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China and North Korea: The Limits of Influence

ANDREW SCOBELL

North Korea presents China with a major dilemma: the status quo is unsustainable, yet China sees change as threatening. In particular, change resulting from direct external pressure on North Korea worries the Chinese because it is likely to unfold rapidly and could prove highly destabilizing—perhaps even cataclysmic—with an outcome that might not be in China’s favor.

Beijing appears to realize that North Korea’s aggressive program to develop nuclear weapons requires some sort of response. But the steps China is prepared to take will almost surely disappoint.

MISTAKEN ASSUMPTIONS

The nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula materialized in October 2002 when an official of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea confessed to the visiting US assistant secretary of state for East Asia, James Kelly, that his country has an ongoing nuclear weapons program. Preoccupied with preparing for war in Iraq, Washington was slow to focus on its second nuclear crisis with Pyongyang in 10 years.

In the face of North Korean posturing and brinkmanship, the United States consistently stressed a political rather than a military solution. President George W. Bush, speaking on December 31, 2002, insisted that North Korea constituted a “diplomatic showdown” and not a “military showdown.” Under a North Korean verbal barrage demanding direct bilateral talks with the United States, Washington remained adamant that negoti-

ations with Pyongyang include other concerned capitals such as Seoul, Beijing, Tokyo, and Moscow. The Bush administration insisted that North Korea’s nuclear designs posed a problem not just for the United States, but also for other countries—especially North Korea’s neighbors.

The United States pressed China especially to exert influence on North Korea. To that end, Washington and Beijing have held an ongoing dialogue about Pyongyang at the highest levels. President Bush and Chinese President Jiang Zemin discussed North Korea in face-to-face meetings and in telephone conversations in late 2002 and early 2003. Secretary of State Colin Powell and Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan also held regular discussions on the subject.

The focus on China stems from the assumption that Beijing has significant influence on Pyongyang and is prepared to use it, and that Beijing’s goals regarding North Korea are the same or at least similar to those of Washington. The Bush administration believes that China is uniquely positioned to pressure North Korea because it is Pyongyang’s closest friend. The administration also believes that Beijing places the highest priority on preventing Pyongyang from acquiring nuclear weapons.

All of these assumptions are questionable. While China probably has more influence on North Korea than any other country, this influence is limited. And China’s priorities regarding North Korea have tended to be quite different from those of the United States. In fact, the world may have witnessed nearly the furthest extent of Beijing’s influence on North Korea with China’s hosting of and participation in the talks between Washington and Pyongyang that were held April 23–25, 2003. The outcome of a new round of

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multilateral talks, which China helped arrange this summer, remains in doubt.

China deserves considerable credit not only for persuading North Korea to be more flexible on the format of talks, but also for getting the North Koreans to show up. Pyongyang had insisted that it would only talk to Washington one-on-one; Washington had been just as insistent that any talks be multilateral. China, which in mid-January 2003 had offered to host talks between North Korea and the United States, initially urged Washington to negotiate face-to-face with Pyongyang. In China's view, the root of the problem was the US relationship with North Korea. By mid-March Beijing realized that Washington was unlikely to agree to bilateral talks and proposed a three-party format. The Chinese also prodded and coaxed North Korea to be more flexible. North Korea relented in the face of what was perceived as direct pressure from China, and announced in mid-April that it was willing to consider various formats for the talks.

The outcome of the April 2003 meeting proved inconclusive and no follow up talks were immediately scheduled. Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo engaged in shuttle diplomacy this summer, traveling to Pyongyang and Washington in an attempt to resume discussions. In July his efforts proved successful: North Korea agreed to multilateral negotiations. But neither the basis for more talks nor the result of the April talks is clear: in April North Korea informed US officials that it already possessed nuclear weapons.

A UNIQUE CONFLUENCE OF CONDITIONS

The pressure China brought to bear on North Korea that led to the April meeting resulted from a unique set of three conditions. First was the lead-up to and launch of the Iraq war. This had a significant and sobering effect on China and North Korea. Both regimes were extremely concerned about what the United States might do next. The result was a sudden sense of urgency in Beijing and Pyongyang to remove any excuse for the United States to use military power on the Korean peninsula.

Second, China had thought more seriously about the strategic consequences of a nuclearized North Korea and began to recognize the disturbing ramifications. Some Chinese security analysts grasped that Beijing's hierarchy of priorities regarding Pyongyang might be illusory—that China's number one priority of keeping the regime afloat might change if North Korea went nuclear. A nuclearized North Korea could mean the end of the Communist

regime in Pyongyang if it led the United States to respond militarily and oust the government. And if the United States failed to act, Pyongyang might engage in nuclear blackmail against China. (Indeed, one Chinese analyst has raised this as a possibility.) At the very least, North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons might trigger a chain reaction in Northeast Asia: Japan and perhaps South Korea might also go nuclear. Rarely mentioned but certainly of concern to China is the possibility that Taiwan, too, might reconsider its non-nuclear stance.

Third, China began to realize the economic cost of continued tensions on the peninsula. This is measured not only in terms of China's significant expenditures to prop up North Korea's collapsed economy but also in the fallout on South Korea's economic performance. Seoul was feeling the effects from the prolonged nuclear crisis, and Beijing feared they might restrain South Korea's burgeoning economic relationship with China.

The Iraq war almost certainly provided the impetus for both China and North Korea to act. But the "shock and awe" value of "Operation Iraqi Freedom" will likely fade over time. Meanwhile, Beijing views with growing concern the negative economic impact and regional strategic implications of the creeping nuclear crisis. But by themselves, these issues probably will not prompt China to exert direct influence on North Korea in the future.

Beijing will, however, continue to encourage Pyongyang and Washington to talk. This is so because two major factors still shape China's thinking on North Korea: a lingering "buffer mentality" and a conservative, risk-averse Chinese mindset. Both predispose Beijing to shy away from bold new initiatives and to remain focused on efforts aimed at propping up Pyongyang.

FROM LIPS TO LIPSTICK

The Chinese long have viewed North Korea as a buffer between them and the military forces of the United States and its ally, South Korea. With the end of the Korean War in July 1953, North Korea became a cordon sanitaire. This made sense in the 1950s and 1960s and even in the 1970s, but by the 1980s and 1990s the buffer had become an anachronism. China now has good relations with South Korea and cordial ties with the United States and no longer sees either as a direct military threat.

Yet the buffer mentality lingers in Beijing. Korea still is seen as a sensitive border region: the route for Japan's invasion of China at the beginning of World War II and possible invasion by the United

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States in late 1950. Some Chinese leaders and analysts continue to refer to the relationship between China and North Korea as one of "lips and teeth": if the Korean "lips" are gone, then China's "teeth" will get cold. Granted, many in Beijing have come to regard Pyongyang more as lipstick than as lips. This lipstick is red, increasingly expensive, and of questionable quality, but it looks good at a cursory glance.

The lipstick is red because both China and North Korea are fraternal socialist party-states—two of only a handful of Leninist regimes in the world today. The continued existence and health of the other are of considerable importance to each, and not simply because they are neighbors. The loss of another member of the Leninist fraternity would exacerbate the question of domestic political legitimacy.

The lipstick is expensive because Pyongyang has become a significant economic drag on Beijing. During the 1990s, North Korea suffered a severe famine resulting in an estimated 3 million deaths. Despite aid from China, the United States, South Korea, and nongovernmental organizations, famine-like conditions persist in 2003. Today, China is North Korea's most important trading partner, accounting for half of all Pyongyang's imports. China provides vital stocks of food and fuel to its needy neighbor. But, because North Korea exports little to China, the economic relationship is extremely one-sided. In contrast to this aid-donor bind with North Korea, China enjoys a thriving and prosperous economic relationship with South Korea. While China's exports to North Korea have hovered between \$260 million and \$600 million annually since 1985, its two-way trade with South Korea has grown considerably, reaching an estimated \$44 billion in 2002. Seoul, moreover, is China's fifth-largest foreign investor, pumping in approximately \$1 billion in 2002 alone.

The lipstick is now of dubious quality because it has not been working as effectively as advertised and has created significant headaches for Beijing. Kim Il Sung, who ruled North Korea from 1948 until his death in 1994, enjoyed good personal relationships with successive generations of China's top leaders, including Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Relations have not been as good between senior Chinese leaders and Kim's son, Kim Jong Il, who succeeded his father as North Korea's top leader. Nevertheless, Beijing appears to have rationalized that, while the younger Kim might be a difficult SOB to deal with, he is at least China's SOB. Former President Jiang Zemin reportedly confessed that he did not know what Kim Jong Il was thinking or what

he intended to do. In short, China has sway over a truculent and unpredictable leader.

Pyongyang's actions in 2003 have only created greater frustration and distress for Beijing. On January 10, North Korea announced its withdrawal from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). On February 18, it threatened to void the 1953 armistice agreement ending the Korean War if economic sanctions were imposed. On March 2, North Korean fighters intercepted a US surveillance aircraft flying in international airspace over the Sea of Japan.

China and North Korea are technically allies, bound by a 1961 treaty to come to each other's aid in the event of war. Their defense relationship might more accurately be described as a "virtual alliance": Beijing has made clear to Pyongyang since the mid-1990s that China will not come to North Korea's aid if Kim Jong Il finds himself in trouble.

Still, this is the only bilateral military alliance China has, and it was sealed in blood by fighting shoulder-to-shoulder in the Korean War. The fiftieth anniversary of the Korean armistice was celebrated on July 27, 2003. Many Chinese are proud of their country's role in the Korean War. They resist any suggestion that the sacrifices of almost 3 million Chinese soldiers who served, including hundreds of thousands killed and a comparable number wounded, might have been in vain.

However dubious its quality, the "lipstick" relationship still looks good at first glance because it appears to hold geopolitical benefits for China. More careful examination would reveal that it has become a liability. But, on the positive side, the Korean issue puts China in demand: Beijing is viewed as a key player on the peninsula. It is also an issue on which China can cooperate with the United States. And it makes China look, for now, like a responsible and influential major power.

Unfortunately, as the crisis continues, the world may discover that China has virtually no influence over North Korea. If China is unable (or unwilling) to deliver results on North Korea, relations with the United States might be adversely affected, and at the very least China might lose face internationally. Indeed, prior to China's efforts in early 2003, US officials expressed considerable frustration with China's reluctance to intervene in the North Korean crisis.

Beijing has influence on Pyongyang, but it is

almost certainly soft and largely potential, rather than hard and actual. Chinese analysts admit that China's influence is limited and can only be exerted through suggestions or encouragement from behind the scenes instead of through blunt and direct admonishments in public view. They also lament the challenges of dealing with Pyongyang—a proud and difficult regime that does not readily listen to, let alone heed advice.

The Chinese probably will never exert substantial hard influence, moreover, because they fear the consequences of doing so. Whether it be no result or a bad result, from China's point of view a negative outcome seems likely either way. No result would mean North Korea does nothing except pull away from China. China then would lose any possibility of influence, while possibly gaining a dangerous and unpredictable foe on its doorstep. A bad result would be the possible collapse of North Korea, the emergence of a more paranoid and militant regime, or even war on the peninsula.

China has more influence with North Korea than any other country because of its history of steady

fast moral support and material assistance, but Pyongyang still views Beijing with suspicion. Kim Jong Il's regime would almost certainly prefer not to be so dependent on China. If China finds North Korea's leadership difficult and unpredictable, North Korea is no less suspicious of China's motives. For both China and North Korea the relationship over the past decade has been close but uncomfortable.

RISK-AVERSE, AND WITH DIFFERENT PRIORITIES

Risk-averse under the best of circumstances, China is especially so during times of leadership succession, as is the case today. Beijing's current foreign policy priority is to maintain peace and stability in the Asia Pacific; on the domestic front it wants to ensure continued economic growth and prosperity. With a transition in progress from the so-called third generation associated with former President Jiang Zemin (age 77) to the fourth generation spearheaded by newly elected President Hu Jintao (age 60), there is an overwhelming desire for peace on China's periphery and good relations with neighboring states and the major powers, especially the United States. Beijing is reluctant to pursue any new policy initiative that would put these goals at risk.

China's priorities regarding North Korea have tended to be quite different from those of the United States.

China's priorities on the Korean peninsula also differ considerably from those of the United States. Beijing has focused on stabilizing and strengthening the Pyongyang government (that is, preventing its collapse), while Washington wants to put an end to the regime.

Since North Korea's January declaration that it was withdrawing from the NPT, China has viewed the nuclear issue with apparently growing concern. Several months earlier, on October 25, 2002, then President Jiang, speaking at a joint press conference with President Bush, confessed that China was "completely in the dark" about North Korea's nuclear program. China's leaders and spokespeople repeatedly stress their country's desire for a non-nuclear, peaceful, and stable peninsula and a negotiated solution to the crisis.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Beijing's top priority remains the survival of the Pyongyang regime. Preventing a nuclearized North Korea remains an important goal, but it is less vital for China. Beijing evidently believes the best way to ensure Pyongyang's survival is to shape a kinder, gentler, more reform-minded North Korea.

Beijing has a like-minded partner in Seoul. China and South Korea have been engaged in multilevel talks on North Korea, working together to promote economic reform in the North and more recently seeking to resolve the nuclear crisis. South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun visited Beijing in early July 2003 and met with Chinese leaders, including President Hu. A key topic of discussion was North Korea and the two governments issued a joint statement on July 8 urging that the "dialogue process" begun in Beijing in April "should continue."

PRESSURE? WHAT PRESSURE?

What pressure can China exert on North Korea? Beijing could publicly criticize North Korea in the United Nations. But this would only make North Korea more militant and paranoid and destroy any influence Beijing has over Pyongyang. The same would be true if China were formally to revoke the

1961 alliance treaty. China could also impose economic sanctions. China, however, adamantly opposes sanctions. In Beijing's view they would make Pyongyang more desperate and probably lead to regime collapse.

One recent incident is often cited as evidence that Beijing possesses both the will and the ability to pressure Pyongyang. In late February 2003, China shut off an oil pipeline to North Korea for three days, allegedly for "technical reasons." Many have speculated that this was a deliberate act intended to apply pressure on North Korea. More likely, the shutdown really did occur because of technical problems, but it was to Beijing's advantage to let both Pyongyang and Washington believe it was meant to send a signal to North Korea.¹

When Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam Sun in Beijing in mid-February, he warned Pyongyang to moderate its behavior. Because the pipeline shutoff occurred shortly after this meeting, the North Koreans concluded that it was an application of Chinese pressure, even though China claimed this was not the case. The effect was to help convince Pyongyang to sit down with Washington two months later. Meanwhile, Beijing can encourage Washington to believe that China is heeding calls to pressure North Korea and can win credit for merely doing what it had to do anyway.

WISHFUL THINKING

It is wishful thinking for the United States to believe that China will apply strong pressure on North Korea to move it toward complying with Washington's demands. The reality is that both China's ability and its desire to push for major change in North Korea are quite limited. And even if China were to apply additional pressure, North Korea in all likelihood would either not respond or react negatively.

The Bush administration should recognize that on North Korea, only limited support will be forthcoming from Beijing. The best Washington can expect is a China actively pressing the United States and North Korea to talk and willing to host or participate in further meetings. But this presumes that both Pyongyang and Washington are ready to sit down in the first place. ■

¹Given the divisive political environment in Beijing on the eve of the tenth National People's Congress, it is improbable that the shutoff was a pressure tactic resulting from a high-level decision in Beijing.