



China Is Doing What It Has to in North Korea

And new U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson can't change that.

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For the last eight years, Republican officials have acted as if Washington's failure to reorder the globe to their liking reflects a lack of effort. If only Barack Obama had exercised "leadership," hadn't "withdrawn" from the world, and resisted "isolationist" pressures, the rest of the world would have miraculously complied.

But despite his previously stated — and inconsistent — opposition to American interventionism, President Donald Trump appears to be basing his foreign policy on the same principle. If only he blusters loudly enough, foreign nations will fall into line. Mexico will pay for a wall. Allies will contribute more to their defense. China will sink its South China Sea ambitions, shutter its factories, and, most urgently, force North Korea to abdicate its nuclear program. His appointees appear to be adopting the same attitude.

Obviously, no one really wants a nuclear North Korea. And in that sense, it is in everyone's interest to thwart Kim Jong Un's nuclear aspirations. But Pyongyang has proved willing to sacrifice much to become a nuclear state, seemingly convinced that that's the only way to ensure its own survival when facing down a far more powerful United States and an enviously prosperous neighborhood.

So far sanctions, while hurting North Korea, have not forced it to abandon its nuclear program. The regime might survive even a much harsher approach: A half-million or more people died from starvation during the late 1990s, but the regime didn't waiver. Meanwhile, negotiations have foundered: Few analysts believe that the Kim regime is willing to trade away its nuclear status, whatever limitations on its growing arsenal it might be willing to accept. And nobody

disputes that any military action against North Korea would risk a devastating war, even though Pyongyang would end up the loser.

So Washington has looked for a solution from North Korea's main financial underwriter, China. Although China has agreed to steadily tougher sanctions on Pyongyang, its enforcement has been sporadic and unenthusiastic.

That's what has persuaded the Trump administration to threaten China. During his election campaign, Trump suggested that Beijing could easily dictate to Pyongyang. Secretary of State Tillerson appears to share that belief. In his confirmation testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he declared that the Chinese "really do have complete control over what sustains the government of North Korea," citing the former's purchase of coal.

Yet the North never has been inclined to listen to its neighbor. Despite their rhetoric of being "as close as lips and teeth," the two countries have a permanently fraught relationship. In private, officials from both sides lament the failings of their nominal allies. Senior Chinese scholars such as Zhang Liangui regularly slam the North's intransigence — sometimes publicly. North Korea always maintained distance from its huge neighbors, both China and the Soviet Union, determined to value Korean-ness above ideological ties. It was baffled by and hostile to the Cultural Revolution and the Sino-Soviet split of the late 1960s; China was equally irritated in the 1990s by Pyongyang's failure to evolve, politically and economically.

Kim Jong Un's grandfather and father alike ignored China's opposition to the North Korean nuclear program and rejected Beijing's repeated advice to undertake economic reforms. Kim appears to be no more pliant, having treated China's advice with calculated disdain and executed his uncle by marriage, Jang Song Thaek, who was Beijing's closest interlocutor in the country. The perceived intransigence has turned popular sentiment in China strongly against the Kim dynasty, making "Fatty Kim" a regular target of Chinese social media jokes. Open criticism of Pyongyang has been muted in the last couple of years, as Beijing reasserts its own controls, but there's still little love lost between the two neighbors.

But despite the evidence that Beijing's leverage is limited at best, Tillerson appears convinced that Washington can force China to act. For instance, he told the Senate committee the obvious, that Beijing "has not been a reliable partner in using its full influence to curb North Korea." Yet there was no acknowledgement that China was acting rationally — that is to say, in its own national interest — in ignoring U.S. desires. China is aware that if it put serious pressure on North Korea — by curtailing its financial assistance, for instance — the result could be dangerous instability. The North Korean regime could respond by disappearing into the same isolation and mass hardship that it has endured in the past. And if the regime crumbled, it would threaten to spread conflict, millions of refugees, and loose nukes on China's, not America's, doorstep. A unified Korea would be a geopolitical windfall to Washington, not Beijing. Switch country locations and the United States would behave similarly.

Tillerson went on to opine: "We cannot continue to accept empty promises like the ones China has made to pressure North Korea to reform, only to shy away from enforcement." Indeed, he added, "looking the other way when trust is broken only encourages more bad behavior. And it must end."

He advocated a “new approach with China in order for China to understand our expectations of them, going beyond certainly what they have in the past.” In particular, “if there are gaps of enforcement, they have to be enforced.” If Beijing doesn’t enforce the U.N. sanctions on North Korea, he said, Washington should “hold China accountable to comporting with the sanctions” and “consider actions to compel them to comply.”

The vision of America forcing Beijing to do its will might put a smile on Trump’s face but is on par with the president’s many other “alternative facts.” No nationalistic rising power would accept such foreign dictates. The America of the early 19th century was truculent in dealing with its neighbors and rival powers; from the Barbary pirates to Great Britain, popular sentiment was to fight rather than yield. Similar nationalist sentiments prevail in China — stirred but by no means controlled by the leadership in the imperial palaces of Zhongnanhai.

Washington could employ economic coercion against China, but Americans as well as Chinese would lose. Nor should the United States assume that its East Asian allies would back America in such a confrontation. They must live with an ever more powerful neighbor and have good reason to doubt the constancy of American administrations both present and future following the abandonment of deals such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Moreover, Beijing’s economic rise has been an obvious boon for them, and in that regard China now matters more than the United States. South Korea’s trade with China is greater than its trade with the United States and Japan combined. China and Hong Kong together account for more than twice as much trade with the South as America.

The Trump administration also has much that it wants from Beijing. If Washington seeks to “compel” compliance with U.N. sanctions on Pyongyang, the administration might as well abandon hope for new trade arrangements, reduced ambitions in the South China Sea, and greater flexibility toward Taiwan. No serious power, especially one that sees itself as undergoing a “great national restoration,” can allow an increasingly hostile competitor to dictate terms on important issues.

China might not be averse to negotiating over North Korea — if the United States agreed that really meant negotiate. But Beijing would be no more ready than America to abandon interests it views as fundamental. Is the Trump administration willing to help pay for the costs of a breakdown in the North? Perhaps help build a wall along the Chinese-North Korean border? Or more realistically — assist in setting up refugee camps for North Koreans? Accept Chinese military intervention to stabilize a tottering North Korean state? Promise to withdraw U.S. troops if the Koreas reunify? Accept a neutral unified Korea?

American officials have been frustrated with China’s support for North Korea but so far have failed to give Beijing a good reason to risk instability and chaos on its doorstep. Coercion will backfire. Rex Tillerson has been appointed to be America’s chief diplomat. He should prove that by offering Beijing compelling reasons — an attractive deal in Trump-speak — to cooperate with the United States, instead of waving a big stick he can never use.

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