China's North Korean Liability

How Washington Can Get Beijing to Rein In Pyongyang

By Zhu Feng, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, July 11, 2017

On July 8, at the G-20 summit in Hamburg, U.S. President Donald Trump held a cordial press conference with Chinese President Xi Jinping where they discussed how they would address the growing threat of North Korea. Just days before, on July 4, as many Americans were observing Independence Day, North Korea announced that it had successfully tested an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching Alaska. This was likely on Trump’s mind at the summit when he told this Chinese counterpart that he believed the two of them would “come to a successful conclusion” in reining in Pyongyang. The key challenge, of course, is how they will get there.

For over two and a half decades, international efforts to curb North Korea’s nuclear ambitions have been in vain. Pyongyang has repeatedly and blatantly violated its multiple commitments to denuclearize and shows no willingness to fulfill its promises to do so. Make no mistake: a North Korea with nuclear weapons is not a problem just for the United States and China but a collective one. Former U.S. President Barack Obama’s policy of “strategic patience” failed. Now, as U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has made it abundantly clear, particularly during his visit to Beijing in March, the Trump administration hopes to change the U.S. approach to North Korea. But as much as Washington has failed to rein in North Korea, so has China. Beijing must face the reality that the Kim family’s nuclear and missile programs are opposed to Chinese interests and a threat to regional stability. As momentum once again builds in Beijing to reassess its relationship with North Korea, it is time for China to make a significant shift in its policy, once and for all.

AN UNSUSTAINABLE STATUS QUO

China-North Korean relations have been slowly souring since the end of the Cold War. North Korea ceased being China’s ally long ago when Beijing decided, against Pyongyang’s objections, to normalize its ties with Seoul in 1992. A recent example of their dysfunctional relationship is the killing of Kim Jong-nam, former leader Kim Jong-il’s eldest son, by North Korean agents in Malaysia. Its heavily publicized nature signaled Pyongyang’s utter disrespect for Beijing, under whose protection the elder Kim had lived in Macau. China has long offered various forms of support to the North based on their shared history, but the relationship has turned into a heavy burden for China, holding Beijing back from playing a greater role in the global and regional order.

Beijing is, of course, highly aware of the costs if it continues to keep Pyongyang within its fold. The completely divergent paths they have taken to fulfill their basic goals of peace and development since early the 1990s have kept the two countries apart. For today’s Chinese, North Korea today is reminiscent of the deplorable era under Chairman Mao Zedong. But for North
Koreans, China is an “accomplice” to American imperialism. Despite this, Beijing has not been ready yet to “give up” North Korea, since doing so would require an explicit policy decision, such as pulling its lifeline to North Korea or literally deeming it a “public threat.”

Trump once complained of China’s failure to put enough pressure on Pyongyang. Although his warm meeting in April with Xi at Mar-a-Lago gave the impression that the two leaders were inclined to work together in “harnessing” North Korea, China’s lack of determination in fully abandoning North Korea may disappoint the Trump administration.

North Korea’s increasingly belligerent behavior has irritated China to an ever-greater extent. Pyongyang conducted 15 missile tests in 2015 and 33 in 2016, and so far in 2017, it has tested ten. In 2016, Pyongyang conducted two nuclear tests despite ever-increasing international pressure. Although North Korea’s aim is to destroy the United States, China’s capital is also well within range of some of Pyongyang’s Scud missiles. It would only take one unpredictable official in the military chain or some such for North Korea to turn on a nominal ideological ally in the most drastic way. The threat of a nuclear attack is not the only thing China must worry about; the risk of a North Korean nuclear accident spewing radiation across the Chinese border could spell catastrophe in megacities such as Shenyang in the Liaoning province, which has over eight million people and is located just 124 miles from the North Korean border.

Chinese public opinion toward North Korea is also worsening, with many Chinese now critical of Beijing’s long-standing indecision to deal adequately with Pyongyang. A growing number of Chinese citizens believe that the North is a bad actor that poses a severe threat to China’s security interests, according to polls conducted by the Global Times. Another portion of the Chinese populace believes that Beijing should not assume the responsibility for denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula—Washington should. China’s only role, they believe, is to support reconciliation while bolstering negotiations, even if many Chinese are aware that such a limited role for China is remarkably inconsistent with the real threat posed by the North.

Concern over North Korea has also been on the rise in South Korea, leading Seoul to allow the U.S. deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense ballistic missile defense system, against China’s strong protestations. This is because THAAD interceptors are capable not only of shooting down North Korean missiles but also of obstructing missiles launched from China. This growing geostrategic complexity triggered by Pyongyang requires that Washington and Beijing not distract themselves with this negative spillover and focus on finding a workable solution.

This is what a great many Chinese citizens want. When Beijing recently shuttered the Chinese branches of the South Korean-owned Lotte supermarket chain, providing land for the THAAD deployment, the move was viewed domestically as unconstructive. Although Beijing also managed to stir up Chinese nationalistic fervor by insisting that THAAD is a threat to China’s national security, it was arguably little more than a cleverly engineered political ruse. Actual popular resentment toward North Korea is surging, and Beijing’s passive North Korea policy is increasingly under fire domestically. For example, the Chinese academia and media are largely and distinctively divided over how Beijing should approach Pyongyang, and considering that many Chinese media outlets are wholly state owned, this signals that the likelihood of a
reassessment of China’s commitment to North Korea is slowly but firmly gaining favor in Beijing.

INCREMENTAL HELP

It is fortunate that just as Chinese public opinion is turning against the North, the Trump administration has begun pushing China to get tougher on Pyongyang. And since ties between Beijing and Seoul have reached their lowest point in history, this is yet another reason why China needs to reconsider its impotent and misguided policy of trying to balance the two Koreas against one another.

Trump has made himself clear: the failed Six Party Talks of yesteryear are over, and North Korea’s continued actions in contempt of the international community mean that U.S. strategic patience is over. As a result, all options are now on the table. Chinese leadership should view this as an opportunity not only to improve ties with the United States but also to change its official stance on North Korea.

Yet the debate in Beijing is partially stymied by feelings that U.S. animosity toward China remains unchanged, so China should do little to help the United States solve the North Korea issue. Of course, this faction opposes China’s unilateral action to pressure North Korea. Such opposition no doubt adds to the Chinese government’s hesitation to utilize a number of economic tools at its disposal, such as ending oil deliveries to the North. But if the two powers could maintain a forward-looking approach to regional security, they could work together to ensure that North Korea truly feels the pain of international sanctions. Beijing’s suspension of coal imports from the North, for example, was a big blow to Kim Jong-Un’s regime, as Pyongyang has used most of its income from coal imports to develop its nuclear weapons.

In this regard, Trump needs to understand the complexity of China’s thinking on North Korean policy. Getting China to take more responsibility on North Korea requires both a gentle and a hard push. The Trump administration has made it clear that it will not tolerate a nuclear North Korea—but Beijing has heard this before. Despite the rhetorical flourish, to the experienced Chinese diplomat, the Trump administration’s policy sounds quite a lot like those of Presidents George W. Bush and Obama: a desire to achieve denuclearization but an unwillingness for this to come at the cost of war on the peninsula. Chinese President Xi Jinping is similarly bound by the strategic logic of China’s long-standing approach to its petulant neighbor—avoiding the dangers and uncertainty of war and instability by looking past the present consequences of North Korea’s actions. Xi’s view of North Korea is still dominated by the fear of a reunified Korea under Seoul, which may want U.S. forces to remain in the country. This is a legitimate concern, but it is possible, given Trump’s isolationist stance, that he might consider not stationing U.S. troops above the 38th parallel or deploying offensive capabilities to a unified Korea.

The real difference that Beijing and Washington must overcome, however, is China’s fear of chaos in North Korea spilling over its own borders. Such instability could spell an unmanageable situation involving all sorts of crises: civil war, famine, and mass displacement, not to mention the danger of fissile material and biological weapons falling into even more unstable hands. Of course, some Chinese hardliners take this view even further, suggesting that it would be foolish
for China to take the North Korean burden off the back of its greatest competitor. They argue that, considering that the United States is in many ways a thorn in the flesh to Chinese interests in areas such as Taiwan and the South China Sea, it would be against China’s national interests to release the United States from this problem.

Today, many within China believe that Beijing must reevaluate its relationship with both Koreas, which essentially means abandoning Pyongyang. It is both the strategic and the moral choice. Choosing South Korea, a democracy with a strong economy, will place China on the right side of history. China’s lack of clear direction on this issue is beginning to negatively affect its reputation, with Beijing seen by the international community as reluctant to cooperate or behave responsibly. These are not traits that behoove a rising power.

BEIJING’S ONE POLICY OPTION

Going forward, China has three options: it can work more closely with the United States on getting tougher on North Korea, continue to drag its feet and avoid rocking the boat, or reinforce its alignment with Russia and use North Korea as a piece in a geopolitical chess game against the United States and South Korea. Of these options, only the first choice aligns with China’s long-term interests to integrate with the international community. The question is how to ease Beijing’s hesitations regarding this choice. In other words, how can the hawks in Beijing be brushed aside to make way for a more decisive and progressive policy while continuing to save face for all decision makers?

There are no easy answers, but the U.S.-China bilateral relationship is certainly a priority for Xi, particularly because of the strong anti-China elements within the Trump administration. The best way to improve the relationship is by cooperating on North Korean denuclearization, which would bring China the added benefit of increased regional security.

Economic pressure is another avenue forward in solving the North Korea problem. There are many avenues for implementing sanctions: reducing North Korea’s coal and oil imports, shutting down North Korean front companies operating in China, expelling North Korean laborers toiling away in Chinese factories, barring Chinese banks from doing any further business with Pyongyang’s moneymen, and cracking down on a host of other avenues for cash to reach Kim Jong-un. China has halted operations for many if not all of these activities at one point or another over the last 15 years, sometimes simultaneously. But now is the time for China to be utterly comprehensive, to seal all the cracks and thus send a clear signal to North Korea—and the Trump administration—that Beijing will not stand idly by. Such pressure, of course, will not work on its own. Beijing and Washington must cooperate or at least coordinate their efforts for engagement with Pyongyang to demonstrate that Kim can still choose a diplomatic solution to resolve these tensions. As Pyongyang grows ever more belligerent, it becomes increasingly urgent for Beijing and Washington to restore cooperation over North Korea.