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China Benefits From North Korea's Crazy Blustering

By: Justin Logan – April 21, 2013

Sen. Bob Corker is puzzled that Beijing has not done more to pressure North Korea to denuclearize, suggesting that the Chinese should fear nuclear proliferation to Japan or South Korea if Pyongyang's provocations go unanswered ("Does China Really Want a Nuclear Japan and South Korea?" op-ed, April 16). Yet he shows why China has have no reason to worry, especially compared with the prospect of a North Korean collapse.

According to Mr. Corker, doubts about U.S. security guarantees are causing Tokyo and Seoul to consider nuclear weapons programs. There is no evidence that either capital is seriously considering a nuclear weapons program. Further, both states enjoy formal security guarantees from Washington that the Obama administration has re-emphasized as part of the "pivot." Mr. Corker's preferred policy—an even "deeper and more visible [U.S.] military presence in the region"—will shrink the already minute prospect of proliferation to either country. Accordingly, the Chinese are unlikely to push Pyongyang hard enough because of the risks involved. A North Korean collapse, which would be more likely than a nuclear Japan or South Korea, raises the likelihood of chaos, loose nuclear materials and refugee flows in the short run, and a unified Korea with U.S. troops on the Chinese border in the long run. Beijing understandably views either prospect as more dangerous than the extremely unlikely proliferation scenario Mr. Corker raises.

The Chinese understand that nuclear dominoes are not about to start falling when Washington is spending more of its own resources on the defense of South Korea and Japan. They also understand the extraordinary dangers in pushing North Korea to the brink of collapse. As long as Washington reassures its clients in the region, the Chinese will be right to shrug off the threat of a nuclear Japan or South Korea as fanciful.

Justin Logan

Cato Institute

Washington