

The Ever-Deepening Korean Conundrum: Can China and the U.S. Cooperate?

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Relations between Washington and Beijing ticked slightly up with the Biden-Xi meeting in Bali. Reestablishing high level communication between the two governments was the first step necessary to stabilize the relationship. However, significant differences on many key issues remain.

One of the greatest geopolitical challenges is posed by North Korea. Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un has rejected negotiations with the U.S. and South Korea. At the same time, he has moved ahead with missile development, staging more than 60 launches so far this year. The most recent one was of an ICBM capable of reaching the U.S. And a seventh nuclear test is warily anticipated by observers.

Kim continues to dismiss any overtures from Washington or Seoul. His sister, Kim Yo-jon, recently delivered another insulting diatribe: “We warn the impudent and stupid once again that the desperate sanctions and pressure of the U.S. and its South Korean stooges against [North Korea] will add fuel to the latter’s hostility and anger and they will serve as a noose for them.”

The U.S. seeks Beijing’s support for denuclearizing the Korean peninsula. However, Xi sees little reason to oblige. Chinese diplomats with whom I have spoken, asked why their government should aid Washington when it is seeking to contain the People’s Republic of China.

The best answer is that it is in Beijing’s interest to promote stability in Northeast Asia, and the North’s current military trajectory could pose problems for the PRC as well as the U.S. and its allies. Indeed, through 2017, China was broadly supportive of efforts to prevent the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea from becoming a nuclear power. Relations were long bad between the two states. When I visited the DPRK that year, my North Korean interlocutors stated their

government's desire to end dependence on any state, and there was little doubt against whom their comment was directed.

However, the possibility of Washington and Pyongyang reaching a modus vivendi with the 2018 summit between President Joe Biden and Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un caused Xi to change course. The latter two began meeting, holding five summits in quick succession. Since then, Beijing has blocked any new UN sanctions, instead encouraging negotiations.

Xi's position on another DPRK nuclear test is unknown, or at least unknown to the public. The North may be delaying another test out of fear of the PRC's reaction. However, the U.S. and its partners would be foolish to expect China to cut off energy and food shipments that keep the DPRK afloat.

Beijing is balancing two interests. One is denuclearization. Despite skepticism of some American analysts—generally hawks which view the PRC as an enemy—China does not control North Korean policy. However, the Chinese see DPRK behavior as destabilizing, raising risks of aggressive North Korean military action.

Moreover, Washington's efforts to deter the North encourage larger permanent garrisons, more frequent temporary deployments, well-publicized military flyovers and sail-byes, and closer military cooperation with the Republic of Korea and Japan. The US also has considered preventive war to decapitate the North Korean regime, destroying its nuclear capabilities and/or killing its leadership. That could trigger full-scale war on the peninsula, which obviously would not be in Beijing's interest.

However, the PRC also rejects joining the U.S.-led campaign against Pyongyang. The means desired by Washington, increased sanctions on the North, could result in the end China fears, a North Korean collapse. The consequences could include factional conflict/civil war, humanitarian crisis, mass refugee flows, and, worst of all, from China's viewpoint, reunification, yielding a larger, more powerful ROK, allied with America and hosting additional U.S. bases.

Hence the diplomat's query to me. With Washington working assiduously to contain the PRC, why should the latter help the U.S.? Frankly, after America's president declared economic war on China, even a less belligerent communist party leader would not be inclined to aid Washington.

Nevertheless, the Biden-Xi meeting and commitment to restart diplomatic working groups offers an opportunity to seek areas of agreement on North Korea. First, are there shared policies which might discourage Pyongyang's missile and nuclear developments without increasing chances of a failed North Korean state? Second, are there allied policies and commitments that would reduce the economic and security costs to the PRC of a DPRK collapse? Third, what kind of end state on the peninsula would simultaneously reflect Korean desires, satisfy Chinese security, and respect U.S. interests?

Seoul, Beijing, and Washington also should establish communication channels for use should the Kim regime falter. The North is approaching three years of almost complete isolation in response to the COVID pandemic. The political system appears stable, but the internal pressure may be

greater than is evident outside. Kim's attempt to prevent access to South Korean culture suggests an elevated level of paranoia and fear. The sudden collapse of Romania's Ceausescu dictatorship in 1989 remains a model of the potential brittleness of even the most brutal autocracies.

Should the DPRK falter, China, South Korea, and the U.S. all likely would consider intervening militarily—to prevent humanitarian catastrophe and loose nukes, forestall civil strife and military conflict, and secure geographic and political objectives. In fact, there is good reason for Washington to stay out of such an imbroglio, but restraint seems unlikely, especially if the ROK goes in. A military free-for-all, even if only between China and South Korea, would be extremely dangerous. Some process of notice, separation, and “deconfliction,” like that between the U.S. and Russia in Syria, would be desperately needed.

Also worthy of discussion is what kind of policy package the PRC would support for North Korea. The objective is not to turn the issue over to Beijing, which obviously would not have America's best interests at stake. Rather, Washington needs to learn what China would back in negotiations with the DPRK. Best would seem to be a serious offer for arms control, with verifiable restrictions on its nuclear program in exchange for meaningful sanctions relief with snap-back provisions should any accord be violated.

Reaching agreement won't be easy. However, the professed willingness of both governments to restart serious dialogue over problematic issues offers an opportunity to address North Korea and its ongoing missile and nuclear programs. Despite their obvious differences, Washington and Beijing both desire stability in Northeast Asia, which the DPRK is today placing at risk.

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