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False Hopes

by Ted Galen Carpenter

03.11.2010

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American leaders have experienced repeated frustration in their efforts to enlist China in the campaign to impose robust economic penalties against the newest nuclear proliferators: North Korea and Iran. In the various rounds of multilateral sanctions adopted by the UN Security Council, Beijing has sought to delay such measures and weaken their provisions. Chinese officials also have complained loudly about unilateral U.S. measures—so much so that the Obama administration has reportedly sought to carve out “exceptions” for Chinese firms with respect to legislation now pending in Congress that would tighten sanctions on companies doing business with Iran.

Washington’s patience at what American officials regard as obstructionism is fraying, though, and the differing agendas threaten to exacerbate tensions that are already at a high level because of the recent U.S. arms sale to Taiwan and other disputes. The Obama administration is clearly trying to prod China to be more cooperative on the sanctions issue—especially with respect to Iran. During his summit meeting in Beijing in November 2009, President Obama reportedly warned Chinese President Hu Jintao that if China continued to block meaningful sanctions against that country, Israel might ignite a crisis by taking military action to damage Tehran’s nuclear program.

For a few weeks, the Chinese government seemed more receptive to having the UN impose a new round of penalties. But that momentary flirtation with a more hard-line policy has receded. And there is no apparent willingness at all in Beijing to consider strengthening the rather modest sanctions in place against North Korea.

Americans are increasingly irritated and perplexed at Beijing’s posture regarding the nuclear proliferation problem. China would seem to have ample reasons to want to prevent Iran and North Korea (especially the latter) from acquiring nuclear weapons. China ought to worry about North Korea building an arsenal on its doorstep and perhaps triggering a nuclear-arms race in Northeast Asia. That is especially true since a nuclear North Korea would create an incentive for China’s long-time rival, Japan, to build a deterrent in response.

So why has Beijing been so reluctant to see strong sanctions imposed on the two proliferators?

The reasons are most apparent and understandable regarding North

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Korea. Although maintaining the nonnuclear status quo on the Korean Peninsula may be a significant Chinese objective, it is not the most important one. Beijing's top priority is to preserve the North Korean state as a buffer between China and the U.S. sphere of influence in Northeast Asia.

As Pyongyang's economy languishes, China worries that the North Korean regime might implode, much as East German system did in 1989. Such a development would lead to the sudden emergence on China's border of a unified Korea allied to the United States, probably with the continued presence of U.S. military bases. North Korea's collapse would also likely create a massive flow of refugees into China.

The overriding objective of keeping North Korea as a viable country places a distinct limit on the amount of pressure that Beijing is willing to exert on Pyongyang. In theory, China could use its economic leverage as North Korea's principal source of energy, food and other vital commodities to compel Kim Jong-Il's regime to put its nuclear weapons program back into the deep freeze. In reality, though, Beijing fears the possible consequences of using that leverage.

China's reluctance to pressure Iran is a little more difficult to explain. But a key reason is that Beijing has cultivated close ties with Tehran, and regards Iran as an important supplier of China's rapidly growing appetite for oil. Since any nuclear problems that Iran might pose are far away from the Chinese homeland--and would be directed at the United States and its allies, in any case--Chinese leaders see little upside and considerable downside to joining in a coercive sanctions regime against Tehran.

Finally, the Chinese government is wary of the precedent that a system of robust sanctions against either Iran or North Korea might set. Indeed, Chinese policy makers are hyper-vigilant about the possible implications of international precedents on nearly any issue.

That is why Beijing was unenthusiastic, for example, about calls for a UN Security Council endorsement for the NATO wars in the Balkans during the 1990s, or the subsequent decision to grant Kosovo independence from Serbia. Chinese officials were worried that any precedent set along those lines might someday be used regarding Taiwan--or even China's restless regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. Likewise, Beijing was nervous about the justifications used for the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, and the precedent that war could set.

In the case of economic sanctions, Beijing worries that critics of China's international behavior could someday use similar measures against Chinese firms. That worry may be exaggerated--or even entirely misplaced--but it doesn't make the concern any less real to Chinese officials who believe that some Western political factions seek any excuse to curb the country's growing political and economic power.

Any one of those factors would probably be enough to cause China to balk at calls for more robust sanctions against Iran and North Korea. The combination of them makes it virtually certain that U.S. officials will continue being disappointed in their hopes for greater cooperation from Beijing on the twin nuclear crises. Chinese leaders will not engage in outright defiance, since that would risk damaging their country's crucial relationship with the United States. But we can anticipate continued foot-dragging on sanctions, combined with a concerted effort to dilute any additional measures that might ultimately be imposed.

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