

The Chinese Navy Can Make North Korean Sanctions Bite

Joint U.S.-Chinese naval operations would put real pressure on Pyongyang — and are in China's interests, too.



China's Peoples' Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) sailors march in Hong Kong on July 1, 2015. (Isaac Lawrence/AFP/Getty Images)

On Feb. 8, the U.S. State Department released the latest in a series of acknowledgements that the United States and China agree that solving the problem of a nuclear-armed North Korea will take cooperation between the two nations. China has run hot and cold on North Korea before, but the current desire to rein in its rogue neighbor and sometime ally seems sincere. But a step that would truly demonstrate mutual resolve against the Kim regime's pursuit of a nuclear arsenal is for the United States and China to cooperatively enforce sanctions against North Korea through a combined maritime interdiction operation.

In late 2017, the United Nations Security Council passed a series of increasingly harsh sanctions on North Korea in response to its recent missile and nuclear warhead tests. The sanctions are intended to seriously curtail North Korea's trade, as well as targeting specific government entities and halting joint ventures with other countries. This is a strong message, but sanctions alone, which have been tried for decades, are not enough.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has often said he views these sanctions as primarily the work of the United States, a view reiterated in a statement by North Korea's U.N. mission on Feb. 12. Convincing him that the time has come for him to reconsider his nuclear ambitions will require China's active participation in sanctions enforcement. Such a move would convince North Korea that its sole ally and biggest trading partner had reached the end of its strategic patience.

But what could persuade China to cooperate with the United States like this? China has demonstrated extraordinary patience with North Korea, often in ways that seem to run counter to China's long-term strategic goals. That now seems to

be changing.

As China increasingly seeks to assert itself as a dominant player in the region, North Korea is becoming a liability. China still views North Korea as a strategic buffer against democratic South Korea and, by proxy, the United States, but the cost of propping up an embarrassing regime is outweighing the strategic value. What China seeks most of all is regional stability, and North Korea's actions are having a markedly destabilizing effect on the Korean Peninsula.

North Korea's actions have increasingly pricked China in sensitive spots. In May 2017, Kim chose to test a nuclear weapon just hours before President Xi Jinping was set to deliver a keynote speech on China's increasing diplomatic influence. When North Korea directed its actions primarily at the United States, China was willing to tolerate them. Now that they have become an impediment to Xi's domestic and diplomatic ambitions, that calculus has changed.

It is true, as many scholars have observed, that China will not intentionally allow the North Korean regime to collapse. China has a vested interest in preventing the potential flood of refugees streaming into its northeastern regions that might result from the sudden implosion of Kim's regime — a nightmare scenario that is not in the United States' interest, either. But there seems to be an increasing willingness to apply the screws to Kim over the nuclear issue.

That's because Chinese leaders are beginning to understand that a nuclear-armed North Korea is a threat to their national interests as well. China's ambassador to the United States, Cui Tiankai, has made clear that a nuclear-armed North Korea is as unacceptable to China as it is to the United States and the rest of the Asia-Pacific region. A nuclear-armed North Korea has the potential to spark a regional nuclear arms race that could spread to South Korea, Japan, and even Taiwan, whose own past nuclear program was curbed in 1988 under U.S. pressure. And while the possibility seems remote, North Korean nuclear weapons could aim at Chinese cities far more easily than American ones. Kim may one day find himself in need of a deterrent against Beijing if Xi's government decides to act upon the growing belief in Chinese policy circles that Kim's continued rule is detrimental to Chinese ambitions. Because it sees regional stability as the bedrock of continued economic growth, China cannot afford either a regional arms race or an unpredictable nuclear threat on its border.

As the pressure from sanctions mounts, Kim will likely seek alternative methods to maintain trade with the few nations willing to continue their illegal relationship with North Korea. Because it shares borders with only China and South Korea, North Korea will need to turn to the sea for what little trade it can muster. Maritime forces will be needed to interdict illicit shipping emanating from North Korea. The United States could conduct such an operation unilaterally or with close allies, but a joint effort with China would have a far greater impact.

Andrew Winner of the U.S. Naval War College recently argued that a U.S. interdiction effort to enforce the latest sanctions on the North Korea would have only a marginal impact in shaping Kim's behavior. His assessment is correct if one views interdiction of maritime shipping solely as a means to an end. Decades of sanctions have forced North Korea to develop what John Park, director of the Harvard Kennedy School's Korea Working Group, refers to as "sanctions immunity," in essence a resiliency developed in response to decades of sanctions that enables North Korea to withstand their most debilitating effects. There is little, short of completely cutting off North Korea from the outside world, that would drive major changes in Kim's calculus.

But it isn't the sanctions themselves that really matter in this case, it is who is enforcing them. If the United States attempts to enforce sanctions alone or only with close allies, the latest round of sanctions is unlikely to deter North Korea. Chinese participation and joint enforcement, however, would send Kim the message he needs to hear.

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