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## **The Trump fantasy: If we say it, they will do it**

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As neoconservatives took over the Republican Party, GOP officials increasingly have acted as if Washington's consistent failure to reorder the globe to their liking reflects a lack of effort. Unfortunately, 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.

His appointees appear to be adopting the same attitude. For instance, in his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson displayed a dangerous mix of ignorance and arrogance in assuming that the United States can force Beijing to act as the administration wishes regarding North Korea.

No one wants a nuclear North Korea. But there is no easy way to stop Pyongyang.

So Washington has looked to China for the solution. While Beijing is not happy with its nominal ally, so far it has continued to underwrite the North. The desire for stability has trumped the commitment to denuclearization.

Which led the Trump administration to threaten China. During his presidential campaign, Trump suggested that China could easily dictate to Pyongyang. Tillerson testified 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 nominal ally. Barely suppressed hostility between the two governments has been evident in recent years. Kim Jong Un's grandfather and father alike ignored China's opposition to the North Korean nuclear program and rejected Beijing's advice to undertake economic reforms. Kim appears to be no more pliant, having executed his uncle, who was China's closest interlocutor in the North.

No one knows what Pyongyang would do if faced with complete isolation. It might turn inward and attempt to survive. In response the country might collapse into destabilizing chaos. If so, Beijing might intervene militarily.

Whatever the consequences of Chinese action, Tillerson told the committee the obvious, that Beijing "hasn't been a reliable partner in using its full influence to curb North Korea." Yet there was no acknowledgment that China was acting rationally in ignoring U.S. desires.

A North Korean collapse would threaten to spread conflict, refugees and loose nukes on China's doorstep. A unified Korea would be a geopolitical windfall to Washington.

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 bad behavior. And it must end."

He advocated "a new approach to 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, Washington should "hold China accountable to comporting with the sanctions" and "consider actions to compel them to comply."

Alas, no nationalistic rising power would accept such foreign dictates. America of the 19th century was truculent in dealing with its neighbors and European powers. Similar nationalist sentiments rage in China.

Obviously, Washington could employ economic coercion, but Americans as well as Chinese would lose. Nor should the U.S. assume that its allies would back America in such a confrontation. They must live with their ever more powerful neighbor and have good reason to doubt the constancy of American administrations both present and future.

Moreover, the Trump administration appears to have much that it wants from Beijing. If Washington seeks to "compel" compliance with U.N. sanctions on the North, whatever that means, 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 can allow an increasingly hostile competitor to dictate terms on important issues.

China might not be averse to negotiate over North Korea — if the U.S. really meant negotiate. Beijing's unhappiness with Pyongyang is obvious, having just banned coal exports from the North. Is the Trump administration willing to help pay for the costs of a breakdown in the North or promise to withdraw U.S. troops if the Koreas reunify?

American officials have been frustrated with China's support for the North but so far have failed to give Beijing a good reason to risk instability and chaos on its doorstep. Coercion would backfire.

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 U.S.

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