



## **The Chimera of Chinese Help on North Korea: Beijing is Unlikely to Aid its Geopolitical Foes**

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A sense of desperation has taken over the U.S. and South Korean policies toward North Korea. Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un has ignored or rejected incessant importuning from the allies to talk. Instead, he seems determined to construct a full nuclear deterrent capable of targeting America before he returns to negotiations; and the People's Republic of China is unlikely to stop him.

After the failed Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi in February 2019, Pyongyang largely cut off contact with the allies. The Trump administration attempted to move negotiations forward, but President Donald Trump remained formally committed to CVID, the Complete Verifiable Irreversible Dismantlement of the DPRK's nuclear program. The North was unwilling to put its nuclear program on the auction block. South Korean President Moon Jae-in spent his remaining three years in office similarly attempting to make a deal with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Alas, by the end of his term Moon, a genuine man of peace, was reduced to unseemly begging. However, Kim evidently wanted to preserve his arsenal while trading some of his nukes for partial sanctions relief.

New administrations in Washington and Seoul have made overtures to North Korea to no avail. Instead, Kim's answer this year was unequivocal: 31 missile tests and an expected nuclear test upcoming. So far, allied officials have alternately fulminated, applying new but ineffective sanctions. Though in hawkish sync, the two governments have run out of ideas, except asking China to act.

This request isn't new. Rather than admitting its policy was ineffective, Washington blamed the PRC. Common was the belief that China could easily force Pyongyang's compliance by applying political pressure and enforcing economic sanctions. Now the allies are trying again.

America's secretary of state, Antony Blinken, and South Korea's foreign minister, Park Jin, recently met and spent much of their time kvetching about North Korea's threatening activities. For instance, stated Blinken, "Until the regime in Pyongyang changes course, we will continue to keep the pressure on," which could be forever, given the North's current behavior. Park posited

that the DPRK was at a crossroads, with the possibility of returning to diplomacy. But what incentives can Seoul offer to encourage Pyongyang to do so?

Instead, Park observed: “I also think China should play a very positive role to persuade North Korea that maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula requires their new thinking.” The next day National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan took a similar position with Yang Jiechi, a Politburo member and former foreign minister. According to an unnamed U.S. official, “Jake raised concerns, in particular, about the veto, which comes following a significant series of ballistic missile launches in violation of previous U.N. Security Council resolutions and the preparations ... for potential nuclear tests.”

Presumably, there is no harm in trying, but the allies should have no illusions about the likelihood of Beijing solving “the North Korea problem.” Indeed, it is unlikely that China could do so even if it wanted to, and it probably doesn’t want to. Beijing is thought to provide a food and energy lifeline to North Korea; cutting that would guarantee increased widespread hardship, not regime compliance with outside dictates. The DPRK leadership is willing to impose extraordinary hardship on its population to achieve its political ends. The regime suffered through famine in the late 1990s, and in 2020, it effectively sanctioned itself, sealing its border and cutting off most economic contacts to halt the spread of COVID.

Moreover, though the Xi government would prefer a nuclear-free DPRK, the former is reluctant to risk destabilizing the North Korean regime. Equally important, Xi & Co. are not inclined to do the U.S. or South Korea any favors.

Beijing’s problems with the Biden administration are obvious. Chinese diplomats have complained (to me) about being disrespected, and the PRC told Washington that business-as-usual would be impossible so long as the overall relationship was hostile. Moreover, Beijing reacted badly to South Korea’s attendance at the Madrid NATO summit. A nuclear North Korea is likely to be a bigger problem for the West than China thus serving Beijing’s interests now.

What can Washington and Seoul do? They should move toward an arms control strategy with Pyongyang in practice if not in name, proposing a deal akin to that discussed at the Hanoi summit, with a focus on freezing the North’s nuclear program. The U.S. should offer to initiate diplomatic relations and end the ban on travel to the DPRK.

Despite the admittedly fractious relationship between America and China, they need to maintain a working relationship. The U.S. and Soviet Union eventually managed a passable *modus vivendi*. As the world’s two most important states today, Washington and Beijing must cooperate on issues of mutual importance. Maintaining peace and stability in Northeast Asia is a shared interest of China and America.

Finally, Washington and Seoul must address the PRC’s security concerns while seeking the latter’s assistance. Beijing’s interests in the Korean peninsula differ from those of the Republic of Korea and the U.S. In the short-term, the PRC fears regime collapse in North Korea and all that might unleash: mass refugee flows across the Yalu, loose nuclear weapons, political conflict, violent strife, and even civil war. In the long-run Beijing wants to protect economic and security

interests. Most important is preventing a reunited Korea, at least one allied with America militarily.

If the allies expect the PRC to adopt policies that would destabilize the North, they must address Chinese objections such as potential costs of the collapse of North Korea and assurance in the event of reunification, perhaps including the withdrawal of U.S troops and/or neutralization of a united Korea. As distasteful as such a position might seem, Beijing is unlikely to aid the allies otherwise.

The DPRK remains one of the world's most difficult challenges. It might seem natural for the allies to look to Beijing for support. But none is likely to be forthcoming unless the U.S. and ROK offer China benefits in return. The U.S. and South Korea should ask themselves how badly they want to solve "the Korea Problem."

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