

North Korea Tops Kerry's Asia Agenda

By: Scott Stearns – April 3, 2013

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry travels to Asia next week for talks on how best to deal with an increasingly aggressive North Korea. China once again has a central role in approaching the reclusive state.

For all of what he calls North Korea's "dangerous and reckless" threats, Kerry said Pyongyang can still negotiate its way out of international isolation over its nuclear program.

"They can come back to the table and join all of those other countries, including their nearest neighbor and partner China. Obviously they share nearest-neighbor [status] with the Republic of Korea, but China which has such an important role to play and which has always maintained a closer relationship to the North than any other country," he said.

It is that relationship that has long made China key to U.S. efforts to end North Korea's nuclear threat, and will once again dominate Kerry's agenda in Beijing, said Doug Paal, director of the Asia program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"The United States would hope that China would do a lot of things to restrain the flow of energy and food to North Korea to get their attention," he said. "Hold back on new investment in various businesses in North Korea. Those all run against China's primary interest in North Korea, which is to provide for stability there. So we have a very fundamental difference."

A difference that Paal said is being debated in China like never before, including by senior army officers and by some in the new government. Among them is incoming Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who guided Chinese diplomacy at the six-party talks with North Korea, South Korea, Russia, Japan and the United States.

"So we've got a competent, knowledgeable guy who, I can tell you, in private is prepared to say some tough things about North Korea that others in the Chinese government don't like to say," Paal said.

Cato Institute analyst Justin Logan said Beijing's reluctance is based in part on Chinese concerns about U.S. gains on an ultimately reunified Korean peninsula.

"The Chinese don't say this publicly a lot, but they're very, very concerned about the prospect of a unified Korea with American military garrisons on their border," he said. "That is a military problem that the Chinese think is important."

So far, China appears to share U.S. concerns about the belligerence of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, by backing tougher United Nations sanctions and by calling for more talks to resolve the standoff.

Jim Schoff is a former U.S. Defense Department official for Asia who is now a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment. He said the United States, China and South Korea could propose general-officer talks to reinstate an armistice from which North Korea just withdrew as a way of showing their wish to de-escalate the crisis.

"Seoul is trying to improve its relationship with China as well. Some in the region have been concerned that South Korea is going to turn away from the United States and Japan and turn toward China. Well, that's not such a bad thing if that relationship improves," he said.

Schoff said there is considerable economic gain for China in a more prosperous North Korea.

"They are really just a blight or a ghetto sitting amidst an incredibly wealthy and productive part of the world," he added. "The potential, if you create that land bridge between the mainland and a dynamic South Korea and linked to Japan and other countries the economic potential in that region for China's northeast and for Russia's far east, is tremendous."

Schoff said that is an opportunity for U.S. diplomacy.

"What is the potential, down the line, for thinking differently about the geopolitics of that region? A very difficult conversation for China to have, but perhaps getting easier as the years go by," he said.

In addition to Beijing, Kerry will also visit Seoul and Tokyo on next week's trip. Before traveling to Asia, he will visit Turkey, Israel, the Palestinian territory and London.