

Clinton's Threat to "Ring China with Missile Defense" Would Backfire

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Hillary Clinton is favored to become the next U.S. president. Unfortunately, her policy toward China appears to emphasize confrontation. In a recently leaked email, she was quoted as privately threatening to "ring China with missile defense" if Beijing didn't bring North Korea to heel. She also said that Americans should "put more of our fleet in the area."

Her comments confirm what long has been obvious: Clinton is far more belligerent than President Barack Obama. Her proposed policy would add new tensions to U.S.-China relations and drive Beijing closer to the ever provocative Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

The DPRK's nuclear program has become Northeast Asia's largest security challenge. Today, the North is believed to have enough nuclear materials for up to 20 nuclear weapons. By 2020, Pyongyang could have at least 50 and perhaps as many as 100 of them.

Marry such an arsenal to accurate long-range missiles, and Pyongyang's mischief-making ability would expand dramatically. China understands the dangers and wants to keep the Korean peninsula nuclear-free.

However, China does not feel directly threatened by North Korea's nuclear program. In contrast, China fears collapse, chaos, and refugees at its doorstep, which would become far more likely if Beijing applied the kind of economic pressure on North Korea demanded by the U.S..

Moreover, at a time when Washington appears to be attempting to contain China, Beijing does not want to destroy its one military ally in the DPRK and promote Korean reunification. This would yield a more powerful American ally hosting U.S. troops – troops that could end up on China's border.

Further, Beijing blames Washington for the "North Korea problem." In Beijing's view, decades of American hostility have driven the DPRK to develop nuclear arms. Thus, it is Washington's responsibility to reduce the threat and negotiate with the North.

The U.S. government and Hillary Clinton obviously do not agree with the Beijing's position. But they should take it into account. Addressing Beijing's concerns would be the most effective, and probably only, means of winning its cooperation against Pyongyang.

For instance, Washington could open an official relationship with North Korea and offer a "grand bargain" to achieve denuclearization of the peninsula. For this endeavor, the U.S. could request Chinese backing. The U.S. could seek coercive Chinese support with the promise that Washington would assist if a North Korean implosion occurred and remove all U.S. military personnel from the peninsula in the event of reunification.

Instead, the U.S. has made a practice of simply telling Beijing what they desire and complaining when China does not deliver. Alas, the time (if it ever really existed) when Washington could simply dictate to others has passed. Furthermore, the time when any country could dictate to Beijing has passed.

Which has led to numerous proposals to force Beijing to pressure the North. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) once proposed threatening the entire bilateral relationship to get results. Others have taken the Clinton position, that the U.S. should initiate military counter-measures which would discomfit China as well as North Korea.

Presumably, there is an unpleasant enough sanction or two which would pressure Beijing to do the U.S.'s will. However, the Beijing pain threshold is probably quite high – likely higher than Washington's determination to act.

After all, rising nationalistic powers are not inclined to let foreigners dictate to them. Just look at the U.S.'s experience. "Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute!", shouted Americans when confronted by the Barbary Pirates two centuries ago. Washington likely would have to do much more than it, or Clinton, originally imagined to force Beijing's compliance.

Indeed, a refusal to submit characterized China's response to U.S. and South Korean plans to deploy the THAAD anti-missile system in the Republic of Korea. Beijing's relationship with Seoul, which was recently on the upswing, has tanked. The Chinese foreign minister announced that China "will take necessary measures to defend national security interests and regional strategic balance."

Ramping up military threats against China is likely to cause it to respond in kind. The U.S. is wealthier and more powerful, but Beijing has greater interests at stake, which means it is willing spend and risk more. In a sense, Beijing, as the weaker power, must do whatever is necessary to maintain its credibility, lest Washington attempt to dictate to them in other areas. No potential great power could allow that to occur.

Moreover, attempts at coercion, successful or not, would poison future relations, which would be dangerous for the world's two most important nations. A century ago, Germany and Austria-Hungary confronted Imperial Russia in a dispute over Bosnia. Russian officials backed down—

all the while muttering “never again.” Their refusal to compromise in the summer of 1914 in the crisis involving Russia’s ally Serbia greatly contributed to the outbreak of World War I.

While no one expects a similar conflict in East Asia, the various territorial disputes as well as North Korean provocations create manifold military tripwires. And the U.S.’s alliances with Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea could draw the U.S. into even local incidents, which would otherwise be of minimal interest to Washington.

U.S. policymakers are understandably frustrated by Beijing’s continued support of North Korea. However, threats like the ones advocated by Clinton would almost certainly be counter-productive. The U.S. is unlikely to apply enough pressure to coerce Beijing into acting against its interest. And any attempts to do so would make them less willing to cooperate in the future.

Instead, Washington needs to relearn the art of diplomacy and seek to persuade rather than dictate. Doing so might not be as satisfying as making demands. But such a course is more likely to succeed – which should be everyone’s objective in dealing with North Korea.

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