



Responses to PacNet #32 – The Illogic of China’s North Korea Policy

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In PacNet #32, Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman make a detailed case for how China’s current approach toward North Korea actually contradicts many Chinese national interests. Their argument can be supplemented by four additional concerns for China and its now indispensable role in international politics.

Cossa and Glosserman argue that Beijing’s policies on North Korea undermine the UN Security Council. Those same policies undermine the nuclear non-proliferation regime. China’s shielding and aiding of North Korea has negative interaction effects concerning Iran and the Middle East, Pakistan-India, the monitoring role of the IAEA, and the inclusiveness of important enforcement efforts such as PSI.

Cossa and Glosserman point out that North Korean provocations strengthen US alliance cooperation and relevance in the region. In addition, North Korea is motivating specific military capabilities over which analysts in Beijing express concern: South Korean missiles with longer ranges and better accuracy, Japanese reconnaissance satellites, and US missile defenses.

Thirdly, North Korea often reneges on agreements and resolutely takes more from China than it gives. Thus, business with Pyongyang is high risk for Chinese companies and a financial burden on Beijing. So while some observers accuse China of “economic imperialism,” its policies toward North Korea may actually incur greater costs than the financial benefits involved.

Finally, in addition to damaging China’s image in South Korea and Japan and its international reputation as an emerging “responsible stakeholder,” China’s policies on North Korea are setting a bad precedent for relations with regional neighbors associated with ethnic minority groups inside China. The way that Beijing deals with North Korean refugees and related rights groups does not live up to international norms or China’s own principles. Instead, those policies are increasing fear, resentment and cross-border organization among ethnic Koreans. Given the number of ethnic minority groups in China, and their complicated relationships with neighboring countries, this is not a good formula for social stability.

China has accomplished so much in recent decades, economically, diplomatically, and in terms of improving the quality of life of the Chinese people. These accomplishments have brought China ever closer to South Korea, Japan, and the US. China’s national interests - as well as international

support for China’s growing global role - would be better served if Beijing worked closer with its forward-looking partners rather than with its anachronistic Cold War ally.

Jonathan T. Chow, Research Fellow, Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Reading Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman’s essay, I could not help but contrast China’s eagerness to avoid instability on the Korean Peninsula with its apparent willingness to court it in Southeast Asia. China’s growing naval capabilities, its expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea, and its increasing assertiveness in enforcing those claims with the threat of force have contributed to increased “hedging” behavior by a number of ASEAN states. This has been evinced by naval exercises between Vietnam and the United States, US plans to deploy littoral combat ships to Singapore, and discussions regarding similar arrangements in the Philippines. Many observers have also argued that the United States’ decision to station Marines in Darwin, Australia on a rotational basis is a reaction to China’s growing assertiveness in Southeast Asia.

At the 17th ASEAN Regional Forum in 2010, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi exhibited a good deal of swagger when he told Southeast Asian delegates, “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact,” a statement widely interpreted as a warning to the ASEAN countries not to interfere in China’s “core interests,” particularly the South China Sea. But where is China’s swagger when it comes to North Korea, which has just over one-third the land area of Vietnam and a GDP roughly one-tenth the size of Vietnam’s? The same rising global power that has been willing to make bold territorial claims against Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea - even at the expense of provoking balancing behavior - is suddenly timorous when it comes to pressuring North Korea. Seen in this light, China’s claims that even mild censure of Pyongyang risks a major crisis ring hollow. Were China to punish North Korea for its provocations, Pyongyang would likely seethe in anger. However, if North Korea is as concerned for its own survival as Beijing seems to believe, one would think that given a choice, it would prefer fuel and food to launching another attack like the one on Yeonpyeong Island, especially if it were certain that such an attack would lead to starvation at China’s hands.

Winston Lord, Chairman Emeritus, International Rescue Committee; Former US Ambassador to China

This is the best piece I have ever seen on the awful Chinese policy on Korea. The PRC policy could lead to conflict, perhaps including China and us, because the North feels free to poke the South which in turn is bound at some point to retaliate militarily. Indeed the only time that Beijing really seemed to lean on Pyongyang was when we scared them

after the two DPRK provocations. This article should be required reading for every Chinese policymaker.

Joseph Bosco, National Security Consultant

Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman make the best case yet for the premise from which to start - that China shares Western concerns regarding the North Korea threat. I harbor an alternative viewpoint. It starts with this statement in their first paragraph: “[T]he real problem is the illogic of the Chinese position – at least from a US perspective.”

Let’s examine a different logic underlying China’s position *from a Chinese perspective*. Start with the old good cop, bad cop routine: by comparison to the weird Kim family and their dangerously bizarre behavior, China’s Communist leadership looks downright rational, mature, normal, even positively benign. Quite a public relations windfall for the world’s largest dictatorship with a hostile anti-Western ideology, a history of aggression against its neighbors, a terrible human rights record, and an increasingly menacing military machine.

Precisely because the People’s Republic has been the financial, military, and diplomatic protector of the Democratic People’s Republic, and because of its proximity, “China is the only country that possesses the necessary leverage to rein in North Korea’s ominous nuclear weapons program.” Richard Nixon said that in his memoir - in 1994. And Asia experts have argued repeatedly, as Henry Kissinger did in his own memoir that same year, that “It is absolutely not in China’s interest for North Korea to possess nuclear weapons.” And in an article shortly thereafter he wrote “Although the Chinese . . . may be thought to have even more to lose from a nuclear North Korea than the United States, they seem not to perceive their risks in practice.”

For decades, Beijing has persisted in seeing its own interest differently from the way we see China’s interest. Consequently, Western experts have struggled mightily to explain China’s steadfast indulgence of its totally dependent ally. The explanations have been varied and conflicting, sometimes made by the same experts - even in a single interview. China declines to pressure Pyongyang because (a) it is ambivalent, (b) it fears collapse of the regime and a flood of refugees into China, (c) it fears Pyongyang would lash out, attack the South, and draw China into another Korean war against the U.S., (d) it was waiting for Kim Il Sung to die, (e) it was waiting for Kim Jong Il to die, (f) it figured Washington would take care of the problem and give China a free ride, (g) it sees a modest North Korean nuclear capability as a means to guarantee a divided Korea.

While a few of those rationales have some validity, particularly the last one, I believe a persuasive case can be made that China has derived multiple strategic benefits from the almost 20-year North Korea nuclear/missile saga: (1) it has been able to play the responsible stakeholder/good-faith partner in Western eyes; (2)) its indispensability on North Korea has accrued huge negotiating leverage over the West on other issues - Taiwan, trade, human rights, Iran, Syria, etc.; (3) it has maneuvered the West into providing massive food and fuel assistance to help prop up its impoverished ally; (4)

Washington has been distracted, diverted, and diplomatically drained by almost 20 years of Groundhog Day negotiations; (5) US counter-proliferation efforts, particularly with Iran, have been severely undermined by North Korea’s successful strategy.

Aside from the things China has not done to put the brakes on Pyongyang’s illegal and dangerous programs, it has also acted affirmatively to enhance them, including providing constant protection against serious Security Council sanctions. And, after all, the technology that got North Korea on the nuclear path originated in China and much of the subsequent proliferation went through China. Most recently, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta told the House Armed Services Committee that China has “clearly assisted” Pyongyang in its ballistic missile program. On that point, Sen. John McCain said at CSIS recently that US expectations about what the opening to China would bring the world have been disappointing.

At another CSIS conference, Sheila Smith of the Council on Foreign Relations gave an even more sober assessment of the Panetta statement. If the report is confirmed, she said, those who have long supported policies of engagement with China will have to seriously reconsider their position.

So the Beijing-Pyongyang game is finally wearing thin. Is it too late for the West to undo the damage? How firmly will we push Beijing to push Pyongyang? With all the talk of pivots to Asia, what is needed now with these two (Communist) problem governments is an effective carom strategy.

(For a fuller explication of these arguments, see US Naval Institute Proceedings, December 2011, <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2011-12/now-hear-china-protecting-north-korea%E2%80%99s-nukes>; and The Weekly Standard, April 26, 2012, http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/rough-ride-china-and-north-korea_642093.html?page=2)

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed. We especially welcome any comments from our Chinese colleagues in reaction to either the original PacNet or these additional comments.