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Issue Brief

What Role Can China Play in Cooling the Burning Korean Issue?

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April 28, 2017

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The world is looking at the volatile Korean peninsula with apprehension as the tension escalates, with a looming threat of a war that could turn into world war 3. In what seems like a death call, the North Korean President Kim Jung-un has been very clear in his stance that North Korea would not shy away from use of nuclear weapons if needed. The future seems fearful as threat of nuclear war surrounds the air, at one side one has Mr. Kim, and on the other there is Mr. Trump, both have eccentric personalities. This makes Chinese President Xi Jinping an integral figure in mellowing down tensions. For one, he is a man with stable nature and most importantly, China has historically enjoyed good relations with Pyongyang, thus having power to control the fire that is burning in the Korean peninsula.

China is North Korea's most important ally, biggest trading partner, its main source of food and energy, and accounts for 90 per cent of North Korea's total trade volume. It has helped sustain Kim Jung-un's regime, and has historically opposed harsh international sanctions on North Korea.¹ China's support for North Korea dates back to the Korean War (1950–1953), when its troops flooded the Korean Peninsula to aid its northern ally. On the other hand, North Korea provides strategic support to China in East Asia, as this region is surrounded with American allies in shape of Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea.

China can play a decisive role in melting of hearts not by sanctions and threats, but by diplomacy and cooperation with North Korea. When you have Mr. Kim and Mr. Trump at loggerheads, it is imperative that someone play a role of good cop to control the situation rather than fueling the fire with more aggression. Chinese President Xi Jinping maintains a calm personality trait. Jonathan Fenby wrote in *The Guardian*, "Xi has a reputation as a conciliator, a man who gets on with those around him."² His traits of being composed and good mediator are what the world needs right now to solve this ongoing tension. This would further amplify China's recent drive for global presence and its position of peaceful rise.

Furthermore, China and US cooperation is also crucial to resolving the issue. Bilateral and multilateral dialogue should be held to ease the tension, and also, China and America need to prevent North Korea from playing them against each other, signifying that there isn't "any gap, any room" between them

¹ <http://www.cfr.org/china/chinanorth-korea-relationship/p11097>

² <http://factsanddetails.com/china/cat2/4sub5/entry-4302.html#chapter-3>

which would allow Pyongyang to manipulate.³ Beijing's and Washington's convergence on the Korean issue has increased since the Xi-Trump summit in April 2017. Moreover, on April 23, Mr. Trump and Mr. Xi spoke on phone for the second time in which President Xi Jinping convinced President Trump to restrain for any aggressive action that could further intensify the threat of war and Mr. Trump has urged Mr. Xi to do more.⁴ Russian leadership should also be involved in the dialogue and diplomacy for a peaceful solution to the Korean problem. It can be seen that China is making an effort to follow the course of dialogue and diplomacy to de-escalate the concerns in order to bring calm to the ongoing turmoil, and there is urgency in Chinese leadership to resolve the current crisis.

If things don't work out by diplomatic and peaceful means, then China has to mould itself to a harder stance, that is by imposing sanctions as China is responsible for 80% of Pyongyang's foreign trade,⁵ giving China a huge leverage over North Korea as it is clear that China is an economic lifeline of North Korea. In order to maintain peace and harmony, China would have to take hard measures like these to control the boiling Korean peninsula. Curbing out trade benefits to Korea would eventually turn into a crippling economy, thus this threat could also lead to calming of the air. However, Xi Jinping needs to play his cards very carefully because China would not want to have an enemy in shape of North Korea.

The world is already troubled enough and it does not want another war that involves eccentric leaderships and nuclear weapons. China is the best hope for solving this looming threat and should take imperative steps to cool the burning fire.

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/doug-bandow/cooperating-with-china-to_b_8075256.html

⁴ <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-04-24/trump-speaks-to-abe-xi-on-north-korea-amid-u-s-japan-drills>

⁵ <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/17/politics/trump-north-korea-china-policy/>