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China Must Confront Its North Korea Problem

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Great powers often 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.

It was often said that the Chinese-North Korean relationship was like lips and teeth, forged in blood during the Korean War. That's true. But even then the relationship was fraught with tension. Pyongyang never gave due credit to Beijing, whose military intervention retrieved an otherwise lost war. And Kim Il-sung purged the pro-China faction of the Korean Workers Party on his way to absolute power.

However, today those look like the "good ole' days." There is little doubt that the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea has lost Chinese public opinion. People who pay attention to their government's small ally are almost uniformly hostile. Weibo users are particularly vicious in their comments about the monarchical Communist hybrid and its mercurial leader, Kim Jong-un.

Academics and analysts outside of government also show little love for China's one ally, which only takes, and never gives. Criticism flows freely in private; some urge tougher sanctions and a few even hint they would welcome U.S. military action. Such disaffection has made it into the media.

Top officials no longer attempt to disguise their frustration with the North's behavior. President Xi Jinping has yet to meet Kim. In contrast, the former has hosted South Korean President Park Geun-hye, even giving her a place of honor at last year's military parade. Beijing has responded to the North's nuclear and missile tests with anger and support for modestly tightening sanctions.

The Kim regime has returned ill-disguised contempt. Emissaries from the People's Republic of China came and went as North Korean leader failed to make even a pretense of listening. The DPRK continued to conduct more nuclear and missile tests.

So Se Pyong, Pyongyang's ambassador to the UN in Geneva and the UN's Conference on Disarmament, predictably denounced the U.S. and South Korea in interview at the start of April.

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.” And his government is “not having dialogue and discussions on that.”

While even great powers cannot always control their international dependents, few accept being publicly humiliated in such a fashion. 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 than casual statements from the U.S. This came after the execution of the PRC’s principal interlocutor in Pyongyang, Kim’s uncle, Jang Song-thaek. China has lost credibility internationally along with good will in Seoul and Washington.

Thus, it is in China’s interest to end its business as usual treatment of North Korea. It would help, however, if the U.S. and its allies, most obviously the Republic of Korea and Japan, made it easier for Beijing 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. Historical ties are attenuated, but still matter. 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. Telling the PRC’s leaders that their concerns are unimportant and should be sacrificed for what Washington has determined to be the greater good is not likely to be helpful. Nationalistic leaders attempting to restore China’s international role certainly do not want to be seen doing America’s bidding.

The U.S. needs a different strategy. Along with its friends in the region, Washington should offer to share any humanitarian burden, provide economic assurances, acquiesce to direct Chinese involvement in a messy transition, and pledge to withdraw all American forces from a reunified peninsula. That is, the U.S. must help moderate the uncertainty created and minimized the geopolitical disadvantage, which the PRC might suffer.

Moreover, Washington should offer to negotiate without preconditions, and address issues other than nuclear weapons, such as replacing the 63-year-old armistice with a peace treaty. Winning North Korean acceptance is less important than satisfying Beijing that the U.S. is giving the North a chance to accept. Despite everything, Chinese officials still publicly blame America for driving Pyongyang to develop nukes.

If Beijing 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. Kim appears to be serious about pursuing both nuclear weapons and economic development. The latter, if successful, might undermine the political order that he has attempted to cement with blood, having executed hundreds of officials since taking over in December 2011.

Moreover, if Kim is ever tempted to act on his many threats against the U.S., 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. The overwhelmingly sentiment would be to eliminate the problem of North Korea once and for all.

Acting responsibly in Korea also would demonstrate China's maturity and readiness for global leadership. Taking action also would help repair the damage done Beijing's reputation by its ham-handed maneuvers over disputed territorial claims in the Asia-Pacific. Everyone in the region would breathe more freely if the North Korean regime was transformed for the better, whatever the details.

The DPRK might be beyond China's ability to solve. However, the North's continuing irresponsible behavior puts a premium on Beijing abandoning its largely hands off policy. 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.

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