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Why China and America Don't See Eye to Eye on North Korea

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Secretary John Kerry went to Beijing to again lecture his hosts about the need for China to pressure North Korea over the latter's nuclear program. As expected, Kerry's mission failed. The Xi government agreed that something must be done, but again proved unwilling to threaten the survival of the Kim dynasty and North Korean state.

Immediately after Pyongyang's fourth nuclear test Kerry attacked Beijing's policy: it "has not worked and we cannot continue business as usual." While visiting the People's Republic of China he went into rhetorical overdrive. The North—a small, impoverished nation far distant from the United States, Latin America, Europe, Africa and India—"poses an overt threat, a declared threat, to the world."

Even before Kerry arrived the PRC made clear it disagreed with his analysis. "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." Before Kerry arrived she dismissed "pointing fingers at others" and while he was in Beijing she cited the behavior of other parties as "one major reason why the denuclearization process on the peninsula has run into difficulties." While Beijing officialdom has shown plenty of irritation with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, China has demonstrated no fear of its troublesome neighbor. Certainly it has yet to be convinced to destroy its own ally and strengthen America's position in Northeast Asia.

Kerry made the best of an embarrassing situation when he announced that the two sides agreed to an "accelerated effort" by the UN Security Council to approve a "strong resolution that introduces significant new measures" against the DPRK. Reaching a common goal was not enough, said Kerry: "We believe we need to agree on the meaningful steps necessary to get the achievement of the goal."

No one should hold their breath as to the nature of those steps, however. Foreign Minister Wang Yi dismissed criticism of his government's stance toward the North as "groundless speculation" and insisted that "We have delivered on our obligation." He echoed Kerry in supporting passage of "a new resolution," but added the devastating caveat: "In the meantime, we must point out that the new resolution should not provoke new tensions in the situation, still less destabilize the

Korean peninsula.” Wang explained that “Sanctions are not an end in themselves” but should be used to encourage negotiation, not punish.

Indeed, Xinhua, the state-run Chinese news agency, said what Wang could not admit, at least in polite company. It is “unrealistic to rely merely on China to press the DPRK to abandon its nuclear program as long as the U.S. continues an antagonistic approach wrought from a Cold War mentality.” Like refusing to talk to Pyongyang and continuing to threaten North Korea.

Moreover, noted Xinhua, “China-DPRK ties should not be understood as a top-down relationship where the latter follows every bit of advice offered by the former.” So don’t expect Beijing to destroy its relationship with the North to make unrealistic demands which would be ignored.

Washington isn’t likely to find any stronger support in Moscow. On Tuesday Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov rejected nuclear talks without North Korea, since that would “signify that someone is being isolated.” A similar attempt was used to apply pressure on Iran and “there were no successful results,” he explained, only continued nuclear development. “We cannot repeat the same mistakes in regard to North Korea.”

The next time Kerry is tempted to lecture someone, anyone in China, he should switch to persuasion. They obviously don’t believe that it is in their interest to follow U.S. priorities. If he wants them to do so, he must convince them that America’s proposals advance Chinese interests—which means explain to them why they should risk destroying their one military ally in the region, with the possibility of creating chaos and conflict next door and adding the entire peninsula to America’s anti-China alliance network.

Good luck.

While doing so is not impossible in theory, it would take a major effort in practice. Simply ordering the Chinese to act won’t work. Ever.

In fact, Beijing’s position is understandable, indeed, reasonable from China’s standpoint, even if thoroughly unwelcome to Washington.

In 1950 the PRC went to war with America to preserve the North Korean state and prevent U.S. forces from advancing to the Yalu River. Although the advent of nuclear-tipped missiles makes the possibility of a hostile army division next door seem less fearsome, the symbolism of America’s tightened military ring around China would remain potent. Washington is engaged in an ill-disguised campaign of containment. Beijing wants to see a united Korea allied with the U.S. about as much as it desires to have a nuclear North Korea.

Indeed, even without a U.S. garrison a more powerful ROK would pose a challenge to the PRC: a united Korea would be a significant regional competitor and create a powerful draw for ethnic Koreans on the Chinese side of the Yalu. In fact, the two countries have squabbled over history and whose territory once belonged to whom. Moreover, Beijing’s favored economic position in the North would disappear as South Korean money swept away Chinese concessions.

Worse, the process of getting to a reunified Korea likely could be disastrous. Nothing in the DPRK’s history suggests a willingness to gently yield to foreign dictates. During the Cold War founding dictator Kim Il-sung ruthlessly eliminated both pro-Soviet and pro-China factions; Pyongyang consistently played Moscow and Beijing against each other. In the late 1990s the regime allowed a half million or more people to starve to death. Irrespective of China’s threats, Kim Jong-un might say no and continue in power, irrespective of the human cost. Then the PRC

would have tossed away any influence that it has, providing an opening for Russia, which recently revived its ties with the North.

If China ended up breaking a recalcitrant Kim dynasty by sanctioning oil and food, the result could be extraordinary hardship and armed factional combat followed by mass refugee flows across the Yalu—multiply the desperation and number of Syrians heading to Europe. Toss in loose nuclear weapons and a possible South Korean/U.S. military push across the Demilitarized Zone to force reunification. The result would be a first-rate nightmare for Chinese President Xi Jinping.

So, explain to me again, Secretary Kerry, why China should ruin its geopolitical position to further Washington's ends?

John Kerry's mission to Beijing wasn't hopeless, in theory, but if his private message was the same as his public pronouncements, then don't hold your breath on winning Chinese support for taking decisive action against the DPRK. Next time he visits he should employ the art of persuasion—or stay home.

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