



Persuading China to Cooperate Against North Korea

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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 is worse than ineffective. It likely ensures that the PRC will ignore 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. And there is virtually no chance the North will negotiate away its growing arsenal assembled at such great cost.

So attention naturally shifts toward the People's Republic of China, which joined Washington in criticizing the blast. The PRC is the most important investor in the North and provides substantial energy and food assistance. Beijing also has helped protect the DPRK by weakening proposed 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.

Too bad Chinese intervention is not the panacea many appear to believe. So far Beijing has demonstrated little inclination to act. Even if it did, there's no guarantee that doing so would solve the North Korean "problem."

Contra common belief in Washington, the United States is in no position to dictate to the PRC. It doesn't matter that American policymakers are convinced of their righteousness and China's complicity with evil. Beijing doesn't agree. And this authoritarian government, backed by a nationalistic population while enjoying growing economic, diplomatic and military clout isn't going to let anyone—especially a country seen as trying to "contain" China—dictate PRC policy.

Threats are only likely to make the Chinese leadership more recalcitrant. Donald Trump insisted: "if they don't solve the problem, we should make trade very difficult for China." One can imagine how the United States would react if presented with a similar demand. An upraised middle finger comes to mind.

In fact, Beijing has perfectly understandable reasons to avoid wrecking the North Korean state. Denouncing the PRC for being unreasonable isn't going to help. After all, American officials

cannot credibly claim that their policies toward the Korean peninsula are unrelated to their perception of America's national interests. If the administration wants to enlist China's aid, Washington must *convince* the PRC that acting is in China's, not America's, best interest.

That requires addressing Beijing's concerns.

While unpredictable, obstinate and irritating, so far the DPRK is not a major problem for China. The Kim Jong-un regime has cut the refugee flow across the Yalu in half. Economic cooperation remains profitable despite persistent North Korean unreasonableness. 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. Any North Korean weapons will be pointed south. Moreover, while it is widely presumed that the PRC was not informed of the latest test ahead of time, high level envoys recently passed both ways between the two countries. So Kim may have alerted his reluctant patron—without, of course, asking its permission—making his actions appear less destabilizing, even though still unwelcome.

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 that would not guarantee Pyongyang's compliance. A half million or more people died of starvation during the late 1990s without any change in DPRK policy. Renewed privation would be a blow to Kim, who has promised economic growth, but the leadership has never based its policy on protecting its people from hardship. In contrast, from its founding the regime jealously guarded its independence even from its major communist benefactors.

Thus, the DPRK leadership may refuse to bend, forcing Beijing to act on its threats. 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. In which case China would have sacrificed its relationship with its sole ally for no reason.

Even worse, from Beijing's standpoint, Vladimir Putin's Russia might step in as North Korea's savior. Moscow and Pyongyang recently revived their relationship and Putin might decide to preserve this important challenge to the United States. In fact, Moscow's UN ambassador insisted that any new sanctions be "proportionate," not what Washington wanted to hear. If so, the PRC again would find that it had compromised its interests for nothing.

Or the North Korean regime might collapse, bringing to mind the old warning about getting what you wish for. The consequences could be violent conflict, social chaos, loose nukes, and mass refugee flows. Hundreds of thousands of North Koreans already have crossed the Yalu; starvation highlighted by combat among armed factions could create a human tsunami. The PRC might feel forced to intervene militarily to stabilize the North—and Chinese forces might not be able to leave quickly. Indeed, Beijing might decide to maintain 'its' Korea under different leadership rather than accept a unified Western-leaning state on its border.

After all, a united Republic of Korea would be more rival than supplicant. China's political influence would ebb. PRC business investments would be swept away as South Korean money flooded the North. Worse, a reunited Korea allied with America would put U.S. troops on the Yalu and aid Washington's ill-disguised attempt at military containment.

Overall, then, sanctioning the North appears to create enormous benefits for China's rivals but few advantages for China. Why would any rational leadership in Beijing go along with America?

Washington must make a compelling case to the PRC. The United States 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 bolstered by intercontinental missiles and submarine-launched missiles. The Kim dynasty has been ostentatiously brutal in ways suggesting paranoia and insecurity. All this makes South Korea and its American patron ever more nervous. Much could go wrong—to China's detriment.

At the same time, the United States, along with its allies, the ROK and 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 origin and crux of the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula has never been China," said a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman: "The key to solving the problem is not China."

Washington and its allies should offer a peace treaty, diplomatic recognition, membership in international organizations, the end of economic sanctions, suspension of joint military exercises and discussions over a continued American troop presence. This should be presented to the PRC for its advice—and to demonstrate that the allies are serious about engaging Pyongyang, reducing the threats which Beijing contends are driving the North Korean nuclear program. Washington then should ask for China's backing.

At the same time, the United States, South Korea and Tokyo should promise to share the cost of caring for North Koreans and restoring order in the case of regime collapse. America and South Korea 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. The reason for America's presence would have expired and the PRC's assistance would not be turned against China.

Getting Beijing's cooperation still would be a long-shot. It's certainly not going to happen in response to imperious demands from Washington. The United States will need to practice the art of diplomacy and make a seemingly bad deal attractive to a skeptical adversary.

But the effort is worth a try. The United States and its allies have run out of serious options to forestall a nuclear North Korea.

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