



China is the United States's North Korea problem

November 26, 2019 **Joshua Eisenman, Kelli Kennedy** *The Hill*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; China; North Korea

During last week's Democratic debate, former Vice President Joe Biden was asked how he would resolve the long-running nuclear crisis with North Korea. His answer? That he would work with China to help put pressure on the DPRK. "The way we do that is we make clear to China, which I have done personally with the President of China... They in fact can put pressure on North Korea."

That's a nice sentiment, to be sure. But Biden, like so many others, has the situation exactly backwards.

The problem with U.S. strategy toward North Korea is that it continues to rely on China. For decades, American policymakers, analysts and academics fell into the trap of mirror-imaging, mistakenly believing that China would be changed from the outside through continued engagement. Today, we may have woken up from that particular illusion, but many prominent Democrats and Republicans in Washington still continue to cling to the fanciful notion that China will pressure Pyongyang to help bring about denuclearization.

If they are properly motivated and have their concerns mollified, the thinking goes, China's leaders can be convinced to help achieve U.S. policy objectives vis-à-vis North Korea.

In this way, for more than two decades, U.S. policymakers have intentionally pulled China into North Korea policy. The playbook is well-worn: First, call for denuclearization, then when asked how to achieve that outcome, call on Beijing to help lean on Pyongyang to make it so. But the hard truth is that Beijing has no interest in playing ball — and indeed never has. Therefore, if the United States and North Korea want to make real bilateral progress, they need to accept that China is part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

Perhaps the clearest statement of China's intent towards the DPRK was articulated by Chairman Xi Jinping at his 2017 Mar-a-Lago meeting with President Trump. In response to the U.S. President's request for China's help on North Korea Xi — citing thousands of years of history with Korea — politely declined.

Xi has kept his word. In his subsequent meetings with Kim Jong Un — a total of five, as of this writing — Xi has made no effort to advance bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and the DPRK, or to encourage Pyongyang to denuclearize. China's enforcement of multilateral sanctions against North Korea, meanwhile, remains virtually non-existent, something U.S. officials have acknowledged.

In short, China is doing everything possible to frustrate both UN sanctions and American diplomacy toward North Korea; yet there remains a bizarre and baseless Washington consensus that Beijing, if properly incentivized, will help resolve the long-running nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

As recently as this past May, yet another bipartisan group of top American Asia experts called on the administration to "work with China to ensure that Beijing wields this influence constructively."

It won't, and the continued pursuit of this failed approach amounts to little more than wishful thinking and willful denial of China's stance.

Hard as it may be to accept, the inconvenient truth is that China's leaders prefer the *status quo*, and there is nothing that the U.S. can do to change their minds or mollify their concerns. Even a prosperous and economically integrated North Korea — an outcome that is often set out as a mutual goal for both Washington and Beijing — would be an unpredictable force in the region, and likely to expand ties to U.S. allies at Beijing's expense.

Ultimately, if U.S.-DPRK negotiations are ever to see tangible results, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un must decide to decisively cast his lot with the U.S. and its allies. In order for that to happen, however, both sides must agree to limit, not rely on, Chinese involvement and influence.

History has shown that a U.S. policy that relies on Chinese pressure on North Korea will fail, and that progress toward peace can only be achieved *despite* Beijing's involvement, not because of it.

Joshua Eisenman is an associate professor at the University of Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs and Senior Fellow for China Studies at the American Foreign Policy Council, where Kelli Kennedy is a Junior Fellow.