

## Frustrated pair need to act together

Updated: 2011-12-02 09:07

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China and US could cooperate more on dealing with Pyongyang and TehEran

A major, troubling foreign policy issue for both China and the United States is the nuclear proliferation problem posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Iran. Washington and Beijing share the basic objective of trying to prevent further proliferation of nuclear weapons, since an increase in the number of states with that capability would have destabilizing implications for the international system. Chinese and US leaders would certainly prefer to keep Teheran and Pyongyang out of the global nuclear weapons club.

But the overlap in interests and policies between Beijing and Washington largely ends at that point. The US is more adamant than China about the need to thwart the Iranian and DPRK nuclear programs. Indeed, US officials not only want to prevent those countries from achieving their nuclear ambitions, they would like to see the two regimes ousted from power.

In the opinion of US leaders, Iran and DPRK are aggressive states that pose a threat to the peace and stability of their respective regions. Washington's preferred strategy is one of unrelenting pressure on Teheran and Pyongyang, with the goal of increasing their international isolation until they capitulate on the nuclear issue, if not on other outstanding issues as well. Since the US has virtually no economic ties with either country, it is an easy position to adopt.

China, on the other hand, has important political and economic relations with both Iran and DPRK that Chinese officials want to preserve. Iran is a significant supplier of energy to China's economy and serves as a brake on US hegemony in the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

DPRK is a long-standing ally of China's, and despite Pyongyang's sometimes disruptive behavior, there are still significant emotional links between the two societies. Perhaps even more important, the DPRK is seen as an essential geostrategic buffer state between China and the rest of East Asia that the US and its allies control. Hence, Chinese leaders have no interest in adopting policies that, in the name of nuclear nonproliferation, have the potential to bring down the Iranian and DPRK governments. China fears that, at a minimum, a hard-line policy could create dangerous regional power vacuums and, at worst, might produce successor regimes obedient to Washington's foreign policy objectives and hostile to Beijing's goals.

US officials seem increasingly frustrated with China's approach to the DPRK and the Iranian nuclear proliferation issue, and Chinese policymakers seem equally frustrated with their American counterparts. The US side believes that Beijing does not take the threat that

Teheran and Pyongyang pose to the nonproliferation system seriously enough. Both the Bush and Obama administrations have been annoyed at what they see as China's reluctance to support truly effective economic sanctions against the two emerging nuclear powers.

That annoyance has boiled over on a few occasions, with Washington's former ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, and other right-wing political figures openly voicing suspicions that Beijing is not really opposed to Iran or the DPRK acquiring a nuclear-weapons capability. Even less extreme figures are troubled that China continuously resists proposals for more rigorous sanctions. The statements from Beijing (and Moscow) in mid-October urging more patience before imposing a new round of sanctions on Teheran will likely intensify American concerns.

Chinese policymakers, on the other hand, regard the US approach as inherently counterproductive. They believe that Washington's strategy of coercive isolation will make Iranian and DPRK leaders even more recalcitrant. Beijing has repeatedly urged US officials to conduct serious bilateral dialogues with Teheran and the DPRK and adopt a new strategy that offers political and economic benefits for cooperation instead of just issuing threats if cooperation is not forthcoming.

Both Beijing and Washington could benefit from listening better to the concerns of the other party. The US has a point in the acute problems that a nuclear DPRK and a nuclear Iran could pose to East Asia and the Middle East. Although Washington has repeatedly assured Tokyo and Seoul that it will keep the US nuclear shield in place for both countries, even if Pyongyang retains and expands its nuclear arsenal, it is uncertain how long that assurance will prove effective. China could easily face the prospect of a nuclear Republic of Korea and a nuclear Japan, if the DPRK does not reverse course regarding its own ambitions. Japan's extraordinarily large stocks of plutonium suggest that Tokyo is already hedging its bets.

A nuclear Iran could be even more disruptive in the oil-rich Persian Gulf. The rivalry between Shi'ite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia is already intense and growing more so. It is probable that if Iran begins to deploy a nuclear arsenal, the Saudis will follow suit. Other Gulf countries might do so as well. The already volatile, dangerous Middle East could become even more unstable, with adverse implications for the interests of China and the US.

But Washington could also benefit from listening to Beijing's concerns and frustrations regarding US policy. China is correct about the sterile, if not counterproductive, quality of Washington's approach. Trying to isolate Iran and the DPRK has not worked and is unlikely to work in the future. Indeed, it has stymied any hopes for progress on the nuclear issue, and even worse, it has deepened the paranoia and hostility that those governments exhibit. A different strategy, largely along the lines that China has suggested, offers more promise of success.

Most important, Beijing and Washington need to better coordinate their policies toward Teheran and Pyongyang and to reconcile their own differences regarding strategy. If they fail to do so, the level of mutual frustration and annoyance could rise, thereby undermining the crucial bilateral relationship. That would be extremely unfortunate for both China and the US.

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