CHINA GETS TOUGH WITH NORTH KOREA / By condemning missile tests, Beijing alters ties with neighbor

Wang Guangya, China's ambassador to the United Nations, joins a unanimous vote condemning North Korea's missile tests. The move could lessen China's role as go-between.

Associated Press photo by Frank Franklin II / SF

China has taken a new gamble in its high-stakes relationship with North Korea, betting that a tough stance against the secretive dictatorship over its weapons programs will win an end to the standoff.

By signing on to the July 19 U.N. Security Council condemnation of North Korea's long-range missile tests, China ended a past tenet of never publicly criticizing its sometime ally and permanently changing the relationship, policy analysts say. In freezing North Korean bank accounts in Macao last week, amid allegations that the North engages in massive counterfeiting and fraud, Beijing further upped the stakes.

Both actions marked a major departure for Chinese policy toward North Korea.

"It's a very important indicator that China and North Korea's allied relationship is over," said Yan Xuetong, director of the Institute of International Studies at Beijing's Tsinghua University. "It is a fundamental change."

Others aren't ready to sound the death knell on China-North Korea ties, but most experts agree that Beijing undoubtedly is taking a tougher line with its contentious ally.

"The U.N. resolution and the freezing of the bank accounts is surely meant to send the
signal that China is serious about the missile launch issue, but I still think that worries about chaos and collapse of the regime mean that Beijing cannot completely walk away from Pyongyang," said Adam Segal, senior fellow for China studies with the Council on Foreign Relations.

Since the latest weapons imbroglio began in 2003, when North Korea pulled out of the global Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, China has played the part of diplomatic go-between, coaxing Pyongyang back to the table and urging the United States and others to soften their anti-North Korea rhetoric. Beijing has attempted repeatedly to calm both sides, and has succeeded in bringing them together several times.

That, Yan says, is what makes Beijing's recent hard line on the weapons situation so dramatic.

China is viewed as the only country engaged in the six-party talks able to bring North Korea to the negotiating table, and these recent actions may lead only to further isolation. "China's action will make the six-party dialogue more difficult to resume, rather than easier," said Yan.

Late last week, all the parties, including North Korea, attended the Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit in Malaysia. But North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam Sun was not present at a meeting on the sidelines to discuss how to proceed. North Korean spokesman Chong Song Il said Friday that U.S. financial sanctions were "making it impossible for us to go to the six-party talks."

China told the four other parties in the six-nation framework -- South Korea, the United States, Russia and Japan -- that a meeting without North Korea would do little good and could even worsen the situation.

Such developments have observers wondering if the United States has put too great a stake in China's influence and diplomatic prowess. Yet even if those forces have been exaggerated, no better option has surfaced.

"I think China is engaged in a very delicate balancing act," said Ann Kent, a China scholar at Australian National University's law school. Beijing is adept at appeasing both sides, she said, even if it appears to be losing patience with North Korea.

"It is still playing a very subtle game of diplomacy and not likely to turn against North Korea and move into the Western camp," Kent said. "Indeed, it can't afford to, given its proximity to North Korea."

The true nature of Beijing's relationship with Pyongyang remains open to speculation. Chinese analysts insist the United States and others greatly overestimate China's influence on North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. Some in the West, meanwhile, say China understates its pull with North Korea to avoid having to take a tough line. The truth, as ever, probably lies somewhere between.

"China's influence is not as simple as one plus one equals two," said Sheng Lijun, a senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. "It depends on how you look at it."

While Kim certainly does not appear to follow instructions from China, it's also true that China is the only country with which his government maintains an actual relationship. The secretive Kim's only known forays out of North Korea of late have been to China, including a trip in January that was believed to be designed to show him economic success need not come at the price of political freedom.

The China-North Korea relationship has been complex from its inception. The two were closely aligned politically through the Korean War in the early 1950s. In the 1960s, North Korea became more dependent on China after rifts between world communist powers led to a decline in Soviet aid to Pyongyang. But when China moved forward in the 1980s with open-door economic reforms, North Korea stayed behind, entrenched in ideology, growing ever more reclusive and insular and, financially and politically, dependent on China. That situation still holds today.

The current uneasy relationship between prosperous China and impoverished North Korea is proving a "critical test" for China's new diplomacy, said Evan Medeiros, a Rand
researcher who studies Chinese foreign policy.

That China is engaged at all is a mark of just how much the country’s foreign policy has evolved. In 1993, for example, when North Korea unexpectedly announced plans to withdraw from the world anti-nuclear agreement, China simply stayed out of the debate. Today, it’s the chief mediator.

“I think this shows that China's diplomacy is evolving and China is struggling with what it means to be a regional great power, if not a global great power,” said Medeiros.

As a member of the World Trade Organization, with trade spats brewing globally and a potentially overheated economy, China simply cannot afford to be isolationist, analysts say. They suggest that helping to broker the North Korean missile talks has been essentially good public relations as Beijing increasingly comes under fire for holding the largest trade surplus in modern history.

“There’s so much tension on the economic side of the relationship,” said Segal, of Council on Foreign Relations. “Clearly, one of the ways the Bush administration has tried to dampen pressure on the economic side is to say China is a partner on the six-party talks and also on the Iran (nuclear weapons) front.”

Yan pointed to Chinese President Hu Jintao’s speech last fall at the United Nations, where he spoke of a “harmonious world.” That suggested a major departure for China from its foreign policy of the last two or three decades, focusing solely on economic development and relative political isolation. Now China wants to establish true global political ties.

China intends to change its world strategy, “from just making money, to making both friends and money,” said Yan.

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