
DON'T COUNT ON CHINA OR RUSSIA TO RESOLVE THE NORTH KOREA CRISIS

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10.08.2017

NY Mag, 09 August 2017

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When Russia and China joined the rest of the United Nations Security Council on Saturday in approving a U.S.-drafted sanctions resolution against North Korea, some observers saw it as a hopeful sign that the international system was working: The U.N. and particularly the Security Council seemed to be doing the job they were designed to do, of transcending national politics, managing international crises, and preventing World War III.

President Donald Trump, his administration, and his supporters were certainly happy to take credit for rallying the world around the shared goal of standing up to the North Korean threat. With all due respect to Nikki Haleys diplomatic skills, however, Russias and Chinas decisions to support these sanctions probably had less to do with American resolve and more to do with North Korea growing exponentially more dangerous.

Beijing surely does not relish the thought of a massive, destabilizing war on the Korean peninsula, much less a nuclear exchange in its backyard. Speaking at the ASEAN regional forum of Southeast Asian countries on Monday, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi pointed out that as North Koreas main trading partner, China would pay the greatest economic price for tougher sanctions on the rogue Stalinist regime in Pyongyang. He said his country was willing to take the hit, but Wang has also stressed that the aim of economic pressure must be to bring North Korea to the negotiating table – a goal China has implicitly accused the U.S. and South Korea of hindering with their insistence on pursuing joint military exercises.

For its part, the Trump administration does not necessarily trust China to live up to its promise of strict sanctions enforcement, as it has been known to skirt such obligations in the past. The administration has also repeatedly accused the Chinese government of enabling North Korean dictator Kim Jong-uns bad behavior.

So the two key powers in this crisis are working at cross-purposes and dont trust each other. On the one hand, China wants all parties to do whatever is necessary to resume negotiations and sees Washingtons saber-rattling as an obstacle; on the other, the U.S. seems to think the solution to the crisis is for China to take a tougher stance and views its preference for a softer approach as appeasement.

Controlling 90 percent of North Koreas trade, the Chinese certainly have substantial leverage over the Kim regime, but as Dartmouth professor Jennifer Lind explained in a recent op-ed for CNN,

they are unlikely to use it to help curb Kims nuclear ambitions, because their assessment of the security challenges in Korea is fundamentally different from ours.

To begin with, China sees the U.S. and South Korea as the main instigators of the conflict, not the North, so it is up to us to lower our guns before we can expect Pyongyang to do the same. More important, for China, the main security risk posed by North Korea is the potential collapse of the Kim regime, not the development of ICBMs. Accordingly, while China could theoretically strangle the North Korean economy with a total blockade, it has no desire to do so, as it fears this would precipitate that collapse. The fall of the North Korean regime would send vast numbers of refugees pouring into China, and in the long run, Beijing fears that a unified Korea would mean a permanent U.S. military presence right on its border.

So if Trump thinks the Chinese can be cajoled into putting enough pressure on North Korea to force it into submission, he is likely mistaken. They have made their position perfectly clear: They are willing to get just tough enough with Pyongyang to get to negotiations over a freeze (not a shutdown) of its nuclear program, and no tougher. The rest is on us.

Will the mounting tensions of the past two days, including Trumps cryptic threat of a U.S. military assault or maybe nuclear war, convince China to deal with North Korea on Americas terms? Perhaps, but Beijing has been studiously unimpressed with escalations and ultimatums thus far.

And what about Russia? As Alexander Gabuev, chair of the Russia in the Asia-Pacific Program at the Carnegie Moscow Center, told Newsweek, Moscow doesnt have that much skin in the game and has not that many tools to influence the situation, so they are happy to take a back seat and let China lead the way. From Russias perspective, the sanctions resolution does not do much harm to its commercial interests, Gabuev explained, and it makes the U.S. and its East Asian allies less likely to take escalatory measures.

Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov downplayed Pyongyangs threats in the aftermath of the weekends sanctions bill, noting that this is how North Korea always responds to international pressure, and echoed China in urging the U.S. to open direct negotiations. Russia doesnt want to see war in Korea, but it appears to share Chinas view that the U.S. is more likely to instigate that conflict than North Korea. Therefore, Russia is sending signals that it is not a key player in this crisis and wont be held responsible for a bad outcome.

But hey, at least if we try to shoot down a North Korean ICBM, it probably wont trigger Russias early-warning system and snowball into a civilization-ending global nuclear war, so theres that.

Kaynak/Source: