

Can China Get Tough on North Korea?

By Joel Wuthnow March 13, 2013

On Friday, the UN Security Council unanimously passed its latest round of sanctions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), ending weeks of negotiations on how to respond to the DPRK's February 12th nuclear test. China's affirmative vote is a sign of growing tolerance in Beijing regarding the use of extensive sanctions. However, the real test is whether China actively implements these new sanctions—and history provides reasons to doubt that China will do so.

The new resolution offers the latest in a series of escalating Security Council measures directed against the DPRK since 2006. Of note, it includes new language mandating that states tighten financial restrictions and proposes details on how states should conduct inspections of suspected cargo carried by North Korean vessels. It also proscribes transfers of several items, ranging from nuclear-related technologies to luxury goods.

Some analysts have asserted that China's support for these measures signals a rethinking in Beijing about how best to handle relations with Pyongyang. CATO Institute scholar Ted Galen Carpenter has argued that China's cooperation in crafting the resolution indicates Beijing's frustration with North Korea's "unpredictable, disruptive behavior," and concern about the "potential for a major crisis in East Asia that such behavior could trigger." Paul Haenle, a former National Security Council official, has similarly stated that some in China are asking, "Is North Korea more of a liability than a benefit?"

In reality, Chinese experts and officials are well aware of the challenges to regional stability posed by North Korea's missile tests and nuclear provocation. The real debate in Beijing centers around how that challenge is best handled. An excellent report published by the International Crisis Group in 2009 details the evolving schools of thought among Chinese security experts about how DPRK intransigence should be addressed, with some more inclined to the threat and use of sanctions than others.

China's latest vote on North Korea, combined with its consent for a previous round of UN sanctions related to Pyongyang's December 2012 missile test suggests stronger influence by those within China who believe that sanctions offer a credible path to non-proliferation. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to over-

interpret the importance of China's vote: to one degree or another, Beijing has supported a dual-track approach to North Korea since the latter's first nuclear test in 2006.

As many in the United States, Japan, South Korea and elsewhere realize, the key test of the latest resolution is the extent to which China will abide by its provisions. Indeed, China itself has acknowledged this concern. After Friday's vote China's ambassador to the UN, Li Baodong, stated that "adoption of the resolution itself is not enough," and that China desires the resolution's "full implementation."

Unfortunately, there are reasons to doubt China's commitment to "full implementation." A 2008 analysis by Marcus Noland, an expert on China-North Korea trade at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, argued that "some of the permanent members of the Security Council, particularly China, displayed reluctance to embrace and implement sanctions." Noland points to luxury goods as a particular weak spot in China's implementation record. Similarly, a 2010 Congressional Research Service report concluded that China was taking a "minimalist approach" to sanctions, raising specific concerns in the areas of proliferation-oriented financial transactions and cargo inspections.

There are several possible explanations for reported gaps in China's compliance with UN resolutions on North Korea. One is that China is intentionally undermining sanctions in order to hedge against the risk that the over-use of sanctions might destabilize the Korean Peninsula. Another is that Chinese authorities are simply ill-equipped to identify and prosecute domestic violators. A third is that there is a bureaucratic disconnect, in which resolutions are sincerely agreed to by civilian diplomats, but transgressed by others with different interests at stake, such as local governments or the military.

The possibility that there may be compelling strategic or bureaucratic reasons for China's apparent compliance shortcomings presents a very real challenge for the "strong implementation in coordination with China" that U.S. ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, has called for. Hence, observers should have realistic expectations about what the United States and its allies can expect from China.

However, the U.S. can take several steps to improve the chances of effective implementation by China. These include prioritizing the implementation issue in interactions between President Barack Obama and China's incoming president Xi Jinping; identifying Chinese failures to adequately report to the UN Panel of Experts charged with monitoring compliance; flagging clear violations by Chinese enterprises and DPRK front companies operating within China; coordinating efforts with other regional stakeholders; and reminding Beijing of its own call for "full implementation."

Chinese leaders have promoted a “new-type relationship” based on mutual trust and cooperation to define the next phase of relations with the U.S. Working closely with the U.S. to address the North Korean challenge in the Security Council is a positive and meaningful step in creating such a relationship. The next, crucial step should be active and timely follow-through to the resolution.