

# BEFORE IT'S NEWS

## A Strategy for Achieving US, Chinese, and Russian Cooperation on North Korea

By Ted Galen Carpenter

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Although the Obama administration took bold steps toward developing a constructive relationship with America's long-standing Cuban adversary, no similar new thinking is evident regarding U.S. policy toward North Korea. Indeed, at the same time that Washington pursued its conciliatory Cuba initiative, the administration imposed additional economic sanctions on Pyongyang—ostensibly because U.S. officials believed that North Korean operatives were responsible for the cyber-hacking incident directed against Sony Pictures. The latest punitive measures continue a strategy that American administrations have pursued with respect to North Korea for decades—a strategy that has failed miserably.

An entirely new approach is needed. Instead of trying to increase pressure, especially unilateral pressure, on Pyongyang, Washington should make a concerted effort to reduce tensions with Kim Jong-un's regime. The Obama administration also should endeavor to create a united front with China and Russia regarding policy toward North Korea. Taking such steps, however, would require a willingness on Washington's part to make major concessions.

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Along with North Korea's other neighbors, both Beijing and Moscow have reason to be uneasy about Pyongyang's growing record of disruptive actions. In recent years, that worrisome behavior has included the sinking of the South Korean naval vessel Cheonan, the shelling of a South Korean island, and various nuclear and ballistic missile tests. Indeed, rumors currently swirl that Kim's regime may be planning to conduct yet another nuclear test, despite warnings from China and other countries not to engage in such a provocation.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has repeatedly signaled his dissatisfaction with Pyongyang's behavior and has taken steps to strengthen Beijing's economic and political relations with South Korea. In turn, Kim's government has moved to reduce its dependence on China, especially its extensive dependence regarding food and energy supplies. As part of the effort to limit its reliance on Beijing, North Korea also has sought to repair ties with Moscow that had been fraying since the demise of the Soviet Union.

But while the Chinese and Russian governments may be unhappy about Pyongyang's tendency to create regional crises, they are not about to sign on to Washington's hard-line policies. Beijing, in particular, has long urged the United States to develop a more normal relationship

with North Korea. It is wise advice. U.S. officials should propose a high-level dialogue with Pyongyang aimed at achieving several objectives. One would be to formally end the state of war on the Korean Peninsula by replacing the 1953 armistice with a peace treaty. Another would be to establish full diplomatic relations between the United States and North Korea. A third goal should be to rescind most of the unilateral economic sanctions that Washington has imposed and to signal U.S. support for lifting a majority of the international sanctions against Pyongyang. In return, Washington would be justified in insisting that North Korea not only refrain from conducting nuclear and long-range ballistic missile tests but also pull its conventional military forces back from their current menacing positions near the so-called Demilitarized Zone with South Korea.

China and Russia would be more willing to prod North Korea to refrain from provocative conduct if Washington embraced such a new, conciliatory approach. But the Obama administration would need to take other actions as well. Beijing and Moscow are understandably reluctant to cooperate with the United States regarding North Korea when the Obama administration continues to adopt measures that are hostile to Chinese and Russian interests on other issues. U.S. officials are unrealistic to expect Beijing to be helpful with respect to North Korea when Washington unsubtly backs Vietnam, the Philippines, and other parties regarding their territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. It is even more unrealistic to expect such help when the United States blatantly supports Japan in its feud with China over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea.

But the insensitivity of Washington's stance toward Beijing pales in comparison to its policy toward Moscow. Any hope for gaining Vladimir Putin's help to rein-in Pyongyang is almost certainly doomed when the Obama administration continues to adopt ever-escalating sanctions against Russia because of the controversies over Crimea and eastern Ukraine. North Korea's disruptive behavior may be an annoyance, but it hardly poses a major problem for Russia. If the United States wants meaningful assistance from Moscow on the issue of North Korea, Washington must improve its overall bilateral relationship with Russia. That means lifting the punitive measures and abandoning any notion of including Ukraine, Georgia, or other countries on Russia's border as members of NATO.

The opportunity exists for creating a united U.S., Chinese, and Russian policy front to ease the tense situation on the Korean Peninsula. But seizing that opportunity requires an entirely new U.S. policy toward Pyongyang. Equally important, it requires Washington to reconsider its abrasive policies toward Beijing and Moscow on an assortment of other issues. The Obama administration needs to show the same type of refreshing new thinking that it has displayed regarding Cuba.

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