



## **Beijing Ponders How Hard to Press North Korea**

by Bonnie S. Glaser

Both publicly and privately, Chinese leaders have stated their support for maintaining a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. In consultations with the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Russia, the Chinese have stressed the importance of resolving the issue peacefully through dialogue. Officials from those countries have urged Beijing to use its influence with North Korea to bring about a diplomatic solution to the impending crisis.

China has a great deal at stake in the preservation of a non-nuclear Korea. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how vigorously Beijing will pressure North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to desist from nuclear brinkmanship and abandon the recently announced plan to reactivate a nuclear reactor at Yongbyon that has been mothballed since 1994.

China's influence over North Korea is undeniable. It supplies a sizeable amount of annual energy and food aid as well as emergency assistance to the North. Moreover, how Beijing handles the matter of North Korean refugees could have a significant impact on the survivability of the North Korean regime. Although Sino-North Korean ties have been rocky, the two countries maintain an amicable relationship that was sealed with blood when China dispatched its troops across the Yalu River to fight UN troops in the Korean War. It is widely believed that Beijing played a constructive role in persuading North Korea to negotiate the 1994 Agreed Framework in which Pyongyang agreed to freeze all nuclear activity in return for light water reactors and a supply of heavy fuel oil.

The current crisis provides Beijing with an opportunity to boost its image as a responsible major power that is willing to actively contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. It also presents a chance to persuade skeptics in Washington of the value of closer cooperation between the U.S. and China.

Growing Chinese frustration with Kim Jong-il's dangerous antics is yet another reason for the international community to be hopeful that Beijing will weigh in with North Korea. Chinese leaders were infuriated this past fall when Pyongyang announced, apparently without consulting China, the appointment of business tycoon Yang Bin, a Dutch citizen who owed a huge tax bill to the Chinese government, to head a special economic zone in North Korea's Sinuiju Special Administrative Region. The sinking of a South Korean patrol boat by a North Korean Navy patrol ship last June in the Yellow Sea also incensed Chinese leaders. Moreover, Pyongyang's admission to having a uranium enrichment program on the eve of President Jiang Zemin's summit with President George W. Bush put China in an awkward position because it raised the possibility that Beijing had prior knowledge of the secret project. Jiang insisted in his private talks with Bush that

China was "completely in the dark" about the uranium enrichment program and shares the U.S. desire to see it eliminated.

Despite Chinese irritation with Kim Jong-il and certain knowledge of the benefits that would accrue to China should it help defuse the crisis on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing nevertheless harbors doubts about the extent to which it should intervene. For one thing, China is reluctant to interfere in the internal affairs of a neighboring state, especially through the threat of sanctions. Beijing has consistently opposed the application of economic sanctions and threats of force in international relations, arguing that such approaches damage the favorable international environment on which international non-proliferation mechanisms depend for further development.

An even more critical factor holding back Chinese cooperation is Beijing's wariness of the Bush administration's long-term objectives toward North Korea. Chinese think-tank experts who are privy to high-level leadership deliberations say that their leaders are worried that the U.S. seeks to promote the collapse of Kim Jong-il's regime. Beijing's leadership is alarmed by President Bush's comments to Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward that he "loathes" Kim because he is starving his people and disagrees with his advisers who counsel not to "move too fast, because the financial burdens on people will be so immense if this guy were to topple." Bush reportedly told Woodward "I just don't buy that."

The Chinese are also disquieted by recent reports that Bush administration officials, policy makers, and lawmakers want China to establish camps along its border with North Korea to spur the flow of refugees, thereby accelerating the crumbling of the regime. Chinese officials and scholars say it would be dangerous for Beijing to assume the role that Hungary played in 1989 when it opened its border with Austria, allowing thousands of East Germans vacationing in Hungary to escape communism, which led to the collapse not only of East Germany, but of the Iron Curtain.

A high-level Chinese delegation visiting the United States earlier this month told U.S. scholars that Beijing is willing to sign onto a U.S. policy that aims to reform Kim Jong-il's regime and integrate North Korea into the international community, but will not support efforts to promote instability and regime collapse in the North. "Concerns in China persist that a North Korean collapse would be detrimental to Chinese security," maintained a researcher from one of the leading government think tanks in Beijing.

Chinese experts also contend that there is no urgency for their government to exert pressure on Pyongyang to reverse course and give up its nuclear programs because the Bush administration attaches higher priority to dealing with Iraq and prefers not to handle two crises simultaneously. "Since the U.S. is waiting, it

doesn't hurt for us to wait too," asserted another Chinese scholar. The think-tank scholar also implied that without assurances from the Bush administration that Washington does not seek to destabilize Kim's regime, Chinese collaboration with the U.S. to resolve the North Korean nuclear weapons issue would be limited. As long as "China is not clear about the strategic objectives of the United States," the scholar declared, "the basis of our cooperation is not firm."

A diplomatic solution to the looming North Korean nuclear weapons crisis cannot be achieved without enlisting China's active help. The U.S. should clearly convey to Chinese leaders that shutting down Pyongyang's nuclear programs is an urgent priority. If the North expels the international monitors of its spent fuel and plutonium-reprocessing plant, and unseals the stored nuclear fuel containers, this would leave no doubt that Kim is committed to developing nuclear weapons. A military strike on North Korea, seriously considered during the Clinton administration, would once again be on the U.S. agenda. Certainly Beijing wants to avoid such an outcome.

The U.S. should also dispel Chinese fears that the Bush administration seeks to promote instability on China's border and speed collapse of Kim Jong-il's regime. The failure to do so will inhibit Chinese cooperation to achieve the more urgent goal of ending North Korea's nuclear programs. It will also lead to continued Chinese intransigence to assist with relief efforts to North Korean refugees currently residing in China.

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Note: We call to the attention of readers interested in analysis of the current ROK elections who do not receive supplemental PacNets, *PacNet* 53B "[Korea: Alliances at Risk?](#)" by Ralph A. Cossa, available upon request or from the Forum's web site. For more on this subject from authors associated with Pacific Forum's Comparative Connections on-line journal, we recommend Victor Cha's "Keep Calm on Korea" at [[www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)] and Aidan Foster Carter's "South Korea Charts a Perilous Course" at [[www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com)].