

## Will Beijing Blink again on Pyongyang?

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Even by the standards of a rogue nation, North Korea's recent behavior has been outrageous. First, it tested a solid-fuel medium-range missile to demonstrate its rapidly expanding arsenal of dangerous weapons. Then it reportedly dispatched a team of assassins to kill Kim Jong Nam, the half-brother of the country's ruler, in Malaysia. There seems little doubt that Pyongyang was behind the murder. Either way, the brazenness of the assassination, which involved the use of the deadly nerve agent VX in an international airport terminal in Kuala Lumpur, has shocked the world.

Amid growing international pressure to punish North Korea for its flagrant violation of international law, no country faces as acute a dilemma as China, Pyongyang's long-time patron. Beijing also served as the protector of the hapless Kim Jong Nam who, until his murder, had taken refuge in the Chinese gambling enclave of Macau.

For Beijing, North Korea under the rule of Kim Jong Un has become more of a strategic liability than an asset. Since Kim Jong Un assumed power in 2011 after the death of his father, Kim Jong Il, he has purged senior officials with close links to China and accelerated Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs. In the last five years, North Korea has conducted three nuclear tests and has touted its advances in increasing the destructive power of its nuclear devices and developing long-range ballistic missiles.

Beijing's inability (some would say reluctance) to apply pressure to stop Pyongyang from engaging in such menacing behavior has come at a huge cost to itself. Sino-American tensions have consequently risen because Washington has concluded that, if China cannot rein in North Korea, the U.S. must take action to protect itself and its regional allies. One of the most important steps taken by former U.S. President Barack Obama was his decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea.

Alarmed that THAAD's powerful radar can spy deep into China and undermine China's own nuclear deterrence (a claim the U.S. has rejected), China has launched a relentless campaign against THAAD and tried to pressure South Korea to back out of its agreement with the U.S. to base THAAD on its territory. While vehemently opposing THAAD, Beijing has shied away from making Pyongyang pay a real price for its misbehavior.

When the United Nations Security Council passed new sanctions against North Korea in March 2016 in the wake of its nuclear and missile tests, Beijing managed to insert language that created loopholes for China to continue to trade with North Korea.

China's policy toward North Korea may be changing now. On Feb. 18, it announced that it would suspend all coal imports from North Korea for the rest of the year. Since coal accounts for about a third of North Korea's export earnings and China is the only country that imports North Korean coal, Beijing's decision will hurt Pyongyang's wallet. The true extent of the damage, however, is debatable because China imported \$160 million worth of coal last December, exceeding the amount allowed under the U.N. sanctions.

However disappointed one may feel about China's previous policies on North Korea, Beijing's latest move should be seen as a step in the right direction as it creates an opportunity for China and the U.S. to try to work together to stabilize a very dangerous situation.

#### Wooing Trump

In all likelihood, Chinese President Xi Jinping authorized the move to offer an olive branch to U.S. President Donald Trump after he recently reversed himself and affirmed the "One-China" policy, backing away from his earlier warm approach to Taiwan, while also putting him on the spot. For Xi, it is critical to demonstrate some good faith to Trump on North Korea, which is becoming the U.S. president's toughest foreign policy challenge. Levying the most punishing sanction on North Korea in years should foster the impression in Washington that Beijing is at least doing something to help the new administration.

At the same time, however, Xi is also expecting something in return. At a minimum, he has placed the ball in Trump's court. From Beijing's perspective Washington is supposed to rethink Obama's policy of "strategic patience" toward North Korea and reengage Pyongyang diplomatically. Once the Trump administration starts to talk to the Kim Jong Un regime, the pressure is on the U.S. to deliver results.

Beijing's suspension of coal imports from North Korea may also have another more ambitious objective in mind: pushing the Trump administration to reverse Obama's decision on THAAD. Obviously, stopping coal imports from North Korea may not be sufficient to persuade Washington to do so. But Beijing's move may be an opening bid. Since Trump is known as a transactional president whose dominant interest is getting a better deal than his business partner, China's strategy might work.

If China is doing something that can, at least temporarily, slow down North Korea's advances toward acquiring nuclear warheads and intercontinental missiles, Trump can reciprocate by giving something back in return. As long as Trump believes that agreeing not to deploy THAAD (his predecessor's decision that he is not obligated to honor) gets him a better deal, he might find Beijing's proposition too attractive to turn down.

The problem with Beijing's new thinking, unfortunately, is that a third party -- Kim Jong Un -- has a say in how things are going to work out.

If China believes that the U.S. must now take the initiative to reengage North Korea, such a development is impossible in the immediate aftermath Kim Jong Nam's assassination. The Trump administration has already denied a visa to a senior North Korean envoy previously scheduled to travel to New York to meet with former U.S. officials. Unless Trump ignores the international outcry against the lawless Kim Jong Un regime and authorizes the resumption of diplomatic contact with Pyongyang, the U.S. and North Korea will not be talking to each other any time soon.

Continued snubbing by the U.S. and growing pressure from China may likely motivate Kim Jong Un to up the ante. His calculation is that the only way he can get Washington's notice and make Beijing back off is to further escalate his hostile behavior. In practical terms, this could mean more tests of nuclear warheads and long-range missiles. Kim may feel that, once he has gained these capabilities, Washington and Beijing will not only be powerless to stop him, but also have to treat him as the ruler of a genuine nuclear weapon state.

Any further escalation by Kim will force the hands of both Trump and Xi. For Trump, he must decide between appeasing Kim and confronting him. If he opts for the former and assumes the role of Kim's principal interlocutor, China will be left off the hook, at least until diplomatic reengagement fails. If he opts for the latter, he would be asking Xi to do much more to punish Kim.

The trouble here is that Xi will then face his moment of truth on North Korea. Is he prepared to cut off all support for Kim and risk a regime collapse in a strategic buffer state? In the past, the Kim dynasty has repeatedly called China's bluff when Pyongyang engaged in acts that threatened Beijing's security. But each time China blinked first.

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