

## Persuading China

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Another North Korean nuclear test, another round of demands that China bring Pyongyang to heel. Said Secretary of State John Kerry: Beijing's policy "has not worked and we cannot continue business as usual." Alas, his approach will encourage the PRC to dismiss Washington's wishes.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea may be the most vexing problem of U.S. foreign policy. Three successive U.S. presidents have insisted that the DPRK simply cannot, must not, develop nuclear weapons. Yet it has.

So attention naturally shifts toward the People's Republic of China, which joined Washington in criticizing the latest blast. The PRC is the most important investor in and provides substantial energy and food assistance to the North. Beijing also has protected the DPRK by weakening past UN sanctions and enforcing those imposed with less than due diligence. If only China would get tough, runs the argument, the Kim Jong-un regime in Pyongyang would have to give way.

Alas, Chinese intervention is not the panacea many appear to believe. Contra common belief in Washington, the U.S. cannot dictate to the PRC. Threats are only likely to make the Chinese leadership more recalcitrant.

In fact, Beijing's reluctance to wreck the North Korean state is understandable. If the administration wants to enlist China's aid, it must convince Beijing that acting is in China's, not America's, best interest.

That requires addressing the PRC's concerns.

While unpredictable, obstinate, and irritating, so far the DPRK is not a major problem for China. Economic cooperation remains profitable.

The North disrupts American regional dominance and forces Seoul and Washington to beg for assistance in dealing with the DPRK. Even Pyongyang's growing nuclear arsenal poses no obvious threat to China.

Why, then, should the PRC sacrifice its political influence and economic interests? A Chinese cut-off of energy and food would cause great hardship in the North. But a half million or more people died of starvation during the late 1990s without any change in DPRK policy.

Thus, the DPRK leadership may refuse to bend. The result might be a return to the 1990s, with a

horrific collapse in living conditions but regime survival—and continued development of nuclear weapons.

Even worse, from Beijing's standpoint, Russia, which recently revived its relationship with Pyongyang, might save North Korea. In either case, the PRC would have compromised its position for nothing.

Or the North Korean regime might collapse, with the possibility of violent conflict, social chaos, loose nukes, and mass refugee flows. The PRC might feel forced to intervene militarily to stabilize the North.

Moreover, in a united Republic of Korea China's political influence would ebb. PRC business investments would be swept away. Worse, a reunited Korea allied with America would put U.S. troops on China's border and aid Washington's ill-disguised attempt at military containment.

Overall, then, sanctioning the North appears to create enormous benefits for Beijing's rivals but few advantages for China.

Washington and Seoul must make a compelling case to the PRC. They should begin by pointing out how unstable the current situation is, with an unpredictable, uncontrollable regime dedicated to creating a nuclear arsenal of undetermined size. Much could go wrong—to China's detriment.

At the same time, the U.S. and ROK, along with Japan, should put together a serious offer for the North in return for denuclearization. The PRC has repeatedly insisted that America's hostile policy underlies the DPRK nuclear program. Beijing responded acerbically to Washington's latest criticism: "The key to solving the problem is not China."

The three allied countries should offer a peace treaty, diplomatic recognition, membership in international organizations, the end of economic sanctions, foreign aid, suspension of joint military exercises, and discussions over ending America's troop presence. This should be presented to the PRC with a request for the latter's backing.

At the same time, the U.S., South Korea, and Tokyo should promise to share the cost of caring for North Koreans and restoring order in the case of regime collapse. The U.S. and South should indicate their willingness to accept temporary Chinese military intervention in the event of bloody chaos.

The ROK should promise to respect Beijing's economic interests while pointing to the far greater opportunities that would exist in a unified Korea. Finally, Washington should pledge to withdraw U.S. troops in the event of unification.

Getting Beijing's cooperation still would be a long-shot. But the effort is worth a try. The U.S., ROK, and Japan have run out of options to forestall a nuclear North Korea.

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