

JIAP OBSERVATION

TOWARD AN “ASIAN” NORTH KOREA

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The Bush Administration seems unable to formulate a coherent policy toward North Korea because it is not examining—or exploiting—three assumptions that it holds about this unpredictable regime. First, the Bush Administration views Kim Jong Il as a gangster—which may well be true—but simply another version of our own gangsters and not, in some sense, a legitimate or credible head of state. Second, the Administration takes as a foregone conclusion that North Korea is a client state of the PRC. And, third, most recently, there is resignation to the view that North Korea’s democratic neighbors are not overly concerned with another nuclear Asian power. By failing to analyze these assumptions, the Bush Administration has hindered a creative response to Pyongyang’s nuclear program. In fact, each assumption presents a means of defusing the North Korean crisis without firing a shot or continued groveling to Beijing.

First, let us begin to address the gangster issue. Diplomatic and military threats are not working with the North Koreans. They do not scare easily and it is time to examine why. There is a disconnect between North Korea’s “leaders” and their people. The latter are simply expendable. Kim Jong Il and his supporters are gangsters supported by profits from internationally illegal activities—drugs, guns, human trafficking, and missile sales. If this deeply held assumption is true, then it is time to cut off his funding. A coordinated, aggressive campaign must be conducted against Kim’s international criminal partners to staunch the flow of funds to North Korea. The most obvious targets are the Yakuza who have extremely close ties to Pyongyang. The Japanese government has far greater control over this group’s activities than they care to admit. Squeezing North Korea’s elites will compel them to search for other sources of revenue.

Second, there is no reason to accept the fact that North Korea is some kind of client of China. The PRC currently is seizing on this assumption to hold out for a deal as the US begs Beijing to reign in their cohort. U.S. interests in the region will deteriorate if this assumption continues to have currency. Maybe they too benefit from Pyongyang’s corruption. Nevertheless, Taiwan must wonder what part of their future is negotiable by the Bush Administration. More important, as long as China is assumed to have some influence over North Korea’s nuclear plans, China can sleep peacefully at night—the missiles are not pointed in their direction. North Korea is *their* “mad dog” keeping everyone at bay and for whom they do not have to take much accountability.

This brings us to the third point—why should we assume that our friends in the region merely accept the status quo? What is to prevent one of North Korea’s neighbors from trying to supplant China as Pyongyang’s friend? South Korea seems to be moving in that direction. Taiwan can play to Kim’s dislike of the PRC. Japan has historic and familial ties to the North. All can easily replace the food, energy, and technical aid given by China. None demand regime change. By taking North Korea out of China’s orbit, North Korea becomes a real threat to Beijing. Thus, China is left only to bargain over North Korean power and keeping unwanted “arrangements” off their doorstep. Beijing may be more interested in defanging North Korea if Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons were “Asian” as opposed to simply proxy Chinese.

China needs to feel uncomfortable with a nuclear North Korea and Kim Jong Il needs to feel simply uncomfortable. To accomplish this, the US needs to lose its big brother attitude toward its Asian allies and let them pursue their own security arrangements in the region and opportunities with North Korea. This does not mean encouraging Japan or South Korea to develop their own nuclear weapons. This does not scare Beijing. Independent ties between an economically needy North Korea and its democratic neighbors do. A nuclear North Korea friendly to America's allies is unwanted. The Chinese are unlikely to view this as a good alternative to the current invidious dependent upon their border.

To exploit the advantages described above it will take a wily, backboned American foreign policy team that keeps a tight reign on Bush's domestic policy advisers and a light touch on the US's Asian allies. Thus, far the opposite has been true. There are lessons to be learned from the Dear Leader Kim Jong Il, the most critical being that it is time stop hinting at threats and to take the initiative by encouraging independent allies and turning weaknesses into strengths. China needs to be feel threatened by a nuclear North Korea if they going to help resolve the current crisis.

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