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Questions Grow Over U.N. Curbs on North Korea



Ng Han Guan/Associated Press

A fence along the North Korean border near Dandong, China, one of the principal cities where Chinese goods are distributed to North Korea.

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By [NORIMITSU ONISHI](#)

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TOKYO, Monday, Oct. 16 — Questions over the effectiveness of the Security Council's punitive sanctions on [North Korea](#) for its claimed nuclear test grew Sunday, as both [South Korea](#) and [China](#) — the North's two most important trading partners — indicated that business and economic relations would be largely unaffected.

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A day after the Council unanimously passed the resolution, following nearly a week of intensive diplomatic negotiations, the South Korean government said it would still pursue economic projects with North Korea, including an industrial zone and tourist resort in the North. Those projects are not explicitly covered by the Security Council resolution, but they are an important source of hard currency for the North.

China, which shares a 870-mile porous border with North Korea and is perhaps its most critical economic gateway to the outside world, said Saturday that it had no intention of stopping and inspecting cross-border shipments, as called for, but not specifically required, in the resolution. The Chinese government said nothing on Sunday about how it intended to carry out the sanctions, and American officials said they would be focused on whether the normal trade flow across the border was slowed.

The relative silence on Sunday about how the resolution would be enforced, coupled with the vagaries of the resolution itself, raised concerns that the Security Council action would not have much of an impact for the foreseeable future.

“We’re in the situation where everyone is saying what they won’t do, but no one has yet said what exactly they will do,” said Jonathan D. Pollack, a North Korea expert at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I. “The question for the next few days is what this all means, because there is a lack of specificity in the resolution.”

North Korea, which announced last Monday that it had successfully detonated a nuclear device, has denounced the resolution, accused the Security Council of gangsterism and warned that any American pressure on the North Korean government would be regarded as an act of war. But North Korea has not specified what it may do next in response.

In Washington, Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) said that China was part of “a Security Council resolution that demands very clear cooperation of member

states to make certain that dangerous goods are not getting in and out of North Korea,” and added that she expected cooperation.

But in interviews on two Sunday television programs she acknowledged that exactly how China would cooperate remained unclear, and she hinted that the United States would not rush to interdict North Korean ships at sea, at least initially. Instead, she expects most searches to take place at ports, she said.

“This is a powerful tool, but it’s also a tool that needs to be used carefully,” she said, adding, “I don’t think I want to speculate about how it’s going to be used.” Responding to statements by the Chinese ambassador at the [United Nations](#) that China would not interdict shipments at its border with North Korea, Ms. Rice said on “Fox News Sunday” that China’s support of the resolution was effectively a pledge of “cooperation in stopping the proliferation trade with North Korea.”

She said she was “quite certain” that China would act in accordance with this objective, but she declined to offer details. The resolution approved Saturday condemning North Korea and calling for sanctions against it “came about more rapidly, perhaps, than any in recent memory of this magnitude,” Ms. Rice said on “Face the Nation” on CBS. “So there will be some matters to be worked out.”

In fact, under a loose coalition with other countries around the world known as the Proliferation Security Initiative, a few countries have already boarded ships to and from North Korea in ports throughout Asia. These countries have carried out naval exercises to practice for such interdictions. But their powers to intercept ships in international waters — except when they have permission of the owners, the captain or the country whose flag the ship is flying — have been murky, and remain so under the new Security Council resolution.

The resolution, drafted by the United States, bans trade with North Korea in materials linked with unconventional weapons, and authorizes countries to inspect cargo going into and out of the North. This last measure was diluted, however, by China’s insistence that the resolution state that countries be requested, not required, to do so.

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Steven R. Weisman and David E. Sanger contributed reporting from Washington, and Joseph Kahn from Beijing.

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In Japan, however, enthusiasm for the new resolution was greater. Hawkish politicians close to Prime Minister [Shinzo Abe](#) said the Japanese were prepared to assist the American military in inspecting North Korean ships despite Japan's pacifist Constitution, and called for a debate on whether Japan should possess nuclear arms. Mr. Abe himself has said he has no intention of changing the government's longtime ban on the weapons.

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Like China, South Korea fears that inspecting North Korean ships by force could lead to a military confrontation. As a result, despite pressure from Washington, Seoul has not

joined the three-year-old American-led Proliferation Security Initiative, concerned that intercepting North Korean weapons could begin such an encounter.

“We judged that the contents of the resolution of the [U.N. Security Council](#) do not directly affect the economic cooperation programs between the two Koreas, including Kaesong and Kungang Mountain,” Choo Kyu-ho, the spokesman for the Foreign Ministry, said Sunday, referring to an industrial park and a tourist resort. “We will go ahead with the economic cooperation programs in harmony with the resolution.” Mr. Choo declined to say whether South Korea planned to proceed with long-held plans to expand the Kaesong industrial zone.

Such comments are bound to worry the Bush administration, however, because President [Roh Moo-hyun](#) of South Korea told President Bush in Washington last month that a North Korean nuclear test would drastically change the South’s policy, away from engagement and toward punishment.

Some Korea experts said that with the reluctance of China and South Korea to crack down on North Korea, as well as Russia’s initial unwillingness to take a hard line against the North, it was unclear how effective the sanctions would be.

“Limited sanctions and cooperation will continue, so we’re basically in the same boat as before,” said David C. Kang, a Korea expert at [Dartmouth College](#) who is visiting Seoul. “It’s untenable globally to oppose sanctions right now. So South Korea will go along with them for a while, put some projects on hold, but resume them in a year or sooner.”

Mr. Kang added: “The sanctions are at best kabuki theater. They’re not going to have much effect on North Korea’s behavior.”

China is opposed to restricting the flow of nonmilitary goods to North Korea, which remains one of the most impoverished and isolated countries and depends on that commerce for its economic survival. Chinese border cities like Dandong and Yanji are significant trading posts where North Korean trucks line up daily, stocking up on Chinese food and consumer goods.

China is also North Korea’s biggest supplier of oil, most of it shipped by rail. While the vehicles have to pass customs inspections on both sides, there is no indication that the Chinese strictly control what is sold to North Korea.

As North Korea’s largest trading partner, China accounts for nearly 39 percent of its imports and exports, followed by South Korea, which has a 26 percent share, according to the South Korean government.

Thailand, Russia, and Japan are the North’s other significant trading partners.

Most of the China-North Korea border is demarcated by the Yalu River. While troops patrol the border on both sides, it is widely considered porous, especially in the winter months when the Yalu freezes and people on both sides can cross without fear of detection.

China’s opposition to restricting the flow of nonmilitary goods to North Korea, and what appears to be its reluctance to inspect cargo shipments in or out of the country for materials banned by the United Nations sanctions, could sharply limit their effectiveness.

The utility of seaborne inspections of North Korea cargo ships by the United States or Japan could be undermined if the North Korean government determines that it can import or export goods covered by the sanctions through Chinese ports.

Even so, Beijing agreed to punitive sanctions on North Korea for the first time, and the details of their enforcement may take longer to negotiate. Whether they will be made public remains unclear. Government officials in China typically do not provide detailed information about policies relating to North Korea or other delicate matters.

The resolution came as somewhat of a relief in South Korea, which is caught between its fear of destabilizing the North and its need to show solidarity with its American ally.

The South Korean government’s engagement policy toward the North has been fiercely attacked by the political opposition in the last week. But experts said that the government’s

decision to press ahead with cross-border economic projects indicated that the South would stick to its engagement policy.

“The feeling is that the engagement policy itself was not to blame for the nuclear test,” said Kim Sung-han, a senior analyst at the government-financed Institute for Foreign Affairs and National Security in Seoul. “The issue is how to implement it. Should there be more elements of dialogue or reciprocity? There is the feeling that implementation was not balanced enough. From now on, the government will be more realistic in implementing the engagement policy instead of giving it up altogether.”

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