

Can China and the U.S. Agree on North Korea?

Doug Bandow

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After engaging in a policy of isolation, essentially self-sanctions, North Korea appears to be relying for survival on the People's Republic of China. Both the U.S. and PRC desire stability and peace on the Korean peninsula. They should begin informal talks over how to work together to achieve these shared objectives.

After the Korean War Pyongyang and Beijing described their relationship as close as teeth and lips. That was never the case, however. DPRK founder Kim Il-sung was embarrassed that Chinese intervention was necessary to preserve his rule. He criticized Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, Mao in turn disdained Kim's plan for a monarchical transfer of power.

Relations ebbed and flowed, but Pyongyang remained fearful of the near great power. The PRC was irritated that Kim's heir, Kim Jong-il, steadfastly rejected China-style economic reform, likely out of fear of destabilizing his rule. The latter's son, Kim Jong-un, took over in 2011 and ramped up missile and nuclear tests, challenging China as well as the U.S.

As 2017 ended amid President Donald Trump's talk of "fire and fury," Chinese President Xi Jinping had met South Korean President Park Geun-hye six times but "the Great Successor" Kim not once. Even more stunning, the PRC had backed a series of steadily tougher United Nations sanctions, generally enforcing them as well.

On a visit to North Korea in 2016, the Financial Times' [Jamil Anderlini reported](#): "Most striking was the deep animosity that everyone, from government officials to ordinary citizens, seemed to feel towards their former comrades across the border." I was in Pyongyang the following year, and North Korean economic officials with whom I met insisted that they did not want to be dependent on any one country; it wasn't hard to surmise which one they were thinking of.

Everything changed when Trump agreed to a summit with Kim. Evidently worried that Kim might shift his attentions to the distant and hence less dangerous power, Xi made up for lost time, staging five summits, including one in Pyongyang, the first in 14 years. The U.S.-DPRK relationship has since cooled, while China and the North appear to have reached an informal accommodation. Pyongyang won't directly challenge the U.S. with ICBM or nuclear tests, while the PRC will continue to provide essential supplies and support. However, the DPRK is still suffering. Despite seeming efforts to revive commerce between China and North Korea, [trade is down again](#) this year.

With Washington and Beijing looking for areas of potential cooperation, they should discuss their dual beta noire. There is a temporary calm as the North focuses inward and continues its moratorium on nuclear and ICBM testing. Whether the DPRK's forbearance will long continue is unknown.

Yet continued, steady nuclear development could turn Pyongyang into a middling nuclear power. A recent report from the Rand Corporation and Asan Institute offered a scary forecast:

“Despite some ROK and U.S. efforts to enhance defense and deterrence, there is a growing gap between the North Korean nuclear weapon threat and ROK and U.S. capabilities to defeat it... By 2027, North Korea could have 200 nuclear weapons and several dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and hundreds of theater missiles for delivering the nuclear weapons. The ROK and the United States are not prepared, and do not plan to be prepared, to deal with the coercive and warfighting leverage that these weapons would give North Korea.”

Both China and America want Northeast Asia to be stable, peaceful, and prosperous. Neither desires an aggressive or nuclear North Korea. It also is in the interests of the PRC and U.S. to avoid a catastrophic collapse of the North and prevent a clash between their respective forces if such an implosion occurs.

These are significant commonalities, which, in theory, should provide much to discuss and on which to cooperate. However, the differences also are significant. First is the overall state of their bilateral relationship: neither country is that interested in helping the other. As for the DPRK, Beijing would prefer to keep a friendly buffer state within which it enjoys economic predominance. Washington favors reunification with the South and creation of a united Korea allied with America and hosting U.S. military forces. These differences loom especially large. Moreover, they obviously involve the Republic of Korea, which has been formally allied with the US for nearly seven decades.

The U.S. and PRC could set up working groups to address the varying issues. For instance, what is the best way to maintain the North’s moratorium on testing weapons that would threaten America? Perhaps incorporating a test ban in a formal agreement, along with snapback sanctions relief supported by both Washington and Beijing. How to discourage confrontation by the North? Perhaps a U.S. offer to open diplomatic relations and revive the six-party talks, giving Pyongyang a push to rely on diplomacy, at which Kim Jong-un has proved adept.

China and the U.S. also should address more difficult issues. For instance, the two governments could join with the ROK and conduct preliminary work on a deconfliction process and coordinating staff to ensure that the U.S., South Korea, and China would avoid any inadvertent military collision if the North comes to a messy end. As for the ultimate outcome, Washington, Seoul, and Beijing could search for a modus vivendi—perhaps PRC acceptance of Korean unification with protection for Chinese investments and a US commitment to withdraw military forces from the peninsula.

Most important, of course, would be addressing the tensions in the larger relationship. That won’t be easy. However, new possibilities might emerge if the U.S. and PRC can find their way forward on Korea, which involves a complicated mix of historical, security, economic, and cultural issues. Essentially, the two governments need to separate the peninsula from the welter of other East Asian challenges. The potential of North Korea as a medium nuclear power is too great to ignore.

Given the state of Sino-American relations, the new year does not look promising for an understanding over Korean issues. However, waiting for a crisis to emerge would be too late.

The Biden administration should push for dialogue over the Koreas, which could help move the peninsula toward more certain peace and stability.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.