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China Has A Chance To Lead On North Korea, But Will It?

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After insisting that China should "solve" the North Korea problem, President Donald Trump appears to have given up. "While I greatly appreciate the efforts of President Xi & China to help with North Korea, it has not worked out. At least I know China tried," he tweeted. Now the issue apparently is back in President Trump's not-so-capable hands.

Unfortunately, the administration really didn't try. Beijing never was going to act just because President Trump wanted it to.

Expecting the People's Republic of China to destroy its ally while the U.S. was busy elsewhere in the region seeking to contain Chinese military power, and to do so without receiving anything in return, never was realistic. Unspecified trade concessions simply weren't enough to make a deal.

Alas, the administration doesn't have any other good options. Airstrikes might not reach all the facilities and probably would ignite a war, with devastating consequences to everyone involved, most dramatically South Korea.

Enhanced sanctions are more likely, including secondary sanctions against Chinese companies and banks. This would risk creating a confrontation with Beijing.

Moreover, by shifting the issue from North Korea to the PRC the Trump administration might actually increase Chinese support for the North. Witness the popular rage against South Korea over the THAAD deployment.

Although tougher sanctions would impose economic hardship, there is no reason to assume that alone would bring Pyongyang to heel. When I visited the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in June, officials insisted they would stand firm against America's "hostile policy" no matter what. While they could be expected to say that, the DPRK did not change policy even in the midst of a horrific famine a couple of decades ago.

And so far the PRC appears to value stability above all. If the Kim Jong-un regime appeared in danger of breaking, Beijing might buttress the North rather than risk a collapse, and the violent chaos which could follow.

None of this is in the PRC's interest. Instead of acting as bystander if both regional stability and U.S. relations unravel, Beijing should push Washington to engage in serious negotiation with all parties.

America's priority should be halting the DPRK's advancing missile and nuclear programs. Thus, Washington should revive the North's proposal for a freeze on its activities in return for an end to annual military exercises between the U.S. and South Korea. The latter agitates North Korean officials, who call them a cover for a possible attack.

When I raised this possibility in Pyongyang they dismissed it, saying that the U.S. had rejected their offer. Coming from China and America together, and backed by the threat of joint sanctions, it would be more persuasive.

With some breathing space, Washington could work with the Republic of Korea and Japan to develop a big offer in return for denuclearization, and with Beijing to win the latter's endorsement. The package would have to emphasize security — the DPRK's rulers watched the war in Libya and aren't impressed with verbal assurances like those offered by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

China should offer its support, as well as whatever assistance and assurances would encourage Pyongyang's acceptance. The objective is to denuclearize the peninsula peacefully through negotiation.

In return, the PRC would agree to back the effort with the threat of enforcing its own and U.S. sanctions, so long as its other interests were respected. That would include allied assistance for China if the result was a violent DPRK collapse.

Moreover, the U.S. should offer assurances that reunification would not put Beijing at a geopolitical disadvantage: In particular, all American military forces should go home in the event of unification. Seoul should consider a declaration of military neutrality for a unified peninsula.

Even this approach has critics. Some aver the importance of regular maneuvers for combat effectiveness, but the ROK should be taking ever more responsibility for its own defense. Others fear the agreement would not be enforceable, but that would be an issue for any negotiated settlement.

Finally, such an agreement would leave human rights at risk. However, a North Korea holding tightly to its nuclear weapons is unlikely to relax political controls.

President Trump raised the potential of a China-U.S. deal over North Korea. Beijing shouldn't let him drop the issue without trying to reach an agreement. The situation in the North is likely to worsen, while the opportunities to solve it peacefully are likely to shrink. Action is needed now.

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