

North Korea Causes More Difference than Agreement between China and the U.S.

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Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman's recent visit to China ended up as anything but conciliatory. After declaring that she would be speaking from a position of "strength," the Biden administration appeared to decide that simply holding the meeting counted as positive. However, her Chinese hosts downgraded her reception through protocol legerdemain and gave her two lists of grievances which they wanted addressed.

She tried to emphasize areas of potential cooperation in the face of sharp criticism from Chinese officials, including Foreign Minister Wang Yi. However, her suggestions generated little interest amid the acrid atmosphere. Indeed, most issues seem likely to further divide Beijing and Washington.

One of them is North Korea. Before she left, State Department spokesman Ned Price argued that "It is in no one's interest for the DPRK to be a threat to the region and potentially beyond. It is in no one's interest to see humanitarian catastrophe potentially unfold in the DPRK." Thus, he added: "The DPRK is one of those areas where there is at least some alignment of interests, and so we think that there is room for, at the very least, discussion with the PRC when it comes to the challenge posed by the DPRK's nuclear and ballistic missile programs and its other threatening activity."

Sherman emphasized the issue as she prepared for her visit. "Thinking together about bringing the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is certainly an area for cooperation," she observed, adding that "we look forward to having that discussion as part of the meetings that we will have." After her visit Sherman indicated she had raised the issue but said nothing of Beijing's response.

North Korea demonstrates how difficult it will be to work with China. Neither government wants a nuclear North Korea, but agreement largely ends there. The U.S. wants to prevent a nuclear Democratic People's Republic of Korea at almost any cost. Both the Trump and Clinton administrations considered staging preventive wars, which would have had horrendous consequences that would undoubtedly impact the PRC.

Speaking of the possibility of a U.S. attack on the North, in 2017 Sen. Lindsey Graham observed: "If there's going to be a war to stop [Kim Jong-un], it will be over there. If thousands

die, they're going to die over there. They're not going to die here." Graham added: "If I were China, I would believe him, too, and do something about it." More likely the dead would number in the hundreds of thousands or more, but apparently that did not bother Graham or Trump.

Moreover, before joining the Trump administration as National Security Adviser, John Bolton made the legal case for attacking the DPRK. The Clinton administration was equally serious in planning military strikes despite its belief that full-scale war would result. South Korean President Kim Young-sam believed that war was closer than Clinton's appointees admitted in retrospect, and that only his conversation with Clinton prevented the attack.

As for sanctions, while the U.S. might not intend to collapse the Kim regime, few in Washington, D.C. would shed a tear if that was the result. After all, current policy is intended to incapacitate the regime and immiserate the population. The policy was termed "maximum pressure" for a reason, and this approach became the Trump administration's standard tactic against recalcitrant governments. Although officials usually rejected the objective of regime change, the policy was often implemented with barely suppressed hope that the result would be an elite overthrow of or popular uprising against the existing rulers. Some Korea-watchers believe that regime change is the only solution to the DPRK.

China's position is very different, and not out of love for the Kim dynasty. Contrary to official pronouncements from Beijing and Pyongyang, there is little warmth between the two governments. Only the prospect of an American agreement with the North caused Xi Jinping to revive his nation's relationship with the DPRK.

For the PRC, the impact of war or collapse could include radioactive fallout over Chinese territory, combat overflowing the border, loose nuclear weapons nearby, mass refugee flows across the Yalu River, civil war in North Korea, chaos south of the PRC border, U.S. and South Korean military intervention, and more. Nor would Beijing favor a reunited Korea allied with America with troops along the Yalu. Just such a specter brought China into the Korean War in 1953. Especially in today's atmosphere, the PRC would not want to see the Korean peninsula become part of a regional U.S. containment system.

In short, Washington fears a nuclear DPRK and would welcome a North Korean collapse, while pushing policies that address the former and encourage the latter. China wants to prevent a nuclear North, but not by using tactics which could trigger Pyongyang's implosion. So long as Washington emphasizes the latter, it will be difficult for the two nations to cooperate on North Korea.

U.S.-China relations need a serious rethink. Both governments should lower the rhetorical temperature. Bitter public rebukes might score domestic political points, but they make cooperation on shared interests more difficult. There also are some easy concessions that both sides could make—for instance, providing more visas and allowing journalists to operate.

Moreover, Washington should prioritize issues. The PRC will not transform its political system on U.S. demand: what matters most and what compromises would give both sides enough on which to agree? Where cooperation seems possible, such as in the Korean peninsula, remaining differences need to be fully understood.

For instance, Beijing and Washington should talk about the possibility of Korean collapse and reunification, and America's willingness to reassure the PRC cooperation would not leave the

latter at a geopolitical disadvantage. For instance, would the U.S. help cover the cost of refugees, stand aside if China intervened in a chaotic collapse, pledge to remove U.S. military forces with reunification, and address other Chinese concerns?

Cooperation over shared interests is possible, and that process could help ease tensions between the two nations. But more will be required than a superficial meet and greet aimed mostly at the cameras. Tackling North Korea could become a test of whether both sides are serious about repairing bilateral ties.

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