

China's Two-Faced Approach Toward North Korea

BY KEN WU

Foreign policy observers have lauded China's efforts to get North Korea back to the negotiating table, and with good reason. Beijing applied pressure to get its onetime military ally onto the negotiating table in June 2003, giving hope that Pyongyang was ready to give up its nuclear weapons program. The reclusive regime of Kim Jong-Il has recently shown signs that it is interested in pursuing further talks with the United States.

In spite of China's role in defusing the tensions over the Korean peninsula however, Washington would be wise not to put too much hope in Beijing's ability to force Pyongyang into an outcome that America desires. While improved U.S.-Sino relations since the September 11 terrorist attacks have undoubtedly contributed to China's diplomatic activism, no one should forget that Beijing has its own geostrategic concerns that run counter to those of Washington's.

This article will examine what China's security interests are, the limitations of Beijing's influence in Pyongyang, and what China can do to help resolve the crisis. The importance of settling the nuclear crisis should be clear enough – a North Korea armed with nuclear weapons poses a security threat not only to the U.S., but to China as well. The latter has much to lose if its neighbor decides to go nuclear, for reasons that will be examined below.

Looking Out For Yourself

A nuclear-free Korean peninsula serves China on two interest levels – geostrategic and economic. If Pyongyang does succeed in developing nuclear weapons, other East Asian nations, including South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, may choose to arm themselves with nuclear weapons. Beijing naturally finds this prospect highly detrimental to its own security interests, since China still views Japan with suspicion, and a

leave thousands of American troops stationed at China's doorstep, another outcome that Beijing would find most undesirable.

Also at stake is China's rapid economic expansion. A new Korean war would severely damage the regional economy and thus hinder China's economic growth. Additionally, the war could send millions of Korean refugees towards China, putting undue pressure on the latter's welfare system. The Communist leadership is relying on the country's economic expansion to check social unrest and ensure that the Communist Party remains unchallenged in China.

The Limits of Friendship

With all of these considerations in mind, what then can Beijing do to rein in Pyongyang? China can either use political or economic pressure to force North Korea to give up developing nuclear arms. Last year for instance, China flexed its muscles by replacing local security forces with the People's Liberation Army along the China-North Korea border. Beijing also sent

a strong message to North Korea by cutting off oil supplies to the economically-backwards country for a day.

Even with these tools at hand, Beijing's influence over policymakers in Pyongyang is often overestimated. Gone are the revolutionary bonds that China and North Korea once shared. Mao Zedong and Kim Il-Sung, the first generation leaders of China and North Korea respectively, were committed

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Kim Jong-il is set on insuring North Korea's survival, though China has mixed interests in the region

nuclear-armed Taiwan, still viewed as a renegade province in Beijing's eyes, will likely delay the island's reunification with the mainland.

China also wants to prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear arms since it would conceivably invite American military action. Should North Korea make nuclear threats against the U.S. or her allies, Washington may elect to get rid of Kim's regime with a military operation. Such a move would

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Communist ideologues. 50 years ago, they fought against the U.S. in the Korean War as allies. Since then, Sino-North Korean relations have steadily gone downhill, accelerated by Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping's modernization program, and improving Sino-South Korea relations.

Deng's economic reforms, which began in 1978, were poorly received in Pyongyang. The bloody 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident in China only confirmed Kim's fears that economic liberalization threatened the Korean Communist Party's rule in North Korea. Nowadays, the Korean leadership view their Chinese counterparts with distrust.

China's oft-mentioned economic leverage over North Korea is also overrated. While North Korea has become heavily dependent on its neighbors for economic aid, China, which provides the bulk of the help, is unlikely to impose economic sanctions on North Korea. Such an action, after all, would only precipitate the North's collapse and lead to the refugee problem noted above. Beijing is therefore unlikely to apply significant economic pressure in the near future.

The Third Way

In spite of the above issues, China has a constructive role to play in defusing the latest North Korean nuclear crisis. Over the last couple of months, Chinese diplomats have been urging the U.S. to adopt a more flexible policy towards North Korea, with some good results. U.S. President George W. Bush has softened his stance by offering Pyongyang a written agreement that America would refrain from using force against North Korea. This falls short of the non-aggression treaty North Korea demanded, but America's new position marks a shift away from the more combative tone it adopted after Bush took control of the White House in 2001.

Additionally, China has pressed North Korea to continue the

six-party talks that have stalled since December 2003. By offering to host the talks in Beijing, China is giving Pyongyang the opportunity to deal with Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, and Moscow in a neutral environment. As of late January 2004, North Korea has shown some signs it is interested in resuming the six-party talks, even as it continues its nuclear diplomacy.

A New Diplomacy

Whatever one makes of Beijing's latest diplomatic maneuvers, it is evident that China's foreign policy is displaying a sense of confidence that the Communist country has never shown before. The Foreign Affairs article "China's New Diplomacy" observes how under new President Hu Jintao, Beijing has matured away from the "victimized developing country" mentality that marked the Mao and Deng eras.

This shift in diplomatic attitude is being accompanied by the rise of an increasingly professional Chinese Foreign Ministry. Previously, ideology and personal connections reigned in the ministry. Now, Western-educated diplomats armed with both experience and talent staff the Foreign Ministry.

For the Americans however, the transformation in Chinese diplomacy does not necessarily help the U.S. advance its own strategic objectives in East Asia. Although Washington can expect Beijing to play an active part in promoting six-party talks, China will refuse to side with America if America opts for a tougher approach against North Korea. Guided by a sense of pragmatism, Beijing intends to further its own national interests – satisfying Washington or placating Pyongyang is but a small part in the great game of international politics.

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