



What Does China Say About North Korea?

By Jackson Kwok, 5 May 2017

With two unstable leaders in Pyongyang and Washington keeping the world in suspense about their next moves, China's state media has presented Beijing as the voice of reason in the region. Reports published by the state-run Xinhua News Agency have [repeatedly advocated](#) returning to multilateral negotiations and dialogue, and on Wednesday the [spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged](#) 'all relevant parties ... (to) stop irritating each other'.

Nevertheless, Chinese commentary has been more critical of Pyongyang compared to previous instances where North Korea conducted missile and nuclear tests. When Pyongyang detonated a nuclear device in January 2016, Beijing's reaction was fairly limited by comparison. But in recent weeks China's state media has continuously lambasted not only the governments of South Korea and the United States for what the Chinese government considers a series of brash decisions, but also Pyongyang.

The *People's Daily*, mouthpiece of the Communist Party, has targeted all three governments involved. A semi-authoritative ['Voice of China' \(钟声\) editorial accused](#) South Korea and the United States of needlessly heightening tensions on the Peninsula. The editorial argued that Washington and Seoul's 'sabre-rattling' was provoking Pyongyang and escalating tensions. Xinhua [similarly called upon](#) the United States to 'properly face and undertake their own obligations, and avoid fuelling tensions on the Peninsula'.

Yet the *People's Daily* editorial also denounced North Korea for its nuclear program, stating that it must comply with United Nations Security Council resolutions. The editorial states that North Korea is entitled to security as a sovereign state; but Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), has only served to undermine its security. China's proposed solution to North Korea's security dilemma is for Pyongyang to halt its nuclear program, return to multilateral negotiations with other concerned parties, and integrate with the international system. This position reflects China's ongoing frustration with the unwillingness of successive Kim regimes to implement economic reforms, as China did during the 1980s.

Following a UN Security Council resolution in March to implement new sanctions targeting Pyongyang, a Xinhua editorial [argued that economic sanctions were necessary](#), but that 'sanctions are a means, not an end'. The ultimate objective of the sanctions would be the peaceful denuclearisation on the Korean Peninsula. This position was supported by an editorial in the nationalist tabloid *Global Times* which [noted that sanctions and strategic pressure](#) alone would never force Pyongyang into abandoning its nuclear program. Instead, the editorial



argued, the United States must offer North Korea rational incentives – ‘carrots’ – to halt its nuclear program.

The state media fended off international criticism that Beijing has not done enough to curtail Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions. [Xinhua claimed](#) that ‘China has made unremitting diplomatic efforts to bring about North Korean nuclear talks, and China’s important role is clear and obvious for all to see’. While it is true that China remains North Korea’s main source of food, arms and energy, [Beijing is insistent](#) that its ability to rein in Pyongyang is limited, and that ‘the key to solving the Korean nuclear problem is not in China’s hands’.

In a rare lashing-out against its crucial economic backer, an attack by a North Korean state-controlled news outlet on Chinese media was a reminder of the complexity of China’s ties with its neighbour. An editorial published by the Korean Central News Agency on Wednesday chided the Chinese media for ‘test(ing) the limits of the DPRK’s patience’ and accused Beijing of ‘dancing to the tune of the US’. A response from the *Global Times* the following day [dismissed the KCNA article](#) as ‘nothing more than a hyper-aggressive piece completely filled with nationalistic passion’.

As North Korea’s ballistic missile and nuclear programs continue to develop, and as Pyongyang refuses to comply with Beijing’s wishes, China’s state media will likely adopt an increasingly harsher line – particularly if confronted by more verbal attacks from Pyongyang.

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