
RUSSIA ISN'T THE ANSWER TO AMERICA'S PROBLEMS WITH NORTH KOREA

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As tensions near a boiling point between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, some observers have suggested that Russia could step in and play a helpful, moderating role. North Korea, they argue, should be one of the few issues on which Washington and Moscow can find common ground.

In fact, the Trump administration should not look to Moscow for any serious help in dealing with North Korea. Not only does Russia have less influence over Pyongyang than China does, but uses that influence in ways that undermine the international sanctions against the regime. Russian President Vladimir Putin also views the North Korea situation, as with other international issues, through a zero-sum lens: If American standing in the region is under strain, Russia will attempt to enhance its position accordingly. Similarly, if Beijing gets tougher with North Korea, Moscow might look to step in and fill any void left by China. The Kremlin is not interested in seeing the conflict explode into war, but it is willing to exploit every advantage at the expense of Beijing and Washington, even as the situation grows increasingly worrisome.

That is why calls to look to Moscow for help with North Korea should be viewed very skeptically. The head of the Carnegie Moscow Center, Dmitri Trenin, argued in the New York Times last week that Russia can help nudge Pyongyang toward strategic restraint, and help defuse tensions in the meantime, by offering it new economic prospects. Russia could be a broker in de-escalating tensions, he argued. Former Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov took a similar position in a separate op-ed.

And yet the Russian elites zero-sum thinking sees a deteriorating situation between Washington and Pyongyang as an opportunity for Moscow. Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of Russia in Global Affairs, argued recently in the Financial Times, The North Korean nuclear missile crisis has no easy solution, but managing it is both possible and necessary. And if Russia does this skillfully it will strengthen its position in Asia-Pacific and mark another step away from U.S. hegemony in international affairs.

The Kremlin understands the North Korean psychology, Lukyanov continued, since Russias leaders have historically also felt besieged. For North Korea, it is not about bargaining, but survival □ Kim Jong Un knows the fate of Iraqs Saddam Hussein and Libyas Muammer Gaddafi and sees nuclear missiles as his life insurance. In other words, Lukyanov suggests, Moscow feels Pyongyangs pain.

Lukyanov was also channeling the views of his president, Putin, who earlier this month argued that North Korea would rather eat grass than abandon their [nuclear weapons] program unless they

feel secure. With his own country under sanctions, Putin is not interested in seeing sanctions work anywhere else.

Russian officials have been consistent in condemning both the increased sanctions on the regime in Pyongyang and the rhetoric coming out of Washington (on the second part, they have a point). Much less forcefully, they also have characterized North Korean missile launches as provocative. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov slammed Trump's comments last week at the U.N. threatening to destroy North Korea. If you simply condemn and threaten, then were going to antagonize countries over whom we want to exert influence, Lavrov said.

At the U.N., Russia, along with China, has successfully watered down sanctions imposed through the Security Council. As Hannah Thoburn has argued, Russia has economic interests it does not want to jeopardize by getting tougher with Pyongyang.

On the margins of the U.N. General Assembly session last week, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson sounded unconvinced that Russia could play a useful role. If Russia wants to restore its role as a credible actor in resolving the situation with North Korea, it can prove its good intentions by upholding its commitments to established international efforts on nuclear security and arms control, he said.

Tillerson's skepticism is warranted. Even where Moscow could conceivably be helpful on the margins, it has instead opted for the opposite tack. For instance, a new ferry link between North Korea and Russia was opened for the first time this spring, despite U.S. calls for countries to downgrade relations with Pyongyang over its nuclear and missile-testing programs.

A number of recent reports indicate Russia has been defying internationally agreed-upon sanctions on North Korea. According to the Washington Post, Russian smugglers are scurrying to the aid of North Korea with shipments of petroleum and other vital supplies that could help that country weather harsh new economic sanctions. The article goes on to cite increased activity involving North Korean ports and the Russian far east city of Vladivostok, as Russian traders look to exploit openings as China and others seek to tighten the economic screws on Pyongyang. Russia, in other words, is stepping in where China might be stepping away in providing a desperately needed lifeline for North Korea through provision of energy and other goods. It is time for the Trump administration's well-founded frustration with Beijing over North Korea to be expanded to include frustration with Moscow for its most unhelpful role.

There are even suspicions that Russia spun a story, as reported in August in the New York Times, that Ukraine was the source of rocket engines that helped advance North Korean efforts in missile technology. Ukrainian officials vociferously denied the accusations and pointed to Moscow as the source of a disinformation campaign to besmirch Kiev's reputation. Russia, of course, invaded Ukraine in 2014, illegally annexed Crimea, and continues its aggression in the Donbass region. Tarnishing Ukraine in the eyes of the international community through spreading such stories is very much in line with Kremlin tactics.

Finally, the unrivalled brutality of the North Korean regime has never been of concern for Putin. Like Kim, Putin will do whatever is necessary to stay in power, including engaging in gross human rights abuses (albeit not on the scale of North Korea), attacking neighbors, and threatening use of nuclear weapons.

Putin's Russia simply cannot be trusted or be relied upon to play an honest broker role on North

Korea   or pretty much on any other issue, for that matter. If one hopes to find solutions to solving this serious crisis, Moscow is not the place to look.

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