

Lessons for Washington: China Won't Work Against Itself in Korea

By: Doug Bandow – April 23, 2013

The American policymaking community overwhelmingly believes that China holds the key to stability and peace on the Korean peninsula. If only the People's Republic of China desired, the Pyongyang problem would disappear. Indeed, Secretary of State John Kerry recently traveled to Beijing to press China to act against the latter's ally.

There is a risk of overstating the PRC's influence. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has ruthlessly guarded its independence. Pyongyang even downplayed China's role after the latter preserved the regime during the Korean War. The DPRK might choose to stand-alone against the entire world, including its erstwhile ally, if need be. And the Kim family dynasty might survive, even at great cost to the North Korean people.

Nevertheless, if any country has influence, it is China. Beijing provides substantial quantities of energy and food, invests heavily in the DPRK, and shields the North from the worst effects of UN sanctions. Withdrawing its favor, and using any intelligence and military influence to encourage internal regime change, could create a more pliant North Korea.

Moreover, now is the moment when the PRC might choose to act. China wants stability, which obviously is not promoted by the North threatening to rain nuclear weapons down upon South Korea, Japan, and America. Although one might dismiss such rhetorical bombast, three years ago the DPRK sank a South Korean warship and bombarded a South Korean island. Should Pyongyang take similar action today, few believe that the Republic of Korea would remain supine as before. Conflict could flare, which might draw America into a major war on the PRC's border.

Moreover, North Korea has ostentatiously treated its sole ally with disrespect, even contempt. The DPRK has ignored every recommendation from Beijing in shooting off missiles, testing nuclear weapons, and creating general discord. With friends like this, the residents of Zhongnanhai might prefer dealing with enemies!

Beijing clearly is upset. The Chinese government has verbally called the DPRK to account. A debate over policy toward North Korea has broken out among academics and popular sentiment, to the extent that it can be measured, has turned against Pyongyang.

However, so far PRC policy has not changed. The North remains on Chinese life support. No one in Pyongyang, especially the rotund "Cute Leader" and his attractive wife, seems to be going without.

Beijing's reluctance to act is understandable. Squeezing North Korea would be risky. Increased hardship could spur greater refugee flows across the Yalu. Serious divisions within the North Korean elite could lead to a political breakdown and even violent conflict.

Moreover, so far there is no evidence that the U.S. and its allies have done much to assuage Beijing's concerns. What would America, South Korea, and Japan do if two million North Koreans decided to join their fellow ethnic Koreans in China's border provinces? Beijing can be forgiven for seeing this possibility as more than a minor inconvenience.

Worse, though, is Washington's failure to recognize how its larger Asia policy undercuts cooperation with Beijing against the DPRK. The Obama administration has dramatized its "pivot" to Asia, which means more bases and troops, tighter alliances and greater cooperation. All targeting the PRC.

Of course, the administration denies any such thing, but you don't get to live in Zhongnanhai if you are stupid. Countries like Australia, Japan, and the Philippines are looking to Washington because they increasingly fear China. Their concerns might be overstated, though Beijing's elbows have gotten sharper in recent months. America is doing more in East Asia in response to China. And Beijing knows that.

U.S. troops in the ROK are an important part of Washington's strategy. Although originally stationed there to defend the South, they no longer serve any useful role in that regard. South Korea possesses 40 times the GDP and twice the population of the DPRK. Seoul can defend itself. The uniform response of American government officials and defense analysts is that the forces also are useful for contingencies elsewhere in Asia.

That may be an unrealistic expectation. South Korea would not likely allow Washington to embroil Seoul in someone else's conflict. Moreover, it's hard to imagine where an infantry division would be useful: it would be madness for the U.S. to fight a ground war against China while most of the region's other trouble spots involve internal problems not susceptible to solution through outside intervention.

Nevertheless, Washington assumes "dual use" for its Korean garrison. The PRC is the prime secondary target. And Beijing knows that.

Yet American officials are simultaneously urging China to adopt a policy that could speed up the peninsula's reunification. Which would result in a united Korea, allied with America, hosting U.S. troops, perhaps along the PRC's border. No outcome is less likely to find favor in Beijing, especially among military leaders. President Xi Jinping isn't likely to begin his term by sacrificing his political capital and nationalist credibility to overturn traditional Chinese security policy, challenge longstanding military concerns, and yield to Washington's demands.

Which means the U.S. needs to make a choice. Is it more important to defang North Korea? Or lead a coalition to contain China? Both objectives might be beyond reach. Pyongyang might survive even a Chinese aid cut-off. Other nations might refuse

to confront the PRC. But attempting to simultaneously pursue both objectives almost certainly ensures that neither effort will succeed.

Since Beijing's strategy is essentially defensive vis-à-vis America—to prevent the U.S. from coercing China in its own neighborhood—containment is a counterproductive answer to the wrong question. The countries that should do any constraining if not containing are the PRC's neighbors. Washington should not confront a nuclear-armed power in attempt to maintain military superiority along China's border, a policy which would be an obvious recipe for conflict if Beijing attempted to do the same along America's border.

If the U.S. government abandoned that objective, then it could turn its Korea deployment into a bargaining chip. If Beijing aided the allies and the result was reunification, the troops would go home. Indeed, the best way to make the PRC believe that Washington's regional intentions are honorable (from China's perspective) is to bring U.S. forces home now. Doing so would suggest a political and economic rather than military "pivot." Moreover, Beijing is more likely to believe that a South Korea without U.S. forces would turn into a united Korea without U.S. forces.

There are other issues, such as burden-sharing for North Korean refugees. However, security concerns likely are paramount in Zhongnanhai. An American army division on China's border seems minor compared to the threat posed by ICBMs, SLBMs, strategic bombers, and carrier groups. Nevertheless, such a deployment would have important symbolic importance, especially in a country that spent nearly three years fighting to keep U.S. forces away from the Yalu. If Washington policymakers genuinely believe China holds the key to Pyongyang, then they should act accordingly.

North Korea may be the world's most troubled and troublesome state. The PRC may offer the best solution to the persistent crises surrounding the North. However, Beijing will act only if it believes doing so is in China's interest. Washington has more persuading to do.