

Testimony Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs

“Countering The North Korea Threat: New Steps in U.S. Policy”

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I want to begin by thanking the Chairman and members of the Committee for giving me the opportunity to share some thoughts on this important topic.

Twenty-four years ago a new Administration came into office and immediately confronted a national security crisis involving North Korea. That country was pursuing a clandestine program to develop nuclear weapons, had refused to accept special IAEA safeguards inspections, and had announced its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Over the next year and a half, the Clinton Administration conducted bilateral negotiations with the DPRK which resulted in a controversial deal, one that brought benefits to North Korea in exchange for its return to the NPT and the termination of all its programs to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons.

What happened next is disputed. The American narrative is that the North Koreans dismantled their plutonium program, but secretly launched another program to produce highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons. In its second year in office, the Bush Administration confronted the North over its cheating and effectively terminated the deal done a decade earlier. The DPRK version has the United States first failing to honor its commitments under the deal, and then singling out the North as one point on an “axis of evil” before ending the deal.

In any event, the Bush Administration eventually went on, at different times, to pursue policies of both punitive sanctions and active diplomatic engagement, but to no avail. The Obama Administration did much the same with similar results. Over the years, North Korea has pursued both plutonium production and uranium enrichment programs, built and tested nuclear weapons, and developed and tested ballistic missiles of increasing range. It has put our treaty allies, the Republic of Korea and Japan, at risk of nuclear attack, intermittently provoked them with actions on land and at sea, transferred a plutonium production reactor to Syria – subsequently destroyed by Israel – and now threatens to test an ICBM which it says will be capable of delivering a thermonuclear nuclear weapon to the continental United States.

It seems likely that the new Administration will re-discover old policies, though perhaps pursuing them with new vigor: tougher sanctions to damage North Korea and drive it to the negotiating table, combined with attempts to pressure China to allow those sanctions to work. But we should not be optimistic that this approach will work any better in the future than it has in the past. North Korea is not Iran, it is not integrated into the world economy in a way that makes it vulnerable to sanctions, and its leader was not elected by the people, so his authority and longevity do not turn on delivering prosperity to them. Indeed, we should by now recognize that China's interests regarding North Korea may overlap with ours -- neither of us want to see a war in Northeast Asia -- but they are not congruent. Sanctions that would truly threaten the North's regime, and plausibly bring it to the table in the proper frame of mind, would also risk undermining the regime, and China will not risk such instability on its border.

In looking for another approach, we should first be clear about what we need as an outcome. Too many analysts are now rushing to answer that question by saying that all we need is to stop the North Korean nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs from growing, that aiming for more, completely rolling back the programs, for example, is unrealistic. But it may be, on the contrary, that failing to have more ambitious goals is unrealistic and dangerous.

It may be that entering negotiations with North Korea in which we do not declare our goal to be the return of the DPRK to its former status as a non-nuclear weapon state would appear to have the United States legitimize the North's nuclear weapons status, and thus increase the likelihood that before too long South Korea and then Japan would follow suit. Following such a course has been a topic of discussion in both Seoul and Tokyo of late as both countries assess the credibility of our extending deterrent. It is not only the emerging vulnerability of the US to nuclear blackmail that troubles them, it is also that North Korea may be allowed defense capabilities which we have pressed our allies to forgo. We should not make matters worse in Northeast Asia as we design our policies for dealing with North Korea.

A second, more ambitious goal is to have North Korea meet at least minimum international human rights standards for the treatment of its citizens. It may be counterintuitive to see adding human rights to the agenda as increasing the likelihood of accomplishing our security objectives, but things have changed since we did the deal with the DPRK a quarter century ago. Then, we insulated the nuclear negotiations from human rights concerns, hoping to "keep it simple" and assuming that we could buy the North's restraint on the nuclear weapons issue by offering a substantial nuclear power project. It turned out that since their nuclear weapons program then, as now, was aimed at creating a deterrent to enhance the chances for regime survival, the only deal that would meet their needs was one which addressed the American threat.

In other words, a reasonable interpretation of what goes on here is that the North Koreans see only two ways to insure against US initiated regime change, nuclear

weapons that threaten the US homeland, or a political settlement with the US that genuinely ends hostile relations between us and them. They may have thought they were getting the second in the deal in the 1990s, but there was, in fact, no basis for a dramatic improvement in bilateral relations so long as they maintained a brutal, repressive, totalitarian regime.

If this interpretation is correct, no serious restraint on the North Korean nuclear program should be expected in any deal, unless that deal addresses their security concerns – unless that deal creates the circumstances for a dramatic improvement in US-DPRK relations. And no such improvement is remotely plausible absent a real change in the way the North Korean government treats its own people with respect to human rights.

One way to conceptualize policy that might proceed from this analysis is to envision three phases of engagement over time.

In the first phase, the US and the DPRK would negotiate a roadmap, detailing the steps both sides would take to reach the goals specified by each at the beginning. We would be explicit about the North giving up its nuclear weapons program under international inspection and rejoining the NPT, and meeting specified standards of behavior with respect to human rights. The North would be clear about its goals, presumably to include major modifications in US-ROK military exercises, economic assistance and political moves appropriate to a new relationship with the US. The North would have to agree to suspend nuclear weapons and ballistic missile tests, and avoid any provocations in the DMZ, at sea or anywhere else during this phase. We might expect the North in this phase to want sanctions relief, and to insist that the US and the ROK alter their military exercises in some way.

In the second phase, both sides would take the steps necessary to implement the roadmap, with the US always moving in close coordination with its allies, particularly Seoul, and especially with regard to military exercises.

The third phase would involve serious political engagement between North and South aimed at beginning the process of reunification.

The essence of my remarks is that if our policies are sensitive to an analysis of North Korean goals and motivations, and we are equally as clear about our own objectives, it will lead us to expand our goals and to move in a phased, incremental way to achieve them.

A final word goes to very next steps. Six months ago when I met North Korean representatives for Track II discussions in Kuala Lumpur, I took the opportunity to advise them that they should avoid greeting a new American administration with new nuclear or ballistic missile tests, or any aggressive moves towards the US or its allies, aimed at increasing their leverage in some future negotiation. I suggested that whomever the next President turned out to be, they would not appreciate such

a greeting and would undoubtedly respond with appropriate vigor and certainly not with an inclination to negotiate any time soon. In response, my interlocutor said that his government would have a similar reaction if a new American administration immediately launched new sanctions or made provocative moves in the context of joint military exercises. This should not surprise us.