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China, Russia Dragging Feet On Nuclear Issues

BY TED GALEN CARPENTER
SUNDAY, MARCH 28, 2010

U.S. leaders have experienced repeated frustration in their efforts to enlist China and Russia in the campaign to impose robust economic sanctions against the newest nuclear proliferators: North Korea and Iran.

In the various rounds of multilateral sanctions that the U.N. Security Council has adopted, Beijing and Moscow have delayed such measures and diluted their provisions.

Washington's patience at what American officials regard as obstructionism is fraying, and the starkly differing agendas threaten to exacerbate tensions with both countries. During his summit meeting in Beijing in November, President Obama reportedly warned Chinese President Hu Jintao that if China continued to block meaningful sanctions against Iran, 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 U.N. impose a new round of penalties — and significantly stronger 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.

The Obama administration has been only a little more successful in enlisting Moscow's support for trying to prevent North Korea and Iran from barging into the global nuclear weapons club. Although Washington has sought Russia's help on the North Korean issue, the U.S. priority has been to obtain that country's support for pressuring Tehran. Getting the Kremlin on board for a stronger policy was a key motive behind Obama's willingness to scale back the Bush administration's proposed missile defense system in Central Europe, which had been a major irritant to Russian leaders. And for a time, that concession appeared to achieve positive results.

Moscow's rhetoric regarding Tehran's behavior underscored a growing impatience with the clerical

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regime, and there were hints of a willingness to consider much harsher sanctions. But as in the case of China, Russia has largely drifted back toward its previous position that highly punitive sanctions are counterproductive, and that the United States and the rest of the international community should make a more serious commitment to diplomacy to resolve the impasse with both North Korea and Iran regarding the nuclear issue.

Americans are increasingly irritated and perplexed at the positions that Beijing and Moscow have embraced. Both countries have ample motives to prevent Iran and North Korea from building nuclear arsenals. Iran shares a long border, and North Korea a short one, with Russia. It would seem to be in Russia's own security interest to dissuade those countries from their current paths. Likewise, 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 have Beijing and Moscow been so reluctant to see strong sanctions imposed on the two proliferators? The reasons are most apparent regarding China's position toward North Korea. Although maintaining the non-nuclear 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 North Korea's economy has languished in recent years, China has worried that the North Korean regime might implode, much as the 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. A North Korean implosion would also likely create a massive flow of refugees into China.

The overriding objective of maintaining a viable North Korean state 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.

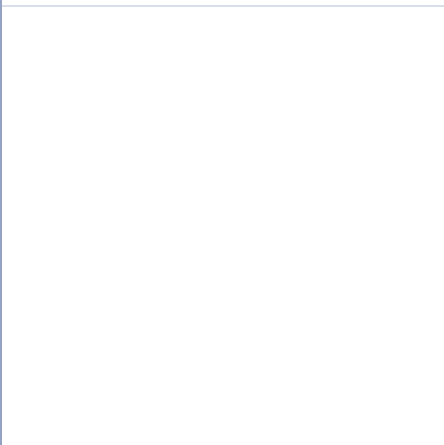
China's reluctance to pressure Iran is a little more difficult to explain. But a key reason is that Beijing has cultivated close ties with Tehran, and regards Iran as a crucial supplier of China's rapidly growing appetite for oil. Since any nuclear problems that Iran might pose are far away from the Chinese homeland — and would be directed against 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.

Economic motives also play a role — and in the case of Iran, a big role — in Moscow's reluctance. Russian firms have been heavily involved in helping to build Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and those contracts have generated income in the billions of dollars. Likewise, Iran is a major arms purchaser from Russia, including missiles and radar for the country's air defense system. Russian leaders are under considerable pressure from powerful domestic economic and bureaucratic constituencies not to antagonize such a lucrative customer.

Those factors suggest that U.S. officials are likely to continue being disappointed in their hopes for more cooperation from Beijing and Moscow on the twin nuclear crises.

Chinese and Russian leaders will not engage in outright defiance, since that would risk damaging their countries' important relationships 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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