



John Kerry's Beijing reality check

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Secretary of State John Kerry's diplomatic hot streak faces a major reality check on Tuesday.

He lands in Beijing aiming to convince a reluctant China to ratchet up pressure and punishments on its recalcitrant nuclear-armed ally North Korea. But the limits of American influence with a rising regional giant, questions over just how much influence even China has over North Korea's unpredictable behavior and the administration's own ebbing time and political capital make the chance of meaningful progress on one of the world's most vexing security threats a long shot.

That doesn't mean Kerry, who has made a habit of what some see as solitary, quixotic diplomatic endeavors, won't try.

"I look forward to having solid conversations -- serious conversations -- about one of the most serious issues on the planet today," Kerry said, previewing his China visit to reporters with him on the round-the-world trip.

He hinted at the extreme sensitivity of the issue when he continued, "I think the conversations need to be very private, and I don't want to be telling the Chinese what they ought to hear privately and personally from me or predetermining the talks."

But whether he conveys his message publicly or privately, the secretary of state may be disappointed in China's response.

Escalating U.S. rhetoric

Kerry described North Korea to reporters this weekend as a "clearly reckless and dangerous, evolving security threat in the hands of somebody who is questionable in terms of judgment and has proven thus to China." U.S. rhetoric toward impoverished and isolated North Korea and its young leader Kim Jong Un -- already scathing -- only intensified after it launched a fresh nuclear test earlier this month.

The test -- which Pyongyang said was a hydrogen bomb and U.S. scientists assessed was a more modest device -- and a string of missile launches underscore a rising strategic threat. It is no longer out of the question that in the future, North Korea could threaten the U.S. mainland, as well as U.S. allies in the region, with a nuclear device miniaturized on top of a missile.

The clear subtext of Kerry's comments is that the United States believes China has an obligation, as an increasingly influential and important power, to roll back its unpredictable neighbor's nuclear arsenal and to halt provocations that are rattling U.S. regional allies Japan and South Korea.

Washington has long seen Beijing as holding the most meaningful card when it comes to changing Pyongyang's behavior, given its status as North Korea's top trading partner and an alliance forged in blood during the 1950-53 Korean war. But Washington has often been disappointed that Beijing has not done more to control the North Koreans, although U.S. officials do acknowledge that it is becoming increasingly frustrated with its troublesome ally.

Kerry is just the latest in a long line of senior U.S. officials from successive administrations to arrive in Beijing seeking a more proactive Chinese role on North Korea.

But China, despite its increasing annoyance with North Korea, is apparently unsure of how to control Kim's erratic regime and is worried about coming down harder against Pyongyang for a host of its own strategic, political and economic reasons.

For now, it appears China's anger at Kim's behavior is not yet trumped by its unease about what may transpire if it accepts U.S. demands to get much tougher, perhaps by curtailing food and energy exports vital to North Korea.

China concerned about clout

Leaders in Beijing, for one thing, may be concerned that if they did act, continued defiance by Pyongyang would only underline their declining clout.

"China is dealing with what is a loose cannon now but might, by attempting to engage in tougher love toward Pyongyang, end up with a client state that is completely unrestrained," said Ted Galen Carpenter, a foreign policy specialist at the Cato Institute. "Then Kim's regime truly is unconstrained and can engage in conduct that is beyond reckless."

Top officials in Beijing, who prize political order above all to preserve Communist Party rule, have also long feared a potentially destabilizing refugee exodus into Chinese territory by millions of starving North Koreans should the regime in Pyongyang fall.

And the prospect of a unified Korea, dominated by Seoul in alliance with the United States, is an unappetizing one for Beijing. Chinese officials drew lessons from watching NATO forces expand east in Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union. Their historic hypersensitivity to a strategic encirclement in their own Asian neighborhood, which may have been exacerbated by the U.S. "pivot" to the region, means they have no desire for a similar outcome on the Korean peninsula.

Kerry, whose recent diplomatic victories include the conclusion of an Iran nuclear deal and the release of U.S. Navy sailors and prisoners from Iranian custody, the re-establishment of ties with Cuba after decades of estrangement and a historic international agreement on climate change, has given less attention to Asia than his predecessor Hillary Clinton.

His focus on other regions has disappointed some Asian diplomats given that he's no stranger to the region, having famously fought with distinction in the Vietnam War, played a leading role in the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Hanoi and helped set up a tribunal for surviving Khmer Rouge leaders in Cambodia while in the Senate.

So he may be keen to put a personal stamp on the Obama administration's Asia policy, which has so far yielded a massive Trans-Pacific Partnership designed to ensure Western rather than China-dictated standards underpin the regional trading system; tightened alliances South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Australia amid Chinese territorial muscle-flexing in the East and South China Seas; and helped steer Myanmar out of isolation and through a political reform process.

U.S. reaches out to Southeast Asia

On this trip, Kerry arrives in China after stops in Laos and Cambodia, as the administration makes significant strides in strengthening cooperation with Southeast Asian nations that seek a counter-balance to a rising and increasingly assertive China.

The swing comes before Obama next month holds an unprecedented Southeast Asian summit with regional leaders at the Sunnylands retreat in California. He will also become the first U.S. president to visit Laos this year, completing a 10-nation sweep through ASEAN countries.

Senior U.S. officials deny that U.S. Asia policy has anything to do with surrounding China, saying the rebalancing is an attempt to show that Washington intends to be a player in the most dynamic and economically promising region of the world and that the Sunnylands summit merely puts a capstone on that process.

"We want to send a message to the region and whoever the next president is that we should be engaging Southeast Asia at this level," said a senior administration official.

But China has viewed much of the Asian pivot with suspicion. And blunt U.S. threats of expanded sanctions against North Korea if Beijing fails to rein in its ruthless young leader could set the stage for contentious talks with Kerry.

Kerry's arrival in Beijing comes shortly after a visit by Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who warned that if China did not act, Washington would have no choice but to broaden its own punitive measures against Pyongyang.

The measures "won't be directed at China, but China probably won't like them," Blinken said in an interview with The New York Times, in a possible hint that Washington could sanction Chinese entities doing business with North Korea.

At the same time, China has made it clear to U.S. officials, foreign policy experts and journalists that although its patience is running out with North Korea, it believes it is up to the United States to configure a diplomatic initiative toward Pyongyang. Beijing has often complained that the

United States is too confrontational toward the North but it is not clear exactly what U.S. concessions Beijing would demand in return for putting more pressure on Pyongyang.

In any case, the United States is unlikely to take such steps.

For starters, the Obama administration -- and ones before it -- have tried to engage North Korea and failed.

The Stalinist state continues to spurn six-nation nuclear talks and has tested three nuclear devices during the Obama administration's tenure.

North Korea is already one of the most sanctioned nations in the world. Traditional carrot-and-stick diplomacy like that used by the administration with Iran is unlikely to work with Pyongyang, given the absence of a willing negotiating partner on the other side of the table.

North Korea reluctant to bargain

North Korea's paranoid and extreme regime has proven itself reluctant to bargain and prone to cheating on agreements, seems to have little desire to escape political isolation, and has demonstrated that it will starve its own people to ensure its own survival.

A military option, meanwhile, is unthinkable given that North Korean rockets could rain destruction on Seoul -- not to mention the U.S. garrison of nearly 30,000 U.S troops -- within a few minutes notice.

Pyongyang's defiance and the lack of any major diplomatic effort underway to coax it back to the negotiating table over its expanding nuclear arsenal means that Obama, like George W. Bush before him, will likely hand over to a new president one of the most volatile foreign policy challenges for the United States.

Indeed, it is unclear whether in its final year, the administration has the inclination, patience or resourcefulness to mount an initiative on North Korea that would bear comparison to its Iran or Cuba diplomacy.

"Our policy has largely been on autopilot, and unfortunately I don't think that is likely to change in a major way," Carpenter, the Cato foreign policy expert, said.

Given that the administration does not have much political capital left, Carpenter said, changing policy toward North Korea would "require a great deal of imagination on the part of policymakers."

He concluded, "I don't see that kind of imagination."