

# The National Interest *online*

## **The China Card**

by Doug Bandow

07.01.2009

North Korea appears to have moved from intermittent to constant provocation. The only nation with real influence in Pyongyang is China. South Korea's President Lee Myung-bak visited Washington two weeks ago but a solution is no closer. American diplomacy should focus on encouraging Beijing to do its utmost to "solve" the problem of the North's criminal regime.

The challenge posed by the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is obvious to all. Probably the most murderous government on earth, Kim Jong-il's regime has presided over the death by famine of at least a half million people. His regime's brutality is both tragic and legendary. While impoverishing his people, he has maintained an oversize military, including an active nuclear-weapons program. And he has created a unique marriage of communism and monarchy, apparently designating his youngest son, now called the "brilliant comrade," to be his successor, just as he succeeded his father, Kim Il-sung. Although evil, he is not suicidal. Kim Jong-il enjoys his virgins in this life rather than desiring them in the next one. Nevertheless, eliminating his regime would be an obvious humanitarian and security plus.

Unfortunately, no easy solution presents itself. Kim's latest confrontational tactics do not prevent a negotiated settlement—U.S. special envoy Stephen Bosworth has emphasized the administration's desire to engage Pyongyang—but the likelihood of diplomacy resulting in a demilitarized peninsula grows ever smaller. Even if the DPRK proves willing to halt any new nuclear activities, it is very unlikely to turn over existing nuclear materials. And while Washington should continue to pursue both bilateral and multilateral negotiations, the process may yield little other than frustration. Tighter sanctions also offer but a forlorn hope. Amid reports that the North is planning a new nuclear test, the UN Security Council voted to tighten sanctions. America's UN ambassador, Susan Rice, said the measure provided a "strong, very credible, very appropriate response." But it in fact offered little in the way of increased enforcement. North Korea already is the world's most isolated state. Moreover, the regime has never let the suffering of its people affect its policies. A government which allowed a half million people to starve is not likely to be moved by increased hardship for those who remain alive.

Only Beijing has the clout necessary to influence the DPRK. The former provides the bulk of the North's food, fuel and consumer goods; trade between the two nations has been rising. Severing that lifeline could bring the North Korean economy to a standstill. However, so far the People's Republic of China (PRC) has demurred. Indeed, before passage of the latest Security Council resolution the PRC called for an "appropriate and balanced" measure and emphasized "calmness and restraint." Even now, China's government appears to fear a North Korean collapse more than a North Korean nuclear weapon.

The last option is war—either a limited strike on Pyongyang's atomic bases or a more general attack. Washington obviously could destroy nuclear facilities above ground and perhaps underground. Whether doing so would permanently block the North's nuclear efforts and eliminate its existing atomic capabilities are less clear.

Moreover, an attack probably would result in war. The Kim regime likely would see a strike as the first step in an attempt at coercive regime change. Moreover, to do nothing would wreck its

credibility at home and stature abroad. While it is not likely to foolishly start a losing war, the DPRK government isn't likely to passively accept a conflict begun by the United States. Although the North would lose any conflict, it could cause massive damage to the South, whose capital, Seoul, lies close to the Demilitarized Zone and thus within range of both artillery and Scud missiles. Other possible consequences include the dispersion of nuclear debris and creation of mass refugee flows.

So is a North Korean nuclear arsenal inevitable? Maybe not. The China card has yet to be played.

Cynicism about Beijing's role in the North Korean crisis abounds. Some analysts believe that the PRC can do little to move Pyongyang, which has steered an independent course for decades. Others accuse China of consciously orchestrating the North's destabilizing course. And the mainstream view is that the PRC is unwilling to risk its relationship with Pyongyang or accept the costs of the regime's potential collapse. Indeed, Beijing has treated North Korean refugees, who face prison and even death when repatriated, with unconscionable brutality.

However, Washington might be able to change China's calculus. It's certainly worth attempting to do so. The PRC could cut off aid and commerce. Beijing also might be able to undertake covert action to transform the North Korean system.

Some analysts would risk the U.S.-China relationship in an attempt to pressure Beijing to pressure the DPRK. For instance, former-Undersecretary of State Robert Joseph advocates imposing unspecified costs on Beijing if it fails to comply. However, much more than just trade is at stake with America's relationship with China. And the PRC is unlikely to bend in response to public pressure.

Beijing's concern over the economic consequences of a North Korean collapse is understandable but should not be conclusive. With a population of more than 1.3 billion people and a GDP of \$4.2 trillion (\$7.8 trillion by purchasing-power parity), the PRC is capable of absorbing all of the North's 23 million people if necessary. But it isn't necessary.

First, the United States should indicate that it is willing to share the cost of caring for any refugees who end up over the border in China (or Chinese humanitarian activities in the North in the aftermath of a collapse). The price would be small compared to the cost of North Korea's current regime. And over the long-term a stable, reform-oriented government in the North or a reunified peninsula would offer Beijing obvious economic benefits. The PRC already trades more with South Korea than does the United States. It likely would enjoy a similar advantage in a more prosperous North Korea.

Second, the Republic of Korea, with a nearly \$900 billion GDP, should join Washington in making such an offer. The cost of German reunification caused Seoul to hope for at least a modest North Korean economic revival before reunification on the peninsula. However, Pyongyang's increasingly provocative behavior suggests that the price of immediate reunification would be smaller than that of a war or arms race.

Third, the United States should enlist Japan, with the world's second largest GDP of \$4.8 trillion, in this effort. Nearly one million ethnic Koreans live in Japan, with the majority hailing from the North. Tokyo could pledge its financial support, as well as indicate its willingness to accept the return of the one hundred thousand ethnic Koreans who emigrated to the DPRK during the 1960s along with their estimated two hundred thousand family members. In return, a new regime in Pyongyang might be more willing to satisfy Japan's demands for an accounting of its citizens kidnapped over the years.

Fourth, the Korean Diaspora could offer its private support. There are more than two million Korean-Americans, more than two hundred thousand ethnic Koreans in both Canada and Russia, about one hundred twenty-five thousand in Australia, and tens of thousands each in countries throughout Asia and Europe. All could assist in the event of a messy end to the Kim regime.

Fifth, the Obama administration should promise the PRC that the United States would not take geopolitical advantage of Chinese intervention. Thus, Korean reunification would not result in

American troops on China's border. Instead, U.S. forces would come home. They aren't needed even today to defend the South. And they certainly wouldn't be required if the DPRK disappeared.

Sixth, Washington should point to the risk of further proliferation throughout East Asia. A nuclear North Korea is more a problem for its neighbors than for America. China should not assume that the United States would or could forever restrain the ROK and Japan from responding in kind if they found themselves facing a hostile, nuclear-armed North. Nor is it in the interest of America to remain in the middle of such an unstable geopolitical mix. In short, Beijing would share the nightmare of a nuclear DPRK.

Finally, the United States, backed by leading Asian and European states, should point out that Chinese leadership in resolving the problem of North Korea would enhance the PRC's international reputation. China has emphasized its determination to "rise" peacefully; there would be no better evidence of its good intentions or leadership potential than helping to rid the world of the brutal, threatening regime in Pyongyang.

Of course, the success of Chinese intervention would not be guaranteed. But all other options have less likelihood of success. Neither banking on the goodwill of Kim Jong-il nor triggering a second Korean War is a hopeful strategy. It's time for the Obama administration to play the China card.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Reagan, he is the author of *Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World* (Cato Institute) and co-author of *The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea* (Palgrave/Macmillan).

### > **Subscribe Now to The National Interest** <

Copyright © 2006 The National Interest All rights reserved. | [Legal Terms](#)  
P: (800) 344-7952, Outside the U.S.: (856) 380-4130 | [backissues@nationalinterest.org](mailto:backissues@nationalinterest.org)  
P.O. Box 9001, Maple Shade, NJ 08052-9662

The National Interest is published by The Nixon Center

The Nixon Center  
1615 L Street, Suite 1250  
Washington, DC 20036  
[www.nixoncenter.org](http://www.nixoncenter.org)