

Enlisting China to Transform North Korea

By: Doug Bandow – February 6, 2013

After flaunting its contempt for neighboring countries as well as the U.S. by launching a rocket last month, North Korea announced plans for another nuclear test. Kim Jong-il is dead, but his system lives.

Nations far and wide have urged Pyongyang to back down, but expressions of international concern only reinforce the North's determination to proceed. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea may be the globe's most malign actor.

Unfortunately, so far the U.S. and its allies, most notably the Republic of Korea and Japan, have failed in their attempts to end Pyongyang's nuclear program.

Military strikes likely would trigger a general war. Sanctions have done little to hurt North Korea's elite. Negotiations have generated endless frustration. Through it all China has urged a diplomatic solution but refused to apply significant pressure on the North.

The Bush and Obama administrations often chided the People's Republic of China about the DPRK's misbehavior. However, Washington's complaining has had no effect.

Although there is growing academic and public dissent from Beijing's continuing commitment to the North, China has increased investment and trade while maintaining aid. Tensions between the two governments are obvious—Pyongyang routinely ignores Beijing's cautious counsels—but so far China has opted for stability. The Xi Jinping government did vote to tighten sanctions against the DPRK after the latter's more recent rocket launch and there are reports of increased customs inspections of cross-border traffic after the North's nuclear announcement. However, Beijing has yet to indicate that it is willing to challenge the Kim regime's hold on power.

Washington should encourage a rethink in Beijing. The PRC will not do America's bidding because that's what the U.S. government wants. Nor can Washington force China to go along.

Washington must convince Beijing to act. The residents of Zhongnanhai likely would be a tough audience, but the U.S. needs to relearn the art of diplomacy.

The PRC believes the Korean status quo to be in its interest. The Kim dynasty offers stability—miserable and brutish, but stability nonetheless. For all of the blood curdling threats which regularly emanate from the DPRK, that regime does not desire war, which it would lose.

The existence of the North offers obvious benefits to China. There are historic political ties. In practice the two states may not be as close as "teeth-to-lips," as has been said, but the PRC has

few other friends in the region. Moreover, China has been pursuing economic interests in its neighbor, winning advantages that would not be possible if America and especially the ROK were more actively engaged in the DPRK.

North Korea also creates a useful buffer. Although the creation of missiles and bombers has transformed geopolitics, PRC leaders do not want a united Korea hosting American troops on China's border. A friendly isolationist state dedicated to "juche," or self-reliance, also limits the cross-border draw for the ethnic-Korean Chinese across the Yalu.

The DPRK could collapse, with violence and refugees spreading into China. Beijing's support for the Kim regime is a geopolitical bottle-stopper.

While China doesn't like the North's nuclear and missile activities, they are not directed at the PRC. Rather, they primarily inconvenience America and its allies Japan and South Korea, whom Beijing suspects of conspiring to "contain" China. Indeed, Washington and Seoul are constantly going to the PRC hat-in-hand requesting Chinese assistance.

Nevertheless, the allies must make the case that the PRC has much to lose from the current situation.

First, the U.S., ROK, and Japan should develop an omnibus settlement proposal, proposing denuclearization backed by intrusive inspections in return for diplomatic recognition, elimination of sanctions, participation in multilateral development institutions, formal peace treaty, and security guarantees. The allies should present their package to Beijing for its consideration and support.

Support that is more than rhetorical. Today China is lax in enforcing international sanctions against the North and provides substantial energy and food aid as well as economic investment. If the PRC found the troika's proposal to its liking, Beijing should indicate its willingness to step on the DPRK's economic windpipe to win Pyongyang's agreement.

China also may have intelligence and political assets in North Korea which could be put into play. They might make a difference in a power struggle in Pyongyang. America is concerned more about policies than personalities.

Second, the three nations should point to the risks from the status quo, which, contrary to superficial appearances, is inherently unstable. The formal elevation of Kim Jong-un may hide deep divisions among party and military elites which have long waited for their turn at power, as well as other family members, especially his uncle and aunt, who may be determined to rule. Continuing economic failure, renewed deadly starvation, and bitter political competition could be a combustible mix.

Whoever is in charge, the current regime has continued the North's irresponsible course. Although no one wants war, Pyongyang may commit one provocation too many. Washington has had its own advocates for preventive war targeting the DPRK's nuclear installations, North Korea's military strikes against the South in 2010 generated widespread

anger in the ROK, and even Tokyo has talked about preemptively striking at North Korean rockets before launch.

Third, the allied trio should indicate its willingness to accommodate the PRC's interests if Chinese pressure contributes to the collapse of the North Korean regime. That would include allied support for refugees as well as acquiescence to temporary PRC military intervention in the North. Indeed, South Korea should propose discreet bilateral conversations on how to respond should the DPRK implode.

Fourth, the U.S. and ROK should commit to a reunification process that accounts for Chinese sensitivities. Most important, there would be no American military forces based in a united Korea. The PRC also likely would gain economically. Although reunification would open the northern half of the peninsula to all, the economic explosion sure to result would offer China the greatest opportunities. After all, today the PRC trades more with the South than do the U.S. or Japan.

Fifth, Washington and its allies should engage other countries in the region, including Russia, India, and Australia, as well as the European Union, to encourage the PRC to act as the responsible power which Beijing says it intends to become. Taking a positive and proactive role in dealing with the North would enhance China's claim to global leadership.

Finally, American officials should indicate that they would reconsider America's position on nonproliferation if the North continues to expand its nuclear arsenal. Washington may decide that it would be better for Japan and South Korea to acquire countervailing weapons than to maintain an American nuclear umbrella. Then the PRC could deal with the consequences.

There obviously is no guarantee that such an approach would work. However, it would be worth the effort. China does not control events in Pyongyang, but greater involvement by the PRC offers the best hope for peaceful denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.