

Persuading China to cooperate against the North

Doug Bandow
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WASHINGTON – Another North Korean nuclear test, another round of demands that China bring Pyongyang to heel. Said U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry: Beijing’s policy “has not worked and we cannot continue business as usual.” Alas, his approach will encourage China to dismiss Washington’s wishes.

North Korea may be the most vexing problem for the United States and its allies. Three successive U.S. presidents have insisted that the North simply cannot, must not, develop nuclear weapons. Yet it has. So attention naturally shifts toward China, which joined Washington in criticizing the latest blast. China is the North’s most important investor and provides it with substantial energy and food assistance. Beijing also has protected North Korea by weakening past U.N. sanctions and enforcing those imposed with less than due diligence. If only China would get tough, runs the argument, Pyongyang would have to give way.

Alas, Chinese intervention is not the panacea many appear to believe. Contrary to common belief in Washington, the U.S. cannot dictate to China. Threats are only likely to make the Chinese leadership more recalcitrant.

In fact, Beijing’s reluctance to wreck the North Korean state is understandable. If the administration wants to enlist China’s aid, it must convince Beijing that acting is in China’s, not America’s, best interest.

That requires addressing China’s concerns. While unpredictable, obstinate, and irritating, so far North Korea is not a major problem for China. Economic cooperation remains profitable.

The North disrupts American regional dominance and forces Seoul and Washington to beg Beijing for assistance in dealing with North Korea. Even Pyongyang’s growing nuclear arsenal poses no obvious threat to China.

Why, then, should China sacrifice its political influence and economic interests? A Chinese cut-off of energy and food would cause great hardship in the North. But a half million or more people died of starvation during the late 1990s without any change in North Korean policy. Thus, Pyongyang may refuse to bend. The result might be a return to the 1990s, with a horrific collapse in living conditions but regime survival—and continued development of nuclear weapons.

Even worse, from Beijing’s standpoint, Russia, which recently revived its relationship with Pyongyang, might save North Korea. In either case, China would have compromised its position for nothing.

Or the North Korean regime might collapse, with the possibility of violent conflict, social chaos, loose nukes and mass refugee flows. China might feel forced to intervene militarily to stabilize the North.

Moreover, in a united Republic of Korea, China's political influence would ebb. Chinese business investments would be swept away. Worse, a reunited Korea allied with America would put U.S. troops on China's border and aid Washington's ill-disguised attempt at military containment.

Overall, then, sanctioning the North appears to create enormous benefits for Beijing's rivals but few advantages for China.

Washington, Seoul and Tokyo must make a compelling case to China. They should begin by pointing out how unstable the current situation is, with an unpredictable, uncontrollable regime dedicated to creating a nuclear arsenal of undetermined size. Much could go wrong — to China's detriment.

At the same time, the U.S. and South Korea, along with Japan, should put together a serious offer for the North in return for denuclearization. China has repeatedly insisted that America's hostile policy underlies the North Korean nuclear program. Beijing responded acerbically to Washington's latest criticism: "The key to solving the problem is not China."

The three allied countries should offer a peace treaty, diplomatic recognition, membership in international organizations, the end of economic sanctions, foreign aid, suspension of joint military exercises and discussions over ending America's troop presence. This should be presented to China with a request for the latter's backing.

At the same time, the U.S., South Korea and Japan should promise to share the cost of caring for North Koreans and restoring order in the case of regime collapse. The U.S. and South should indicate their willingness to accept temporary Chinese military intervention in the event of bloody chaos.

Seoul should promise to respect Beijing's economic interests while pointing to the far greater opportunities that would exist in a unified Korea. Finally, Washington should pledge to withdraw U.S. troops in the event of unification.

Getting Beijing's cooperation still would be a long-shot. But the effort is worth a try. The U.S., South Korea and Japan have run out of options to forestall a nuclear North Korea.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World" and co-author of "The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea," among other books.

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