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Is China Attempting To Torpedo Kim-Trump Summit?

Doug Bandow

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Top of the list is North Korea. After the North's recent angry eruption, or "different attitude," as President Trump put it, he blamed China: "I think I understand why that happened," but "I can't say that I'm happy about it."

Apparently the president believed that Kim was ready to toss away his nuclear weapons, and who knows what else, until President Xi summoned Kim to Beijing and issued contrary instructions. (The administration's multiple threats of military action are far more likely culprits for Pyongyang's shift.)

President Trump is not the only one to assume that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was China's puppet. Joseph Bosco, who served in the Bush Defense Department, charged China with "blatant sabotaging of the promising dialogue" between the U.S. and North Korea.

In fact, Pyongyang is resisting administration demands because Kim believes they are not his nation's, or at least his regime's, interest. From its founding the DPRK has resolutely resisted foreign pressure. Long ago even the PRC discovered the limits of its influence in the North.

Beijing wants a stable, docile, non-nuclear Korean buffer state. That would enhance China's regional influence, prevent the peninsula from being used as a tool of containment, spark allied requests for Chinese help to "manage" the North, and preserve a relationship with both historical and ideological significance. In contrast, a nuclear DPRK ensures Pyongyang's independence, including from the PRC, and generates American complications.

Unfortunately for Beijing, its buffer state was always unruly and recently went nuclear. For years the Chinese leadership decided that buffer took precedence over nuclear.

Especially since the PRC's influence in the North was substantially more limited some observers assumed. The Beijing-Pyongyang relationship was not unlike America's support for brutally repressive regimes — think Egypt or Saudi Arabia today — which nevertheless were believed to advance other U.S. interests.

Chinese intervention in the Korean War preserved founder Kim Il-sung's rule, for which it received few thanks. For years he played Moscow against Beijing.

The relationship between the two supposed allies has oscillated, but generally grown increasingly strained. Kim Jong-un accelerated nuclear and missile testing. Moreover, five years ago he executed his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, who was his nation's principle interlocutor with Beijing.

Nevertheless, complained Bosco, the PRC enabled the North's ambitions "by protecting successive Kim regimes from United Nations-imposed and other economic sanctions." True, because China fears instability and collapse rather like Washington would view a possible Mexican implosion.

In control of the entire peninsula, the ROK also would become a more significant international actor, potentially part of a U.S.-orchestrated containment system. In fact, in 1950 Beijing went to war to prevent a united Korea allied with America and hosting U.S. troops on its border. One can imagine Washington's reaction to Canada joining the Warsaw Pact.

Thus, preserving the Kim dynasty made sense for the PRC. However, in recent years Chinese attitudes have hardened. After every North Korean test Beijing agreed to tighter restrictions and increasingly enforced them.

China Pulls Kim's Leash

Six years after Kim ascended to the North Korean throne he had yet to receive an invitation to the PRC. The DPRK was in the equivalent of Xi's doghouse.

The Chinese deep freeze probably encouraged Pyongyang to play the America card. Xi watched as Kim met with South Korea's President Moon Jae-in and planned a summit with President Trump. This created a fearsome prospect for Beijing: an autonomous DPRK *friendly to America*.

That possibility likely motivated the two Xi-Kim summits between March and May. It was imperative for Beijing to cater to Kim.

China almost certainly was the supplicant, offering the DPRK what the latter long desired. Beijing still wanted North Korea to negotiate, but not from a position of weakness ready to toss the PRC under the proverbial bus.

Instead of fulminating about Sino perfidy, Washington should engage the PRC over its perceived interests. For instance, a U.S. promise to withdraw troops and a South Korean pledge of military neutrality could moderate Chinese concerns over a westward North Korean move and even South Korea-dominated reunification.

Washington should keep its eye on the prize at the upcoming summit: eliminating North Korean nuclear weapons. Doing so is still a long-shot. But President Trump should be prepared to pay the necessary price for the PRC's aid.

Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is author of "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World" and co-author of "The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea."