

NORTH KOREA 'S MENACE, CHINA'S COLLUSION

In the tealeaves left by North Korea's latest international outrage we can read a future we may not like but will have to live with: an increasingly Sinocentric world in which Western ambitions are thwarted by Chinese self-interest.

On the face of it, there's nothing new in this. Powerful states and successful societies put their own priorities first when it comes to international competition for influence, resources or markets. In the process they sometimes align themselves with unsavory regimes or dreadful peoples. During the Cold War the Soviets backed Castro and Mengistu. The Americans made allies of Somoza and Mobutu. During the Nixon administration, you may recall, the phrase was "well, he's an SOB, but he's *our* SOB. The end justified the means. The Politburo saw it the same way. Many Soviets loathed Honecker. Still, he ran East Germany as *their* SOB.

But Cuba, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, or East Germany never could endanger the world the way North Korea can. Even as the American government was hyping Saddam's Iraq as the WMD threat of the post-9/11 era, North Korea was embarked on a program of nuclear-weapons technology diffusion that had already empowered unstable, Islamic Pakistan and had reached all the way to Libya. China knew of it. Japan fretted about it. South Korea had existential concerns about it. But while Saddam cowered in what the media ridiculously called his "spiderhole," Kim Jong-Il and his communist clique were busy with their WMD program (no Iran-style energy-need excuse here), alternately threatening with it and cajoling over it in pursuit of power and concessions.

On the face of it, one might conclude that communist China would wish to constrain North Korea's nuclear ambitions as a matter of self-interest. It would also appear that Chinese and Western interests coincide here: South Korean trade and Japanese capital play major roles in the near-miraculous growth of the Chinese economy. But it is worth remembering that China, too, is ruled by a Politburo. And Kim Jong-Il is China's – well, bad guy. For all the soft-pedaled criticism by the West, the truth is that China has obstructed international efforts to constrain Pyongyang's misdeeds. Is it a coincidence that Kim's much-publicized train ride into China a few weeks ago was followed by the latest outrage on North Korea's part – the unprovoked sinking by torpedo of the South Korean warship the Cheonan, with the loss of 46 sailors?

It is noteworthy how the rest of the world is rushing to explain China's collusion. China has limited influence in Pyongyang, is one refrain. China does not want social instability in its neighbor, is another. China worries about economic collapse and mass migration across its border. China wants evolutionary change in its hard-line communist ally, not collapse. It almost seems – almost – as though Beijing rather enjoys the immediate region's (and the world's) discomfiture. The May 24, 2010 pronouncement by the Chinese Foreign Ministry was telling: "We hope," it said, "[that] all relevant parties will exercise restraint and remain cool-headed."

That certainly will be in China's interest. After all, China has not been the target of North Korea's actions. North Korea has not shot down any Chinese civilian airliners. North Korea has not sunk Chinese

naval vessels. North Korea has not sent missiles across Chinese airspace. North Korea has not abducted Chinese citizens. North Korea is not known to send spies into its communist neighbor.

And so this latest act of state terrorism is likely to fade from view, the bereaved families of the South Korean sailors joining an ever-lengthening list of the North Korean regime's victims at home and abroad. In this divergence of principle between the international community and China, China's short-term priorities prevail, whatever the evidence.

Ahmedinejad and the clerical zealots of Iran must surely be taking notes.