

DPRK is the world's responsibility, not just China's

By: Ted Galen Carpenter – March 28, 2013

The satellite launch and subsequent nuclear test by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have greatly increased the level of concern in the United States and its East Asian allies. A frequent response is to demand that China rein in its troublesome ally. There is a growing view in the West, now verging on consensus, that China holds the key to taming Pyongyang's behavior and solving the crisis caused by the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs. And there is mounting anger that the Chinese government seems unwilling to use its influence in a decisive manner.

Washington Post writer David Ignatius stated in a March 13 column that "through two administrations, the underlying US strategy toward North Korea has been to seek China's help in containing this destabilizing force in northeast Asia". But that policy "has largely failed, and the United States should be running out of patience. With depressing consistency, China has failed to step up to its responsibilities as a regional superpower".

The view Ignatius expressed is neither rare nor recent. A December 2012 editorial in the conservative financial newspaper *Investors Business Daily* urged the Obama administration "to scrap the weasel words and start shaming China, whose actions are making the UN good for nothing in the face of a rapidly progressing nuclear threat". More than a decade ago, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman asserted that Beijing could end the North Korean nuclear crisis with a telephone call threatening to cut off aid, and he found it highly suspicious that Chinese officials were unwilling to make that call.

Such views overestimate the extent of Beijing's influence, and often seem designed to make China a scapegoat for the international community's inability to end Pyongyang's nuclear aspirations. True, China is one of the DPRK's few allies, and is by far that country's largest and most important ally. Since the late 1940s, mutual strategic interests and ideological factors have cemented the alliance. Today, China also provides the DPRK with much of the food and energy supplies it requires.

Both the history of the alliance and the current economic relationship mean that Beijing has more influence than any other country in Pyongyang. But that does not translate into being able to dictate to the DPRK's government. Kim Jong-un's regime has its own interests, policies, and priorities. Although it certainly listens to its Chinese ally and takes Beijing's views into account, the decisions are its own.

Indeed, there have been several instances in which Pyongyang has acted contrary to the Chinese government's wishes. In the weeks leading up to the DPRK's latest nuclear test, Beijing urged its ally not to take such a disruptive, provocative step. Kim's government ignored the advice and went ahead with the test.

China has repeatedly signaled to the DPRK that it is disturbed by that country's destabilizing actions regarding missile and nuclear issues. Beijing has admonished Pyongyang to behave in a more constructive, responsible manner, and China voted for the most recent sanctions in the UN Security Council.

Those in the West who demand that China curb the DPRK's behavior overrate China's influence and underrate the potential adverse consequences if Beijing adopted more coercive measures. Short of severing all food and energy assistance, any unilateral sanctions that Beijing might enact would probably not have a decisive impact on Pyongyang's behavior. The DPRK regards its missile and nuclear programs as high-priority goals, which it is not likely to relinquish — especially without major diplomatic, security, and economic concessions from the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea.

As such, a decision by China to cut off all food and energy assistance would not only inflict great suffering on the DPRK's people, it would risk the onset of chaos in the country. That development could produce a major refugee crisis for China and the ROK, as well as other unpredictable but likely very dangerous consequences on the Korean Peninsula. That outcome would not be in the interest of China or any other country involved in dealing with the DPRK.

It is certainly reasonable to ask Beijing to make a more concerted effort to prevent the DPRK's nuclear crisis from spiraling out of control. But the US and its allies need to do more as well. For decades, Washington's strategy has emphasized increasing pressure and penalties on Pyongyang while offering few (if any) meaningful incentives — such as normalized diplomatic relations, greatly reduced sanctions, and a peace treaty formally ending the state of war on the Korean Peninsula — for more responsible, conciliatory behavior. That approach of “all sticks and no carrots” has not worked and is not likely to work in the future. Instead of reflexively blaming China for the continuing impasse, US policymakers and pundits should perhaps examine how a change in US strategy might produce better results.