

The Illogic of China's North Korea Policy

by Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman

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BEIJING: Discussions in Beijing about North Korea are always frustrating. It's not so much due to the sharp divergence in US and Chinese thinking about how to deal with Pyongyang; the two sides differ on many issues. No, the real problem is the illogic of the Chinese position – at least from a US perspective. Indeed, it would be hard to create a policy toward North Korea that does more damage to Chinese national interests than Beijing's current approach toward Pyongyang.

The standard explanation for Chinese policy goes like this: while denuclearization is desired, stability comes first. There is little chance that North Korea can be persuaded to give up its weapons – at least for a long time – as its arsenal is seen as a form of legitimacy and a deterrent to regime change. Moreover, Beijing has limited influence in Pyongyang and North Korea's real aim is a relationship with the US, hopefully one that sidelines Seoul as well. This logic produces a policy of minimal pressure on Pyongyang, calls for good behavior by all parties, demands that the US soften its position and be more accommodative, and the fending off of demands for Beijing to do more to bring Pyongyang around.

Recent discussions in Beijing made plain the ways that this policy undermines Chinese interests.

China enables Pyongyang's misbehavior. When dealing with North Korea, China walks softly and has discarded the stick. Whether motivated by ties once as close as “lips and teeth,” the desire to maintain whatever leverage China has in Pyongyang, or the fear that pressure might destabilize the North or prompt it to act out, Beijing refuses to crack down on North Korean misdeeds. Instead, it offers diplomatic cover and minimizes any punishment that might be agreed upon by the international community. For example, while Beijing quickly agreed to a UNSC Presidential Statement condemning the North's recent missile launch, it quickly whittled down the list of North Korean companies to be sanctioned from the 40 proposed by the US, EU, and others, to three. The result is a feeling of impunity in Pyongyang that leads to precisely the destabilizing behavior that Beijing says it fears. It has also bought China precious little goodwill in the North; Beijing is insistent on the need to give “face” to Pyongyang; with its antics, Pyongyang shows little regard for China's “face.”

China antagonizes its neighbors. The readiness to back Pyongyang infuriates South Koreans. Beijing's fear of offending North Korea by even expressing condolences for the deaths of ROK citizens after the sinking of the Cheonan and

the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island has hardened South Korean feelings toward China. Nearly 92 percent of South Koreans were dissatisfied with Beijing's response to the shelling incident and more than 58 percent wanted Seoul to strongly protest, even if it meant damaging the economic relationship with China. More than 60 percent now consider China the biggest threat after reunification, almost three times as many as identified Japan. South Koreans are visibly offended by Beijing's call for “all parties” to act responsibly when it is North Korea that is the offender – and taking South Korean lives in the process. In informal trilateral discussions in Beijing last week, South Korean frustration was palpable. We have long heard similar views from Japanese.

China contributes to the strengthening of the US alliance system that it considers a tool of encirclement. Pyongyang's provocations, combined with China's refusal to do more to stop them, has driven Seoul and Tokyo to consolidate military relations with the US. Eager to strengthen the deterrent, US alliances in Northeast Asia are being modernized and reinforced, amid calls for enhancing US extended deterrence. Some in Seoul (and even more foolishly in the US Congress) are even calling for a redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula. Their common concern regarding the North is such that South Korea and Japan are even stepping up bilateral coordination among themselves, a long-sought US goal, but one that has been hindered by historical animosity between Seoul and Tokyo.

China tarnishes its image as a supporter of international law and norms and undermines those norms. International law is hollow if it has “no teeth.” The protection afforded Pyongyang and the refusal to see that UN sanctions have consequences undermines attempts to stop DPRK misbehavior, encourages other governments to act in similar ways, and makes a mockery of international laws and institutions. Countries that would prefer to rely on international law instead develop ad hoc mechanisms to prevent illegal behavior. Beijing is seen as supporting international norms, principles, and laws that are ineffectual and have little impact on state behavior. China would be hard pressed to more strongly signal support for an anarchic international system in which states are largely free to act as they please. Put more bluntly, the more Beijing – frequently aided and abetted by Moscow – renders the UN Security Council useless in dealing with the real challenges to international security, the more it encourages, if not necessitates, the creation of “coalitions of the willing” to deal with such problems.

China reinforces the US role in Northeast Asia and supports its international legitimacy. The reinforcement of US alliances more deeply embeds the US in the region. The growing role of those alliances signals their worth and value – and that of the US more generally – to other governments. The

claims that China has marginal influence in North Korea and that the US is the real target of Pyongyang's activities highlights the significance, importance, and centrality of the US to regional diplomacy and affairs.

China blocks contingency planning that can keep a crisis from occurring or worsening. We are repeatedly warned that attempts to discuss North Korea in trilateral or multilateral settings would send the wrong signal to Pyongyang and spur it to act out. So, while experts concede that we need to prepare for a range of crises and contingencies, actually doing so isn't done for fear of antagonizing North Korea. In fact, such planning takes place without Beijing – this is part of the alliance strengthening. But China has interests in North Korea and is likely to intervene in the event of a crisis. Advanced discussions of how that might occur could minimize the risk that Chinese forces might reach a standoff – or worse – with allied forces in a crisis.

We could be snarky and say we're pleased that China is helping the US achieve its foreign policy objectives. But it is more accurate to say that we, like our South Korean and Japanese colleagues, are frustrated by the consequences of Beijing's self-defeating policies. North Korea continues to act out, endangering lives, risking the destabilization of Northeast Asia, and forcing other governments to divert resources that could be better used elsewhere. China is not the only country that seeks a stable Northeast Asia so that it can focus on economic development. Yet Beijing continues to pursue misguided, illogical and self-defeating policies.

There is some potential good news on the horizon, however. More and more frequently during our visits to China and during international conferences with Chinese scholars and even some officials, we witness our Chinese colleagues seriously debating one another over the logic behind Beijing's current policy. Many are truly embarrassed to be seen as Pyongyang's best (only?) friend and protector. They question whether you can actually have stability – China's primary objective – as long as the North has nuclear weapons. And, they acknowledge all the downsides highlighted above and an even more important one for the long term.

No one can predict when it will occur, but it is becoming increasingly clear that the Peninsula will one day be reunited, under the political, economic, and social system that exists today in Seoul. The longer Beijing keeps the North on life support without insisting on the openness and reform that will set the stage for eventual peaceful reunification, the deeper will be the resentment of the Korean people and the greater will be their suspicion regarding China's long-term motives.

How this serves Beijing's interests remains beyond our ability to comprehend. At some point, one hopes that logic will finally prevail!

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