

CHINA US Focus

How to Win China's Aid on North Korea: Stop Forcing Beijing to Choose Between the U.S. and the North

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June 23, 2016

China is not happy with its long-time ally next door. North Korea's Kim Jong-un has yet to be invited to visit. Beijing implemented the latest round of United Nations sanctions against Pyongyang. Unofficial criticism of the North is ubiquitous in the People's Republic of China.

Yet, Washington continues to make it difficult for the PRC to abandon the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The Obama administration appears to expect Beijing to simply choose America over the DPRK. That is not likely to happen.

The U.S. and China both oppose North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons. That's about it, however. They look at most other aspects of the issue differently, including how much emphasis to place on denuclearization.

For Beijing, the North is a geopolitical buffer. Barely a year after proclaiming the PRC's formation, Mao Zedong took his country into war against America to prevent the latter from occupying the DPRK and deploying forces along the Yalu River. Decades later the People's Liberation Army retains a special interest in the North, and the Communist Party, not Foreign Ministry, handles Chinese relations with the North.

Although propinquity should matter less for security in a world filled with nuclear-tipped intercontinental missiles, the PRC appears to be no more receptive today to the idea of a united Korea hosting U.S. forces. The possibility may have become even more sensitive because of Washington's ill-disguised effort to set up a containment system around China.

Pyongyang is the PRC's only formal ally. Despite evident tensions, the two remain close. At the end of May, North Korea sent a newly empowered former foreign minister to Beijing for talks. Ri Su-yong, a Kim Jong-un favorite recently promoted to the Politburo, reportedly told his hosts that the nuclear program was "permanent."

Beyond the DPRK, China sees potential adversaries everywhere. The U.S. maintains close military relationships with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, the Philippines, and

Singapore, and is building ties with Burma and Vietnam. The PRC understandably feels vulnerable.

Moreover, the cost of a North Korean implosion would be great. The DMZ seals the inter-Korea border while the Yalu offers the PRC no similar protection. If intensified sanctions produced regime collapse, violent conflict, loose nukes, humanitarian catastrophe, mass refugee flows and more, the PRC would suffer more than any other country. The U.S. would be far away, with the Pacific Ocean acting like a huge moat.

American officials might espouse goodwill, offer sympathy, and reiterate the greater global good being served by Beijing's sacrifice, but that's not likely to win over the residents of Zhongnanhai. China has been slowly toughening its position toward the DPRK but has continued to emphasize the importance of maintaining stability and discouraging conflict on the peninsula. If forced to choose between two frenemies—Pyongyang, which poses no threat, and Washington, which is the greatest obstacle to China's advance—one shouldn't bet on the PRC picking the latter.

In which case, North Korea will continue to develop nuclear weapons and ICBMs. David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security figures the North has enough fissile material for about 20 nuclear weapons and is capable of producing the equivalent of about seven more weapons a year. Northeast Asia's future is looking uglier.

Unfortunately, the U.S. is out of options. Military strikes risk full-scale war and the destruction of Seoul, South Korea's capital. Unilateral sanctions aren't likely to bring the DPRK to its knees. Insisting on a commitment to denuclearization before bilateral or multilateral negotiations with the North ensures that serious negotiations will not occur.

If the administration hopes to enlist Beijing's aid, it needs to make possible a compromise outcome which respects the PRC's interests. Abandoning a long-time ally, even if for good cause, would be painful enough for China. Sacrificing security and influence in order to advance Washington's agenda would be far worse. The U.S., South Korea, and Japan could help shift Beijing's cost-benefit analysis.

First, the Western states should agree to help cover the costs of collapse. The PRC shouldn't be the only country expected to care for refugees, provide humanitarian assistance, and more.

Second, Washington and its allies should accept possible unilateral Chinese military intervention if the North appears headed for collapse. The interested governments also should discuss how to avoid a multilateral collision if the Kim regime suffers a messy implosion. The U.S. should indicate its recognition that China has important interests at stake and pledge to keep American forces on their bases in the South, leaving any involvement to the Republic of Korea.

Third, Washington and Seoul should inform the PRC that there will be no U.S. troop presence in a united Korea. Once the North Korean threat to the South disappeared, American forces would go home, as they should have years ago. Washington should demonstrate that it would not take geopolitical advantage of the North's collapse. A united Korea would not become another tool for containment.

Fourth, the U.S., ROK, and Tokyo should develop a proposal for a comprehensive deal with Pyongyang for one last attempt to resolve the nuclear issue through negotiations. China has long viewed aggressive U.S. policy as pushing North Korea towards nuclear weapons. Washington needs to demonstrate its willingness to talk and put the North to the test. Failure would give Beijing one less excuse to preserve the status quo.

By ignoring, even insulting the Chinese, Kim Jong-un has been gambling with his regime's future. The PRC appears more ready than ever before to abandon its troublesome friend. However, inertia—and a cold-hearted assessment of interests—is likely to hold Beijing back from cooperating with the U.S. if forced to choose America over Pyongyang.

If Washington expects more out of the PRC, it should change the policy calculus for Chinese President Xi Jinping. That requires Washington to forgo any attempt to use the Korean crisis to make gains elsewhere. Otherwise America and its allies are likely to face a more aggressive and dangerous DPRK in the future.

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