

A View from the United States on Sino-U.S. Relations

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During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, the candidates reached a bipartisan consensus on one issue: how to deal with North Korea. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump both called for China to do more to convince Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program once and for all. Candidate Trump said that China has “absolute control” over North Korea and promised to do whatever it takes to convince Beijing to use that leverage, including imposing penalties on Chinese firms. As president, however, Trump will have to navigate the reality of China’s extreme hesitance to use the only type of pressure likely to divert North Korea’s nuclear ambitions—the threat of regime-endangering punishment. If and how China should continue to fit into U.S. strategy for dealing with North Korea will thus be a key issue facing Trump and his advisors.

For the United States and its allies, the stakes are enormous. Mismanaging the North Korea threat could result in Pyongyang accelerating development of intermediate and long-range ballistic missiles capable of striking U.S. and allied targets in Asia, and the U.S. homeland.¹ Those missiles could eventually be mated with nuclear warheads, giving Pyongyang a credible nuclear deterrent.² Mishandling China’s role in addressing the North Korean threat could also have negative consequences. Overestimating China’s ability and willingness to help resolve the situation could become a chimerical goal. Conversely, circumventing Beijing and relying solely on missile defense and U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation could damage Sino-U.S. relations and push China into an obstructionist role. Like his predecessors, President Trump will have to balance competing interests while prioritizing defense of the homeland from what could become an existential threat.

This chapter addresses these issues in three main sections. The first details how and why U.S. presidents have engaged China on North Korea over the past 15 years. The second explains U.S. concerns about China’s limited willingness to exert pressure on Pyongyang and identifies the reasons why Beijing has been reluctant to do so. This section also reviews the constraints on additional U.S.-ROK-China trilateral coordination, which was a goal of former ROK President Park Geun-hye. The third section discusses three schools of thought in U.S. policy circles about how to engage China in light of North Korea’s two nuclear tests in 2016. The conclusion discusses how the Trump administration handled this issue in its first few months, and argues that expectations for a fundamental revision in China’s North Korea policy are misguided. This means that Trump and his advisors will have to find other ways to address the North Korean challenge, including through expanded cooperation with Tokyo and Seoul. Nevertheless, engaging Beijing cannot and should not be entirely avoided. One area where expanded engagement is necessary is in contingency planning for a North Korean crisis.

ENLISTING CHINA’S SUPPORT

Candidate Trump’s argument that the burden of North Korean denuclearization should fall on China’s shoulders was not unique, but rather consistent with a decade and a half of U.S. policy. This section reviews prior attempts to encourage Beijing to exercise its leverage on Pyongyang. It then examines how the U.S. candidates discussed this issue during the 2016 presidential campaign.

Efforts during the Bush and Obama Eras

For fifteen years, U.S. officials have argued that the onus of persuading North Korea to abandon its nuclear program should be on China. There are two basic reasons. First, other options either failed to address the problem or were ruled out entirely by U.S. policymakers. In the early 1990s, North Korea refused to provide unfettered access to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors as required under the 1992 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Safeguards Agreement. The Clinton administration tried to encourage compliance through a mix of financial and energy incentives under the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework, but this agreement failed in October 2002, when Pyongyang acknowledged a covert uranium enrichment program and subsequently withdrew from the NPT. The Obama administration briefly resurrected this bilateral approach with its February 2012 “Leap Day” deal that sought to trade a moratorium on DPRK nuclear and ballistic missile tests and a return of IAEA inspectors for U.S. food aid, but this was scuttled by Pyongyang’s missile test several weeks later. Coercive approaches, such as U.S. domestic sanctions (initially imposed in 1992) and U.S.-ROK military exercises, also failed to halt North Korea’s nuclear progress. A preventive strike was considered in 1994 but rejected because of the anticipated high costs and the belief that a negotiated settlement might be possible.³ A U.S.-North Korea peace treaty has also been ruled out due to Pyongyang’s refusal to include denuclearization on the agenda.⁴

Second, the withdrawal of U.S. and other foreign assistance meant that China became North Korea’s primary diplomatic and economic partner. Fuel oil shipments and the planned construction of two light water reactors in North Korea by a U.S.-led international consortium were immediately cancelled after the collapse of the Agreed Framework. The Bush administration significantly reduced food contributions to North Korea through the World Food Program; that aid ended entirely in 2009.⁵ North Korea was also economically isolated after Japan withdrew as its major trading partner following the failure of talks on the Japanese abductee issue in 2002. These actions left China as the key supplier of food, energy, and economic support to North Korea (and China remained its only ally, based on a 1961 treaty). Thus, U.S. officials beginning in the George W. Bush administration argued that China was in a unique position to influence North Korea’s decision-making calculus.

The Bush, and later Obama, administrations relied on China’s support on North Korea in several ways. First, as part of the Six-Party Talks, Beijing helped convince Pyongyang to sign a Joint Statement in September 2005 that reaffirmed a common goal of the “verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner.”⁶ Victor Cha relays that China did this, in part, by telling their North Korean counterparts that U.S. negative security assurances were “serious.”⁷ Second, China took various unilateral steps to respond to North Korean provocations. For instance, China reportedly reduced the flow of oil to North Korea following the latter’s nuclear and ballistic missile tests in 2006 and 2009. Third, Beijing helped to establish a UN sanctions regime following North Korea’s first nuclear test in October 2006 (which was coupled with U.S. willingness to intensify bilateral talks with Pyongyang, leading to the Joint Agreement) and then to expand those sanctions with each

of the four subsequent nuclear tests over the next decade (see Table 1). Securing China’s support in the UN often required intensive “shuttle diplomacy” between Washington and Beijing and high-level diplomatic consultations.⁸

Nuclear Test	Date	UNSCR	Date	Key Provisions
1	10/9/2006	1718	10/14/2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ban on luxury goods to NK • Ban on major combat systems to NK • Ban on nuclear/missile transfers to NK • Optional cargo inspections • NK must return to 6PT w/o preconditions
2	5/25/2009	1874	6/12/2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ban on all NK arms exports • Restrictions on NK financial services • Clarification of cargo inspection provisions
3	2/12/2013	2094	3/7/2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarification of banned luxury items • Ban on new DPRK bank branches
4	1/6/2016	2270	3/2/2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cargo inspections now mandatory • Ban on coal, mineral exports with exceptions • Ban on jet fuel sales to NK
5	9/9/2016	2321	11/30/2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60% reduc. in legal NK coal, iron exports • Suspension of NK science-tech exchanges

Sources: Press statements found on the UN website (<http://www.un.org>)

Consistent with this pattern, the Obama administration relied heavily on China in responding to North Korea’s nuclear tests in January and September 2016. In March 2016, the UN Security Council approved Resolution 2270, which mandated cargo inspections, prohibited the sale of aviation fuel, and banned coal and iron imports from North Korea (with the exception of sales “exclusively for livelihood purposes”), among other steps.⁹ This followed two months of bargaining between Washington and Beijing, including conversations between President Obama and Xi Jinping. In November 2016, China agreed to reduce coal imports from North Korea by about 60 percent as part of Resolution 2321.¹⁰ This was significant because coal is by far North Korea’s top reported export and, thus, source of foreign currency.¹¹ This resolution followed nearly three months of additional bilateral negotiations between China and the United States.

U.S. diplomatic efforts to attain China’s support on North Korea have centered mainly on persuasion. One aspect of this has been linking Chinese cooperation with its desire for a positive international reputation. This is illustrated by former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick’s often-cited “responsible stakeholder” speech, given two days after the Joint Statement was signed, in which he said that implementation of that agreement was the “most pressing opportunity” for Beijing to make a positive contribution to global governance.¹² U.S. officials have regularly cited joint efforts to deal with the North Korean nuclear program as a positive area of bilateral cooperation. Another aspect was highlighting North Korea’s progress towards a nuclear capability and the potential ramifications for regional stability and nonproliferation norms. Following the May 2009 nuclear test, for instance, U.S. officials Jeffrey Bader and James Steinberg informed Chinese interlocutors

that failure to respond with robust sanctions would lead to greater consideration of “doctrines of preemption,” playing on Chinese concerns that the United States might be tempted to use military force. Bader states that this argument was useful in securing Beijing’s support for Resolution 1874.¹³

Aside from persuasion, the U.S. government has both threatened and enacted secondary sanctions as a means to convince China to reduce its ties to North Korea. In September 2005, the Treasury Department proposed (but did not levy) sanctions against Banco Delta Asia, a small Macau-based bank suspected of laundering money for North Korea.¹⁴ This was useful in convincing larger Chinese banks, such as the Bank of China, to refrain from doing business with North Korea out of fear of losing access to the U.S. market.¹⁵ Eleven years later, the Treasury Department took the unprecedented step of actually sanctioning a Dandong-based trading company that was accused of laundering North Korean funds through the U.S. financial system, while the Justice Department issued criminal indictments for representatives of that firm.¹⁶ This pressure was part of the Obama administration’s strategy for gaining Chinese support for approval of harsher sanctions following North Korea’s two nuclear tests in 2016.

The 2016 Presidential Campaign

Although not a major theme of the 2016 presidential campaign, North Korea was addressed periodically by the candidates during both the primary and the general election.¹⁷ The January and September 2016 nuclear tests, in particular, elicited remarks from the candidates, most of whom recited the argument that China should do more to stop North Korea’s nuclear program. Following the January 2016 nuclear test, Senator Bernie Sanders said in a Democratic debate that the United States should “do everything we can” to pressure China on North Korea.¹⁸ Hillary Clinton likewise said in January that China should be “more assertive in deterring the North’s irresponsible actions,” and suggested that Chinese firms found in violation of U.S. laws “will have to face sanctions.”¹⁹ Following the September nuclear test, Clinton said that China must “meaningfully increase pressure” on North Korea.²⁰

Republican candidates expressed similar opinions. Senator Ted Cruz said during a debate that Washington needs to pressure Beijing “because North Korea is effectively a client state of China.”²¹ Trump argued that China has “total control over North Korea” and should “solve the problem. And if they don’t solve the problem, we should make trade very difficult for China.”²² On another occasion, Trump said that Beijing has “absolute control” over Pyongyang and pledged that, if China continued to refuse to use that influence, he would “force China to do it economically.”²³ However, Trump differed from the other candidates by adding that he might be open to the possibility of direct negotiation with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.²⁴ Trump’s claim was that, as a successful businessman, he was better able to effectively negotiate with both Beijing and Pyongyang than previous officials.

CONSTRAINTS ON SINO-U.S. COOPERATION

Despite repeated U.S. attempts to rely more on China to address the North Korea problem, the outcome has usually been disappointing. This section explains U.S. concerns about China’s unwillingness to accept and enforce effective sanctions and about continuing Sino-DPRK economic and diplomatic ties. It then explains Beijing’s reluctance to exert greater pressure. Finally, it addresses the limits on trilateral dialogue between China, the ROK, and the United States, which was a goal of the Park administration.

U.S. Concerns about China

U.S. observers have expressed concern that a number of Chinese policies are enabling North Korea to make progress in its nuclear program despite international sanctions. First is China's inconsistent application of pressure. One complaint is that China tends to only temporarily reduce its economic and diplomatic contacts with North Korea following provocative actions, usually resuming them after a short period.²⁵ Another concern is that China has only weakly implemented UN sanctions, obeying the "letter but not the spirit" of resolutions. This includes China's reluctance to use UN authorities to inspect DPRK flagged ships suspected of transporting illicit cargo and its continued imports of North Korean commodities despite these generating revenue for Pyongyang. Provision of dual use technology by Chinese firms has been another concern.²⁶ Then-U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Russel summed up the problem in congressional testimony in September 2016 when he said that there was much more China could be doing to enforce existing sanctions.²⁷

Second is China's tendency to weaken sanctions in the first place. During negotiations on Resolution 1718 in October 2006, China rejected U.S. proposals to establish a general arms embargo on North Korea, carving out exemptions for continued sales of light weapons.²⁸ In June 2009, Beijing lobbied for international inspections of suspicious North Korean cargo to be voluntary, rather than mandatory (a loophole closed by Resolution 2270 in March 2016). Following the January 2016 nuclear test, China demanded inclusion of a provision permitting North Korean sales of coal, iron ore, and various minerals to continue for "livelihood purposes," thus allowing China to continue importing these items. That exception was partially closed with China's commitment to reduce coal imports by 60 percent in November 2016. In other cases, such as North Korea's sinking of the *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyong Island in March and November 2010, respectively, China blocked any substantive UN action.²⁹

Third are concerns about continuing economic and diplomatic relations between China and North Korea. Since 2009, China has been the only major external supplier of food aid to North Korea (with uncertainties about how much this assistance benefits the regime vs. the population at large).³⁰ China officially eliminated supply of crude oil to North Korea in December 2013, but since then there have been reports of DPRK tankers receiving oil shipments in Chinese ports and at sea.³¹ Moreover, China remains North Korea's major trading partner, purchasing 89 percent of North Korean exports and providing 87 percent of North Korea's imports in 2014. (These figures exclude the Kaesong Industrial complex, which was treated as intra-Korean trade before its closing in 2016.)³² Diplomatically, China has maintained sporadic high-level contacts with North Korean officials, including President Xi's meeting with a Workers' Party of Korea delegation in Beijing in June 2016 and a visit by Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin to Pyongyang in October 2016.³³ For many U.S. observers, these policies reduce the efficacy of international pressure and bestow legitimacy on the North Korean regime.³⁴

Reasons for Chinese Hesitation

Several factors explain China's reluctance to apply greater pressure on Pyongyang. At the most fundamental level, there is a mismatch between Washington and Beijing's strategic priorities. The United States is concerned primarily with denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.³⁵ Although regime change has not been an explicit objective, both the Bush and Obama administrations have been willing to accept a risk of instability on the peninsula in order to achieve non-proliferation goals. By contrast, Beijing sees the maintenance of

peninsular “stability” as a key interest for several reasons: avoiding a deluge of refugees into its northeast, which already faces a precarious economic situation; preserving a useful strategic buffer between China and U.S. and ROK forces; and avoiding the possibility of an inadvertent or even intentional nuclear detonation, the fallout of which could reach Chinese territory.³⁶ The consequence is that China has avoided steps that it views likely to create instability, such as eliminating food and fuel aid or severing diplomatic contacts.

To be sure, Beijing has also consistently identified non-proliferation as an important goal. However, there are significant divergences between China and the United States about how that goal can be most effectively pursued. The U.S. government tends to view domestic and international sanctions as central to convincing North Korea not to cross the nuclear threshold. However, Chinese analysts and officials contend that sanctions often embolden regimes to act more assertively and can have negative humanitarian consequences. Instead, Beijing places more emphasis on dialogue mechanisms such as the Six-Party Talks. There is also an enduring view—based on China’s own experience as a target—that sanctions are tools used by the powerful to bully the weak. Thus, China maintains that sanctions, when they are required, must be vetted and approved by the UN Security Council.³⁷ Finally, many Chinese officials and analysts believe that North Korea faces a genuine threat from the United States, and that addressing Pyongyang’s legitimate security concerns is a necessary condition for denuclearization.

Sympathy among many Chinese citizens for North Korea also limits Beijing’s desire to pressure Pyongyang. Views of the older generations in China were shaped by Mao’s decision to send in Chinese forces to “counter U.S. aggression” in October 1950, as well as by propaganda throughout the Cold War that promoted Sino-North Korean relations as being “as close as lips and teeth.” Younger generations tend to be more hostile to North Korea, due to its inability to modernize and its provocative actions in recent years, and generally have more positive attitudes towards South Korea and the United States. Yet, even for younger Chinese “netizens,” the legacy of close Sino-North Korean cooperation (refreshed by more recent “patriotic education” campaigns) has led to “desires for a friendlier North Korea policy.”³⁸ Altogether, these factors create a floor beneath which Beijing is unlikely to let its relations with Pyongyang deteriorate.

Limits on U.S.-ROK-China Cooperation

As part of her trustpolitik agenda as a presidential candidate, Park Geun-hye proposed closer trilateral coordination between China, the United States, and the ROK. Central to this was the idea of a “trilateral strategic dialogue” among the three states. General support for this goal was offered in the 2015 U.S.-ROK Joint Statement on North Korea, which held that the two allies would “continue to strengthen our coordination with China” and other parties to bring North Korea “back to credible and meaningful talks as soon as possible.”³⁹ Trilateral discussions have, in fact, been held at the Track 2 level at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the National Committee on American Foreign Policy.

Nevertheless, disagreements between the three countries on how to handle North Korea have militated against closer coordination, such as through a trilateral summit. China has been wary about pressuring North Korea. The United States and the ROK, in addition to supporting tougher sanctions, have strengthened their alliance to defend against North Korean threats in a way that has repeatedly frustrated Chinese officials. Beijing has been concerned, in

particular, about deployments of advanced U.S. military capabilities in the ROK, provision of offensive U.S. weapons to Seoul, overflights of South Korea by U.S. nuclear-capable bombers, and regular U.S.-ROK exercises that are targeted at the DPRK (such as Ulchi Freedom Guardian, Key Resolve/Foal Eagle, and naval exercises in the Yellow Sea). While U.S. and ROK officials describe these activities as defensive, Chinese commentary often portrays them as destabilizing and provocative.⁴⁰

Planned U.S. deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea has become a particular constraint on trilateral cooperation. Chinese analysts contend that the THAAD system will undermine China's nuclear deterrent by extending U.S. ability to observe Chinese missile launches, and put strategic pressure on China by integrating U.S. missile defenses across Asia.⁴¹ In 2016, Xi attempted to convince both Obama and Park to reconsider the deployment, but to no avail.⁴² China has also used economic pressure, such as restricting imports of South Korean cosmetics, in a bid to convince Seoul to oppose deployment.⁴³ Conversely, U.S. and ROK officials argue that THAAD is needed to defend South Korea from North Korean missiles and is not aimed at China.⁴⁴

U.S. POLICY DEBATES

In response to North Korea's two nuclear tests in 2016, U.S. analysts have come to different conclusions about how to leverage China to deal with North Korea. Some emphasize positive engagement (a continuation of the status quo), others want to prod China into reducing its economic ties with North Korea through the threat of sanctions, and still others discount China's role and emphasize military solutions. This section assesses each of these views.

Persuasion

One school of thought argues that the United States should continue to court increased Chinese support through reassurance and dialogue. A 2016 Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) task force report, for instance, argued (as the preferred alternative with other options possible) that China plays a key role in bringing North Korea back to the negotiating table. To encourage Beijing, the report suggested a new dialogue that would discuss the "disposition of U.S. forces" on the Korean Peninsula and try to persuade China that the United States is not seeking regime change in Pyongyang. In addition, the report promoted Park's suggestion for five-party talks involving China, the United States, Russia, the ROK, and Japan as a useful policy coordination mechanism.⁴⁵ Scott Snyder similarly argues that the U.S. and Chinese presidents should expand policy talks based on China's growing consternation with North Korean policies under Kim Jong-un.⁴⁶

Adherents to this approach are most receptive to the idea of U.S.-ROK-China coordination. The 2016 CFR report urged U.S. and ROK officials to try to assuage China's concerns that a unified Korea under Seoul's leadership would negatively impact the strategic balance. For instance, South Korea could try to persuade China that its economic stakes in the North would be "respected" during unification.⁴⁷ The report also suggests that a trilateral mechanism could discuss practical issues such as border control, port management, and how to handle refugees in the event of a crisis.⁴⁸ Similarly, Stephen Haggard suggests that the three countries need to "eliminate divisions" among themselves on how to handle North Korea, "even amid sensitive issues" such as THAAD deployment.⁴⁹ A U.S. participant in a Track 2 dialogue hosted by the NCAFP also encouraged trilateral cooperation on issues such as sanctions implementation and intelligence sharing.⁵⁰

The strength of this approach is that it would be least disruptive to the larger U.S.-China relationship and would facilitate new types of bilateral and multilateral coordination. This could improve information sharing and routine policy coordination between the two countries, as well as with the ROK and others, which could be useful in facilitating a response to a future North Korean provocation. The weakness is that, as an extension of the status quo, the approach is unlikely to lead to China significantly expanding its pressure on North Korea. As Evans Revere argues, “China is not yet ready to regard the DPRK as a net strategic liability.”⁵¹ Thus, even if Beijing were to subscribe to additional sanctions, it would remain unwilling to take any steps that it thought would destabilize North Korea.

Pressure

A second school of thought focuses on prodding Beijing to sharply reduce ties with North Korea through the threat of secondary sanctions. Advocates point to the 2005 Banco Delta Asia case as an example of how targeted pressure on small-scale firms can lead to industry-wide reluctance to sustain cooperation with North Korea out of a desire to protect more important equities in the U.S. market.⁵² As noted above, the Obama administration started to use this technique in its decision to sanction a Chinese trading company in 2016. But more steps could be taken. Evans Revere writes that secondary sanctions could be imposed on Chinese companies, banks, and state-owned enterprises that deal with North Korea, while some firms, such as travel or tourism companies, should be shuttered entirely.⁵³ The United States might also encourage its NATO and Asian allies to target the same Chinese firms.⁵⁴

If successful, this approach could result in North Korea losing economic assistance, revenue, and technical expertise. However, there are two downsides. First is that an expansion of sanctions against Chinese firms would create friction in U.S.-China relations at a time when leaders in both countries generally want to avoid conflict. Nevertheless, this concern should not be overblown. China’s Foreign Ministry responded to the 2016 U.S. sanctions on a Chinese firm merely by reiterating Beijing’s opposition to unilateral sanctions in principle and calling on Washington to avoid undermining “China’s legitimate interests.”⁵⁵ Beijing might not react strongly to targeted sanctions against small-scale local firms, especially those operating in clear violation of UN sanctions, but might respond more intensively to steps against larger, more politically influential companies.

Second, reduction of Chinese economic assistance to North Korea might not make an appreciable difference in Pyongyang’s ability and motivation to pursue a nuclear capability. North Korea has already taken steps to become more self-reliant, such as relying more on domestic manufactures than on Chinese imports.⁵⁶ Thus, the regime might be able to pursue the economic modernization component of its byungjin strategy (which calls for concurrent progress on economic and nuclear development) even if Chinese firms scale back or cease operations in North Korea. Another aspect is that the North’s strategic impetus to acquire a nuclear capability is likely far more important than concerns about losing relatively small amounts of revenue in either legal or illicit trade with China.⁵⁷ Thus, the risk is that this approach might become an ineffective chimera for U.S. policymakers.

Bypassing

A third school of thought advocates bypassing China in favor of greater emphasis on military solutions to North Korean threats. This argument recognizes that the status quo has failed to change North Korean behavior and doubts that China either has the ability or willingness to use sufficient pressure to cause such a change. At a National Defense University symposium on North Korea held in November 2015, for instance, one U.S. participant argued that sanctions have a “miserable” track record of effectiveness and suggested that China would never use its leverage effectively due to concerns about instability. Instead, the participant said that the U.S. government should strengthen cooperation with the ROK and Japan on a bilateral and trilateral basis.⁵⁸ Similarly, Robert Manning and James Pryzstup fault the UN Security Council for weak responses to North Korean provocations and focus on increasing U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation.⁵⁹

Along these lines, there has also been some recent discussion on the conditions under which the U.S. military might have to conduct a preemptive strike on North Korea. Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who co-directed the 2016 CFR report on North Korea, gained attention when he said that the United States could “theoretically take out launch capabilities on the launch pad or take them out once they’re launched.”⁶⁰ Several recent commanders of U.S. Forces Korea, including Burwell Bell and Walter Sharp, have also argued that preemptive strikes should be used in the case of imminent threats.⁶¹ However, there has been no apparent discussion of *preventive* strikes (i.e. those that would take place without indication of an impending launch), due both to difficulties in ensuring complete destruction of North Korean nuclear material and concerns about retaliation against Seoul.

The most obvious weakness of this approach is that it could invite a strong North Korean response. Strengthening military cooperation among U.S. allies could lead Pyongyang to conduct further provocations, while preemptive strikes could precipitate a war on the Peninsula. There could also be negative repercussions for U.S.-China relations. As previously discussed, THAAD deployment has been a major friction point between Beijing, Washington, and Seoul. China has already retaliated against South Korea in the economic realm, and could adopt other responses, such as strengthening Sino-Russian military cooperation.⁶² Beijing is likely also to be concerned about increasing trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation (though some Chinese analysts argue that Japan-ROK divisions limit the extent of cooperation between these U.S. allies).⁶³ Nevertheless, given North Korea’s emerging ability to deploy a nuclear ICBM, Beijing’s concerns are unlikely to deter a U.S. president seeking stronger missile defenses, alone or in concert with its allies. In the absence of Chinese pressure causing a shift in North Korea’s priorities, military deterrence and denial are likely to become the preferred option for the United States.

CONCLUSION

U.S. efforts to influence China’s decision-making calculus on North Korea continued during the first few months of the Trump administration. The DPRK issue was on the top of the agenda during Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s March 2017 visit to Beijing and during the initial Trump-Xi summit, held at Mar-a-Lago, Florida, in April. The administration’s early attempts to convince China to increase pressure on North Korea centered on economic

incentives. Taking to Twitter, Trump hinted that China might receive a better “trade deal” with the United States if it helps “solve the North Korea problems.” Trump also suggested that his decision on whether to label China as a “currency manipulator” would be contingent on Beijing’s willingness to sanction North Korea.⁶⁴ Underlying these views was the argument—consistent with one made over the last fifteen years—that China holds unique leverage over the situation. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster noted that 80 percent of North Korean trade flows through China and that “all of their energy requirements are fulfilled by China.”⁶⁵

According to media reports, the Trump administration’s policy review on North Korea also suggested a more coercive tact towards China if persuasion fails. This could involve additional penalties on Chinese firms that do business with North Korea, which would be consistent with Trump’s campaign statements.⁶⁶ One sign that the administration was prepared to follow through on those recommendations was a \$1.19 billion fine levied against Chinese electronics firm ZTE for violating U.S. sanctions on Iran.⁶⁷ Recent UN investigations detailing the ways in which Chinese firms have avoided international sanctions on North Korea, including in areas such as missile technology, might undergird new U.S. secondary sanctions.⁶⁸

However, the Trump administration also appeared wary about China’s willingness to exert enough pressure to impede North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. Asked about whether China would act in a meaningful way, McMaster said only, “We’ll see what happens.”⁶⁹ Trump himself claimed that a 10-minute conversation with Xi at Mar-a-Lago led him to the view that China’s ability to influence the situation is “not what you would think.”⁷⁰ Such doubts might spur the Trump administration to explore a range of alternatives. During a visit to South Korea, Vice President Mike Pence said that “all options are on the table,” pointing to recent U.S. missile strikes in Syria and Afghanistan as signs of U.S. resolve to act unilaterally.⁷¹ Other statements and activities not involving China included reaffirmation of U.S. security commitments to Tokyo and Seoul, pledges to complete the deployment of THAAD, and the redeployment of a U.S. aircraft carrier strike group to the Korean theater.⁷² Those steps are more in line with U.S. strategists who argue against over-reliance on China.

Ultimately, the Trump administration might have to pursue a North Korea strategy that places less emphasis on Chinese assistance. China might be convinced to take actions, such as reducing coal purchases from North Korea or agreeing to additional UN Security Council sanctions, and will likely continue to tout its commitment to nonproliferation on the Peninsula.⁷³ However, there is no evidence that China is prepared to assume the risks attendant with imposing more severe costs on North Korea, such as cutting off Pyongyang’s fuel supplies. On the contrary, China’s trade volume with North Korea in the first quarter of 2017 grew by over 37 percent compared to the same period in 2016.⁷⁴ Absent a significant change in China’s North Korea policy, the United States might have to ratchet up its military posture and increase alliance coordination in ways that create friction in U.S.-China relations.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that China can, or should be, excluded from U.S. strategy. Enforcement of UN sanctions, though unlikely to deter North Korea from pursuing nuclear weapons, could make that process costlier and more time consuming. Moreover, the possibility that China could subscribe to additional sanctions that impede the North’s progress

even more should not be discounted. Dennis Wilder notes that China has been willing to ratchet up pressure on North Korea when the United States has signaled an intent to sanction Chinese firms, suggesting that Beijing might be convinced to do more.⁷⁵ U.S. arguments could continue to highlight the instability that would occur as North Korea strengthens its nuclear capabilities, such as pressure for Japan and South Korea to develop their own deterrents and the chance that the United States might give more thought to preemption or other action short of war.

In addition, the Trump administration should consider expanding engagement with China in the area of contingency planning. U.S. analysts argue that discreet talks between the U.S., Chinese, and ROK militaries are needed to avoid accidents and miscommunications in the event of a North Korean crisis, and to determine how each side can contribute to common objectives such as securing nuclear material or responding to a humanitarian crisis.⁷⁶ Beijing has been willing to address some of these issues in general terms at the Track 2 level, but has avoided direct talks for several reasons, including the view that the Kim Jong-un regime is not in imminent danger of collapsing and concerns that leaks about such talks would embarrass the DPRK.⁷⁷ Willingness by U.S. and ROK forces to share information on contingency plans could encourage the PLA to respond in kind. But the main argument should be that both countries have an interest in effective crisis management. One Chinese interlocutor argues with only a trace of hyperbole that both countries want to avoid wandering into a “second Korean War.”⁷⁸

**The views expressed in this paper are the author’s own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense or the U.S. government. For helpful feedback on earlier drafts, the author thanks Jim Pryzstup and Phillip Saunders.*

ENDNOTES

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