

China Is No Help on North Korea

By ELLEN BORK

When China releases one political prisoner while arresting dozens more, threatens Taiwan, or does any number of other disconcerting things, American officials find themselves needing to justify the policy of engagement. One of the ways American administrations deflect attention from the unsatisfactory record of the bilateral relationship with China is to claim that Beijing is helpful on other important matters. In doing this, policymakers routinely cite North Korea as an example of Chinese cooperation.

They would do well to stop. As China has shown once again in the most recent episode of North Korean nuclear blackmail, Beijing is not helpful when it comes to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Quite the opposite is the case. It is America that helps advance Chinese interests in North Korea.

First, by various accounts, Beijing does not have Kim Jong Il's confidence. It may be that an ideological gap has been opened up by China's economic reforms. Other obscure and bizarre factors may also contribute. According to one story, Kim Jong Il believes China responsible for the death of his mother. Russia also may be a point of tension between China and North Korea. Beijing is not keen on a Russian-North Korean railroad project that would bypass Chinese territory, but Kim Jong Il has an affini-

ty for Russia dating to his boyhood spent in Khabarovsk.

Regardless, China would need no special access to help solve the North Korea problem. China is uniquely situated to impose economic pressure on the regime and relieve the suffering of North Korean refugees, not to mention cooperate in curbing North Korea's

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weapons programs. Instead, China has balked at American efforts to refer North Korea's nuclear violations to the United Nations Security Council and still allows North Korean companies operating inside China to procure components for ballistic missile systems, as the CIA has told Congress. Reportedly, North Koreans operating in China have bought tons of a chemical used to extract plutonium from spent reactor fuel. Some experts agree it is destined for nuclear production.

Then there is China's treatment of

North Korea's refugees. China repatriates them despite desperate conditions inside the country and despite its obligations under international refugee conventions. After North Koreans began invading diplomatic facilities in Beijing last spring, China launched a crackdown that has reduced their numbers vastly. According to the Washington Post, the numbers may have been reduced to as few as 20,000 from a high of 200,000. China also thwarts North Koreans attempting to depart by boat for dangerous journeys to Japan or South Korea. This is no humanitarian gesture, since refugees returned to the DPRK face imprisonment, forced labor, and even execution for treason.

Yet China's behavior makes a grotesque kind of sense considering its interests in North Korea, which have little or nothing to do with ours. China sees the continued existence of Kim Jong Il's regime as a crucial obstacle to an economically strong, united democratic Korea, allied with America, on China's border. Rather than helping to weaken and ultimately bring down the DPRK, China uses America and confrontations over the nuclear program as a way to prop up the regime. China supported the 1994 Agreed Framework as a way to help Kim Jong Il's regime survive. As an added benefit, America bears the burden of supplying oil and other aid to the North Korean regime. Better still, America's belief that China

is indispensable to a solution invests China with importance while making America beholden to Beijing for its influence — even if China actually has none. It's a great little game that Beijing has no motive to stop playing.

Over the years, American officials have strained to find external considerations to justify our China policy. At one time, America touted Chinese contributions to a Cambodian peace settlement and transition to democracy. But then China endorsed a bloody coup by Cambodian dictator Hun Sen, and that was taken off the list. These days, America claims China is helping with anti-terrorism. Whether it is or not, America has given up a great deal in pursuit of Chinese cooperation, tacitly accepting China's crackdown on ethnic minorities in Western China.

Changing entrenched habits is difficult, and the temptation to find China a willing partner in world affairs is strong. For years, because of its historic and geographical ties, China has been accorded pride of place in American policy toward North Korea. Changing that would require extensive revisions to our North Korea policy and carry major implications for the way we deal with China. While that may seem like a big task, the price of not doing so is to continue working against our own best interests in both countries.

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