



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Progress in Pyongyang Must Go Through Beijing

Doug Bandow

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Among the challenges faced by the next president of the United States, perhaps none will be as serious as the question of how to deal with North Korea. The presence of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula is already a potential tripwire for war, and Pyongyang is seeking to develop the capability to strike the United States itself. And although U.S. officials routinely affirm that they will not accept the North as a nuclear power, it has become one nonetheless. Washington seems powerless to influence Pyongyang's behavior.

For many analysts and officials seeking a breakthrough with North Korea, China is the last hope. As Pyongyang's only ally and diplomatic and economic lifeline, China is thought to have a unique ability to influence the regime, and the United States has frequently sought its cooperation. Yet despite some deterioration in Chinese–North Korean relations in recent years, Beijing appears to have recently warmed to Pyongyang, relaxing economic controls imposed after the latter's nuclear test in early September. In order to convince China to change its Korea policy, the next U.S. administration should therefore try a new approach: addressing the rationale behind China's strategy.

See No Evil

Washington's North Korea policy is a wreck. The United States first faced the possibility of a nuclear North more than two decades ago, but hoped that the nightmare would never become reality. The country's derelict regime couldn't last forever, U.S. leaders reasoned. The end of the Cold War would transform North Korea, just as it had transformed the ex-communist countries of Eastern Europe. Officials assumed that the peninsula would be reunified, or that China wouldn't tolerate a northern nuke, or that Pyongyang could be bought off with aid and other benefits. Over the last quarter century U.S. policy thus oscillated between attempts to threaten, bribe, and isolate the North.

Hopes for change proved to be misplaced. Since the 1990s, North Korea has managed two dynastic successions. The regime, underwritten by China, has survived mass famine and a serious erosion of state institutions. Today, North Korea's economy, although still backward, is growing and some people are increasingly enjoying a small measure of prosperity despite

international sanctions. The country's unique "social system," as North Koreans call it, shows no signs of disappearing, and the latest product of its nonpareil communist monarchy, Kim Jong Un, appears secure despite an unusually high number of defections and executions. His country, moreover, continues to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, having detonated its first warhead in 2006.

Indeed, Pyongyang now demands recognition as a nuclear state. Earlier this year, it informed China that it had no intention of abandoning nuclear weapons. And its arsenal is growing: the Rand Corporation estimates that the country could have as many as 100 nukes by 2020. As North Korea develops long-range missiles, South Korea will not be the only potential target; Pyongyang's goal is eventually to put the United States within range as well.

Gotta Know When To Hold Em...

The United States has so far found no effective strategy to prevent a nuclear North Korea. Negotiation is everyone's preferred approach, but it has broken down since the 2003 collapse of the "Agreed Framework," the Clinton-era denuclearization agreement. And even if it might have been possible to buy off Pyongyang decades ago, almost no one today believes that the regime is prepared to yield what it has gained at such substantial cost. Nukes, after all, protect North Korea against any U.S. attempt at regime change, generate international fear and respect, provide opportunity to extort its neighbors, and reward its military with the great power status conferred by the ultimate weapon.

Sanctions are the fallback option, but the North Korean regime's pain threshold is quite high, due to its totalitarian control over the population and relative isolation. In addition, Beijing has been unwilling to significantly ratchet up sanctions, fearing the consequences of a messy implosion just across the Yalu River, which separates China from North Korea. Indeed, if the results of a North Korean regime collapse turned out to be factional conflict, loose nuclear materials, and mass refugee flows, as China believes they would, Beijing might not be the only party wishing for the good old days of the Kim dynasty.

Because of the failure of sanctions, some analysts favor a preventive military strike on North Korea's nuclear facilities (Ashton Carter, as assistant secretary of defense in the Clinton administration, argued for this position). But that would be playing a game of chicken with millions of lives. Kim might be deterred from responding to a U.S. attack on his nuclear facilities for fear of provoking a war that could destroy his regime. On the other hand, Pyongyang has seen the United States routinely overthrow regimes it opposes, and it may have learned the lesson to seize the initiative, and strike after a U.S. assault if it believed full-fledged war to be inevitable. Although North Korea would lose the war, such a conflict could result in staggering casualties, especially among South Korean civilians.

If neither sanctions nor military intervention will work, that leaves the China option. China provides the vast bulk of trade with and investment in the North. Chinese food and energy supplies are particularly important for the country's survival. U.S. policymakers have long urged their Chinese counterparts to crush the North's windpipe, so to speak, and have been surprised when Beijing has refused to do so. For instance, Kelly Ayotte, Republican senator from New Hampshire, argued in 2013 that "we need to be clearer with China as to what our expectations

are [regarding North Korea], because this is a danger to them.” Senator John McCain of Arizona similarly complained in 2010 that “it’s hard to know why China doesn’t push harder.”

Yet China’s leaders are not stupid, and their position isn’t difficult to understand. They have heard a long succession of U.S. officials insist, request, urge, and demand that Beijing do more about North Korea. The problem is, they don’t believe it is in their nation’s interest to do so. North Korea is Beijing’s only military ally at a time when China is surrounded by treaty partners of the globe’s most powerful state—a state that is attempting to make China the target of a Cold War-style containment system. Beijing is being asked to potentially allow its buffer to reunify with South Korea, which would leave a powerful U.S. ally—and U.S. military forces—on China’s border. Along the way, the North could fall apart, spewing conflict, nukes, and refugees northward. Why would Chinese President Xi Jinping or anyone else in Beijing agree to Washington’s request?

...And When To Fold ‘Em

U.S. policymakers have only two real options: coerce China or convince China. Coercion seems unlikely to work when applied to the nationalistic government of an emerging great power. China is determined to overcome what it sees as decades and even centuries of humiliation at the hands of Western powers, and it would be difficult for United States to make its threats seem credible. Beijing’s response to South Korea’s decision to deploy the U.S.-made THAAD missile defense system was anything but conciliatory: China chastised Seoul and warmed to Pyongyang. Worse, launching economic war against China over North Korea—the Obama administration is reportedly considering sanctions on Chinese banks and other companies that deal with North Korea—would poison the entire relationship. Coercion is more likely to push Beijing and Pyongyang together.

The second course, that of convincing China, may remain a long shot, but it is still better than the alternatives. To succeed, Washington will need to listen to Beijing’s concerns and respond accordingly. For example, Chinese officials argue that hostile U.S. policy has forced North Korea to pursue nuclear weapons, and insist that the North’s nuclear program is not Beijing’s responsibility anyway. Instead of confronting China, Washington should work with South Korea and Japan to develop a grand bargain package, focused on denuclearization, to offer to North Korea, for which Beijing’s support would then be sought.

Such a package would require granting some concessions to Beijing. For instance, one of China’s major concerns is that it would bear most of the cost of a potential North Korean implosion. The United States should therefore offer to share the cost of caring for refugees and accept the temporary intervention of Chinese military forces in North Korea, should the need arise (current doctrine presumes that South Korea would occupy the North before formally reunifying the peninsula). China and Chinese enterprises have also made substantial investments in the North, and the United States and especially South Korea should promise to recognize and protect these deals whenever possible.

Understandably, Beijing does not want to contribute to its own encirclement, and so it will be opposed to regime change in Pyongyang as long as South Korea remains a U.S. ally. At the very least, a grand bargain should thus state that if the North were to collapse, the United States would

withdraw its forces from the peninsula in exchange for China accepting Korean reunification, rather than setting up its own puppet state in the North. Seoul might need to go further and pledge military neutrality. Although that would appear to be a major concession, the disappearance of North Korea would eliminate the justification for U.S. military presence on the peninsula. In the absence of a hostile North, the only plausible justification for continued U.S. troop presence would be containment of China. South Korea's recent dalliance with Beijing, moreover, suggests that Seoul would be unlikely to participate in an anti-China coalition. Washington and its allies may have to decide what is more important: a denuclearized Korean peninsula or the U.S.–South Korean alliance.

Finally, Washington should play international poker, indicating that the continued growth of the North Korea's nuclear arsenal would force it to reconsider its opposition to South Korean and Japanese nuclear arsenals. China may prefer not to disarm its ally, but in a world of second-best solutions, it might find the prospect of two powerful, nuclear-armed U.S. allies in its neighborhood even more frightening than the alternative. Beijing, which has resolutely opposed even modest Japanese re-armament, is likely to react particularly strongly to the prospect of Japan acquiring nuclear weapons.

No Easy Victories

A U.S.–Chinese deal on North Korea could still prove impossible. Beijing might not trust Washington to follow through on its commitments; both China and North Korea have seen what happened to former Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi after he traded away his nukes and missiles under U.S. pressure. Even if Beijing did cut off Pyongyang, Kim might refuse to surrender, and the regime would stagger along, more isolated and hostile than ever.

Still, no fruitful option should be left untried, and China is very unlikely to go along with the United States if the latter does not attempt to address the former's concerns. Indeed, from Beijing's standpoint, it would be foolish to confront Pyongyang without some kind of agreement with the United States about what might come afterward.

The next U.S. administration cannot afford to ignore the Korean Peninsula in the hopes that the North Korea problem will go away. It won't. In another four years, North Korea is likely to be a serious nuclear power. It's time for Washington to play the China card.

Doug Bandow is Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the co-author of The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2004).