences which have been dearly bought.

Beijing abhors instability, a likely outcome of greatly ratcheting up pressure on Pyongyang. As I point out for *China-U.S. Focus*, “Nationalistic leaders attempting to restore China’s international role certainly do not want to be seen doing America’s bidding.”

The United States needs a different strategy. Along with its friends in the region, Washington should offer to share any humanitarian burden, protect Chinese economic interests, acquiesce to Beijing’s direct involvement in a messy transition, and pledge to withdraw American forces from a reunified peninsula.

Moreover, Washington should offer to negotiate with the North without preconditions, and address issues other than nuclear weapons. Winning North Korean acceptance is less important than satisfying Beijing.

If China can win Western assurances on the issues of greatest importance, it should act. The primary reason would be to advance the PRC’s interest. The current situation is anything but stable.

If Kim is ever tempted to act on his many threats against the United States, South Korea, or Japan, he might trigger the war that no one wants. Even limited military action might spark a retaliatory spiral. And if full-scale war erupted, Beijing could not expect America to stop short of the Yalu.

Acting responsibly in Korea also would demonstrate China’s maturity and readiness for global leadership. Taking action would help repair the damage done Beijing’s reputation by its ham-handed maneuvers over disputed territorial claims in the Asia-Pacific.

The DPRK might be beyond China’s ability to solve. However, the North’s continuing irresponsible behavior puts a premium on Beijing taking a more active role. The PRC has suffered one too many humiliations at the hands of its supposed client state. It is time for China to restore balance to their relationship.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.