



THE NEW COLD WAR IN ASIA?

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The most likely crisis that the next presidents of the United States, China, and South Korea will encounter at some point after they each take office in 2012 will be North Korean instability. This could occur as a result of the death of the ailing leader Kim Jong-il and a failed succession attempt by his not yet 30-year-old son. Or, instability could result from continued North Korean belligerence that escalates out of control.

The key to averting such a crisis is better cooperation among the key players on the peninsula—Washington, Seoul, and Beijing. This cooperation may not be forthcoming, however, if one considers the pattern of China's performance in response to the North Korean provocations in 2009 and

2010—including a second nuclear test, the torpedoing of the South Korean naval vessel *Cheonan*, the artillery shelling of a South Korean island, and revelations regarding a second uranium-based nuclear program.

Why? Since normalization of relations with South Korea in 1992, Beijing has tried to maintain an equidistant policy between the two Koreas. What happens in one bilateral relationship is completely separate, in Beijing's eyes, from what happens in the other. Beijing keeps its time-honored communist alliance with a struggling North Korean regime, while it also signs contracts with Pyongyang that extract raw materials, including rare earth minerals, out of the North for consumption by China's poor northeastern provinces. South of the 38th parallel, Beijing engages in a burgeoning economic relationship with Seoul, now the 11th largest economy in the world. Annual business with the South is 100 times that with the North (US\$180 billion vs. US\$1.8 billion).

This equidistant policy worked so long as Seoul could countenance it and as long as Pyongyang did nothing egregious enough to force China's hand. Even when the North carried out a nuclear test in 2006, China escaped pressure because half of the blame lay with a then-recalcitrant Bush ad-

ministration that refused dialogue with the North. The North Korean provocations of 2009–2010, however, have forced China to choose. And thus far, Beijing has made all the wrong choices, creating conditions for a new Cold War in Asia.

China remains mired in anachronistic thinking. In the name of communist brotherhood, Beijing has basically acted like North Korea's defense lawyer in the court of public opinion. It still has not condemned the most blatant acts of North Korean military aggression since the Korean War. And it refuses to work with the United States and United Nations to condemn North Korea's uranium-based nuclear program.

This communist allegiance is ironic because it was once the Chinese who accused the United States

and its allies South Korea and Japan of hanging on to "dinosaur-era" Cold War era alliances.

China has allowed its domestic needs to impede its grand strategy. For the past 15 years, China has pursued a somewhat successful charm offensive in Asia, but its protective treatment of North Korea has only added to the chorus of concerns among the South Koreans, Japanese, and Southeast Asians that a rising China may not be a benevolent hegemon in Asia. China supports Kim Jong-il's attempt to transfer power to his

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young son, Kim Jong-eun, because it sees a unified Korea, allied with the United States and Japan, as inimical to Chinese interests. Moreover, maintaining near-term stability is important for Beijing such that it can continue its predatory economic policies of draining the North of resources to feed the revitalization of the landlocked northeastern provinces Liaoning and Jilin.

Chinese in the know whisper that they understand the gravity of North Korean bellicosity, but admit that the paramount goal is to maintain stability on the peninsula. A weak Chinese response, however, only encourages a desperate North Korean leader to rattle the peace in order to extort benefits from others, to credential the young son with military accomplishments, and to develop further nuclear weapons capabilities. This sort of short-sighted behavior raises real questions about China's purported role as a rising new leader in Asia. Leaders contribute to the public good of peace and stability. They do not detract from it by sitting on the sidelines.

Beijing could register its displeasure with Pyongyang through dialing down significantly the assistance that passes through unseen by vibrant party and military channels. Working through these channels can inflict real pain on Pyongyang such that Kim will not contemplate more acts of aggression, but can also save the Chinese some face by not looking as though Beijing has been strong-armed by the Americans and South Koreans.

Most important, the United States, South Korea, and China would be well-served by quiet discussions about how to respond to instability in North Korea. It is a contingency that Asia is least prepared for, yet it is the most likely contingency especially when stroke-stricken Kim Jong-il, now 68 years old, passes away. No one can predict when this will happen, but there is a better than 50-percent chance that Kim could depart from the scene before the next American president leaves office.

Washington and Seoul understand the situation and have engaged in bilateral preparations, but Beijing remains reluctant. It would seem to make good sense to start working with the United States and ROK today if China wants to ensure its place on the peninsula tomorrow. ■