

Why China's Xi Is Reluctant To Bring Kim Jong Un To His Knees

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A major issue in the summit meeting between President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping will be the growing U.S. insistence that Beijing do much more to rein in its disruptive North Korean ally.

“If China is not going to solve North Korea, we will,” Trump told the *Financial Times* on Sunday. His blunt comment is only the latest in a series of escalating warnings from Washington. Administration officials have indicated that all options, including unilateral military force, are on the table.

Unfortunately, the administration’s approach to inducing Beijing to take action against North Korea consists of all sticks and no carrots. The fear that the United States might launch airstrikes against North Korea, with all the possible adverse ramifications of such a move for China’s interests, is apparently deemed sufficient to cause a change in Xi’s policy.

Like its predecessors, the Trump foreign policy team overestimates China’s normal influence over Pyongyang and is oblivious to the reasons for Beijing’s reluctance to apply maximum pressure on Kim Jong Un’s regime. China undoubtedly has more leverage over North Korea than does any other country, but it is still limited. Pyongyang has defied the Chinese government’s repeated requests and warnings to cease both its nuclear tests and its ballistic missile launches.

True, since China supplies so much of North Korea’s food and energy supplies, it could probably bring Kim’s regime to its knees if it severed such assistance. But as I point out in a [new article](#) in *China-U.S. Focus*, Chinese leaders have several reasons for refraining from adopting that option.

There is the worry that intense pressure might cause Kim’s volatile regime to engage in even more risky military provocations, thereby triggering the very war that the United States and all East Asian nations want to prevent.

Even if that nightmare did not occur, cutting off food and energy aid might cause the North Korean state to unravel. Among many other potential problems, that development would lead to massive refugee flows into China.

Beyond those immediate dangers, Chinese officials are concerned that if North Korea imploded, Washington would exploit that situation to Beijing’s geostrategic disadvantage. A united Korea

allied with the United States would mean the loss of the geographic buffer between China and the rest of Northeast Asia that is dominated by America and its allies.

Chinese leaders would wonder further if someday Washington might seek to have military bases in what is now North Korea. Given the recent U.S. behavior in deploying military forces in what was formerly Moscow's East European satellite empire, despite promises to the contrary, such Chinese worries are not unfounded.

There is no indication that the Trump administration has moved to address any of these concerns, much less all of them. So far, the administration's diplomatic approach appears to consist entirely of demands that China take more vigorous action against its troublesome ally or the United States will, despite the potential catastrophic consequences.

Concessions to either China or North Korea do not appear to be on the table. I have discussed elsewhere the possible concessions Washington could offer to China, both with respect to the Korean Peninsula and other areas, to increase the incentives for Beijing to adopt more decisive measures toward Pyongyang.

But expecting China to incur great risks to implement a hard-line policy that would primarily benefit the United States and its allies is inherently unrealistic.

Foreign policy is rarely a charitable enterprise, and Chinese foreign policy is never such an enterprise. If the Trump administration wants China to get tough with North Korea, it will need to make it worthwhile for Beijing to do so.

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