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“More Than a Nuclear Threat: North Korea’s Chemical, Biological and
Conventional Weapons”

I want to thank you for inviting me here today to speak about North Korea’s threats outside those of nuclear weapons.

It is understandable that with the exchanges between the U.S. and North Korea the past few months that nuclear weapons are the focus of attention regarding the DPRK’s military capabilities. However, one should not lose sight of the fact that there are other significant military threats from North Korea.

Today you will hear about some of those other threats. They consist of North Korea’s chemical weapons, potential biological weapons pursuits, cyber capabilities, overwhelming conventional weapons, and the DPRK’s illegal trafficking of military equipment and materials to raise funds for its military goals.

We have on the panel today experts on the various non-nuclear threats emanating from North Korea, so I will only highlight a few points regarding those North Korean capabilities before discussing some possible diplomatic efforts to address those threats.

The DPRK reportedly has pathogens that can produce anthrax and smallpox. The recent discovery of anthrax antibodies in a North Korean defector has raised fears that North Korea is, in fact, developing biological weapons. Some believe the DPRK can quickly launch an industrial-scale production of deadly pathogens. The DPRK has also reportedly offered to sell biotechnology services to developing nations. North Korea is party to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC). Therefore, any pursuit or use of a biological weapon would violate its obligations under international law.

On chemical weapons, the DPRK has approximately 2,500 to 5,000 metric tons of chemical weapons agents, with the focus on Sarin and VX. These chemical toxins may be fired using conventional artillery, rockets, aircraft, and missiles. The U.S. military reports that there is long-range artillery deployed along the demilitarized zone. North Korea is not a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention (“CWC”).

North Korea has tested short, medium, intermediate, and intercontinental range missiles, as well as submarine-launched ballistic missiles. North Korea fired 23 missiles during 16 tests since February last year. They claim that their ICBMs can hit the US mainland. The DPRK is the 4th largest world military with more than 1.1 million personnel in the armed forces. The country has a large number of aircraft, helicopters, combat vehicles, amphibious vessels, submarines, tanks, armored vehicles, and multiple rocket launches.

In addition to the above, cyberattacks are becoming a vital asset for the country to raise funds as it is a fast and easy way to obtain cash. North Korea has targeted banks and reportedly broken into the ROK military systems. Also, North Korea has been accused of being the mastermind behind the global malware attack last May named “WannaCry.” The attack encrypted and rendered useless hundreds of thousands of computers in more than 150 countries and sought ransom to unlock the machines.

Finally, the DPRK has developed several covert networks for the sale of technology and materials to fund its military programs. It has supplied banned nuclear and ballistic equipment to Iran, Syria, and other countries. The DPRK has money-laundering schemes to sidestep sanctions and then pay for its military programs. While addressing the nuclear threat is the most crucial issue at the moment, we must also take into consideration the different ways in which the DPRK could enrich itself and continue its threats through these other means, including through proliferation.

International Engagement on North Korean Threats

Addressing the DPRK threat is not a challenge that Washington should tackle alone. Threats like cyberattacks are not ones to which any single country can find a solution. The solution requires the global community and cooperation with the private sector. North Korean involvement in chemical and biological weapons programs are not in line with the international norm against the development and use of those weapons and should be part of a global effort to address those programs. Several countries would have to become involved in any enforcement to enforce sanctions being violated by the DPRK.

Few countries have any contact with the DPRK, which limits opportunities for diplomatic exchange. Working with countries that do have that type of relationship, for example, Sweden can be part of a planned diplomatic effort to engage North Korea. Of course, the key to any negotiations on North Korea’s weapons will require North Korea to come to the table, which is a significant challenge. All of the following ideas have that critical caveat in mind.

On chemical weapons, the general goal of the international community should be that the DPRK destroy those weapons, regardless of the fact that the DPRK is not a party to the CWC. Any discussions with the DPRK on such weapons would require the engagement of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and regional states at a minimum. The DPRK should join the CWC as a State Party and agree to destroy its chemical weapons with verification. We have witnessed with the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons that the international community can come together to assist in that process.

Regarding conventional weapons, the primary concern is the overwhelming number of such weapons possessed by North Korea. There should be a reduction in the conventional forces, and more equality in numbers and types of weapons with South Korea as a way to reduce tensions. In this respect, the two sides may negotiate an agreement similar to the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE), and both sides can reduce their conventional weapons to an equal amount and types. Such an agreement would require a permanent and verifiable means of destruction. The CFE Treaty can provide some thoughts on a way forward. Also, we may seek a moratorium on testing missiles during such negotiations. It may, however, be possible to have a separate discussion on missiles independent of talks on conventional weapons.

North Korea is already party to the BWC, and as a result, should not be developing biological weapons. Any activities regarding a biological weapons program should stop. Since there is no verification regime in the BWC, a small number of countries, including those in the region, may agree to a verification scheme. The BWC Implementation Support Unit should be part of any engagements, with additional staff and funding for this particular purpose.

The existing sanctions should be reinforced to ensure the DPRK cannot transit illegal materials and equipment to pay for its military pursuits. Preventing these transits will require a diplomatic push on nations that are violating the sanctions and increased efforts to stop the North Korean ships that may be engaged in smuggling. The illicit transfer of materials and equipment is a topic for discussion at the US and Canada joint meeting in Vancouver on January 16th.

As for cyber-attacks and a way to address cyber issues, there are many conversations taking place in governments and within the non-governmental sector on cybersecurity. However, the complexities of the problem have not yet lead to a possible negotiated response by the international community to cyberattacks. Cyber issues also do not fit comfortably into the traditional lines of arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation. While there is a general agreement that no one wants to be the victim of a cyberattack, there is also a sense that the community is not yet ready to give up its advantages to using cyber to obtain one's own goals. These are of course my views with the understanding that I am not an expert on cyber issues. However, there does appear to be a need for more international discussions amongst states but also with the private sector, academic institutions, and relevant international organizations, to start to address the challenges of cyberattacks more holistically.

Final thoughts

The options outlined above lean heavy on a diplomatic effort and negotiations to address the North Korean military threats. Some rely on existing norms that reflect the agreement by the global community against the possession and use of such weapons. Some have conventions or initiatives that can serve as examples for engaging the North Koreans. However, any negotiation needs an element of trust amongst the parties. There must be some belief that the party on the other side wants to discuss the issues and has something to gain by doing so. If we want North Korea to come to the table, we must temper our threats with real possibilities for diplomacy.

In this respect, it would be extremely challenging to convince North Korea the country to relinquish the weapons it believes it needs for its defense or its domestic purposes. Moving the

DPRK to join the international community that has already moved away from the development and use of chemical and biological weapons, for example, will take time. It is also essential that the international community walk the walk and talk the talk of actions that we want other countries, including North Korea, to agree.

We also need to find ways to make any successes from negotiations sustainable. We have seen in the case of the negotiations on North Korea's nuclear program through the years that what was considered as agreements eventually fell apart. How do we make sure that North Korea does not go back to business as usual? In each situation, there needs to be a mechanism to continue discussions and help verify that the North Koreans are living up to their agreements. In that respect, the DPRK should be part of existing treaty implementation bodies. These include ongoing meetings and events with the OPCW and the BWC. Further, into the future, engagement in other initiatives will be helpful, such as the Global Health Security Agenda, the Global Partnership, and the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism. There may be threat reduction programs that we can engage in with the DPRK. However, none of this will materialize if we do not bring the North Koreans to the table, create an environment for negotiations, engage countries and relevant international organizations as well as the private sector, and move North Korea to be a partner and not an adversary. That will take some time.