

Can China Tame North Korea?

By: Ted Galen Carpenter – April 3, 2013

As the behavior of the North Korean government becomes more unpredictable and provocative, calls are growing in the United States for China to put a leash on its troublesome ally. And there is mounting annoyance, even outright anger, at Beijing for its cautious, if not duplicitous, approach.

Washington Post writer David Ignatius stated in a March 13 column “through two administrations, the underlying U.S. strategy toward North Korea has been to seek China’s help in containing this destabilizing force in northeast Asia.” But that policy, he contended, “has largely failed.” With “depressing consistency, China has failed to step up to its responsibilities as a regional superpower.” The editors of the conservative newspaper *Investors Business Daily* were even more caustic, prodding the Obama administration “to scrap the weasel words and start shaming China” regarding North Korea’s burgeoning security threat.

Although such criticism has some validity, there are two problems that those who want China to take stronger measures against North Korea ignore. First, they tend to overestimate Beijing’s control over Pyongyang. Granted, China is one of North Korea’s few allies, and is by far its largest and most important ally, providing that dysfunctional country with much of the food and energy supplies it requires. That gives Beijing more influence than any other country in Pyongyang, but it does not translate into being able to treat North Korea as a puppet. The relationship is not akin to the Soviet Union’s total domination of satellites such as East Germany during the Cold War. Kim Jong-un’s regime has its own interests, policies, and priorities, and among its highest priorities is developing North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities.

Indeed, Pyongyang has frequently shown a willingness to defy Beijing’s wishes when those priorities come under pressure. Chinese officials repeatedly warned their North Korean counterparts not to conduct a test of a long-range ballistic missile, yet Kim’s government went ahead with a so-called satellite launch in December. Beijing was even more emphatic in telling Pyongyang not to conduct another nuclear test, but the limits of China’s influence became evident in February when North Korea conducted such a test—the third since 2006.

Beijing is not happy about Pyongyang’s defiance and has shown its dissatisfaction by voting in favor of the last two UN Security Council resolutions tightening sanctions against North Korea. Chinese officials also have become increasingly pointed in criticizing their ally’s provocative behavior. But U.S. pundits oversimplify matters when they assert, as *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman did more than a decade ago, that Beijing could end North Korea’s nuclear program with a phone call threatening to terminate food and energy aid.

Beijing has compelling reasons for not wanting to take such a drastic step. Applying that kind of pressure would risk having the North Korean regime implode, creating a huge refugee crisis for China. (It might be easier for desperate North Koreans to go north than try to cross the heavily fortified and mined Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea.) Beijing is understandably reluctant to risk chaos on its border.

And that underscores the second deficiency in the more strident calls for China to crack down on North Korea. The U.S. has offered Beijing no incentive to gamble and accept the possibility of an unpalatable outcome. In addition to the refugee chaos that might ensue, the most likely long-term result would be the reunification of Korea under a pro-U.S. government. Even worse from China's standpoint, a united Korea would inherit South Korea's mutual security alliance with the United States. North Korea has long served as a buffer between the Chinese homeland and the rest of East Asia dominated by Washington and its allies. That buffer would now be gone, and Beijing would face the prospect of U.S. military bases in what had been North Korea. No Chinese leader would accept such a shift in the regional strategic balance placidly.

There is the possibility of a compromise. But if Washington wants Beijing to put excruciating pressure on Pyongyang to end its missile and nuclear programs and stop its warlike rhetoric (at the risk that the North Korean state might collapse), it must offer China some meaningful incentives. The most appealing incentive would be to agree to withdraw all U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula and terminate the alliance with Seoul. That step would eliminate Beijing's worries that by coercing North Korea, it would risk having a U.S. military client—and U.S. bases—perched on China's border.

Agreeing to withdraw U.S. forces and end the alliance would tacitly make China the most influential power on the Korean Peninsula. That would not be an easy concession for Washington to make, since it would signify a decrease in U.S. influence in Northeast Asia. But U.S. officials have a decision to make. How serious do they consider the North Korean "threat"? Do they truly regard Pyongyang's missile and nuclear programs as a potentially lethal problem, rather than merely a lot of bluster and posturing by a weak regime? If so, and they believe that China is the only country that has the power to solve that problem, they will have to make it worthwhile to Beijing to incur the risks associated with taking decisive action. That means making the necessary geopolitical concessions and accepting a more limited role for the United States in Northeast Asia.