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U.S. Policy towards North Korea

Chairman Chabot, Representative Bera, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting my colleague Ambassador Robert King and me to testify today on U.S. policy toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

The DPRK government continues to make choices contrary to the interests of its people, its neighbors, and the world community. It flagrantly violates its obligations through its continued pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, posing a growing threat to the United States, our friends and allies in the region, and the global nonproliferation regime. It devotes scarce resources to its illicit weapons programs to its massive standing army, and to elaborate vanity projects for a privileged elite – all while the vast majority of North Korea's nearly 25 million people continue to suffer. More troubling, a UN Commission of Inquiry has concluded that in many instances, the violations it found the DPRK regime to have committed over decades constitute crimes against humanity. And in the last year, the DPRK has repeatedly threatened the United States, and its neighbors, the Republic of Korea and Japan. It is increasingly a global outlier in every sense.

We have no illusions about the nature of the regime, nor its intentions. We have refused to respond to DPRK provocations with concessions. North Korea has obtained no benefits from its bad behavior. Instead, we have tightened sanctions and consistently underscored to the DPRK that neither its occasional and tentative “charm” offensives nor its more frequent periods of aggressive behavior will lead us or the international community to accept a nuclear-armed North Korea. As we seek the negotiated complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea, we know we must keep pressure on Pyongyang or it will not give up the weapons it claims it needs. That is why our policy mix includes sanctions and traditional deterrence measures. In short, ours is a comprehensive approach that seeks to denuclearize North Korea through diplomacy while ensuring deterrence of the North Korean threat.

Diplomacy

We seek a solution to the North Korea nuclear challenge through peaceful, persistent, multilateral diplomacy. The United States has offered — and continues to offer — Pyongyang an improved bilateral relationship provided it takes action to demonstrate a willingness to fulfill its denuclearization commitments and address other important concerns which are also, we believe, shared by the international community. We have consistently signaled to the DPRK that

the door for meaningful engagement is open while applying unilateral and multilateral pressure to steer it toward that door. Our policy has followed this dual-track approach: we are open to engagement when possible, but will continue to apply pressure as needed. Both elements are critical to sharpening Pyongyang's choices, demonstrating to the international community the seriousness of our commitment to a negotiated settlement of this issue, and building multilateral support for the various pressure and deterrence actions we take.

Regrettably, the DPRK has consistently rebuffed offers for authentic and credible negotiations and instead responded with a series of provocations that have drawn widespread international condemnation and increased its isolation. In just the past few weeks alone, the DPRK has conducted seven Scud-class ballistic missiles launches in direct violation of multiple UN Security Council resolutions. These followed short- and medium-range ballistic missile launches earlier this spring, which Pyongyang punctuated on March 30 with threats to conduct additional longer-range launches and possibly a "new type" of nuclear test.

The DPRK says it is ready for "talks without preconditions." No codebook is needed to decipher North Korea's intention: seek open-ended discussion that diverts attention away from its nuclear program and to avoid committing to denuclearization. Pyongyang has been explicit on this point: it seeks acceptance as a nuclear weapons state. It wants to use Six-Party talks, as it has in the past, as cover to continue its clandestine weapons development. We are not interested in Six-Party talks that do not focus directly on steps to implement, as a first and primary order of business, North Korea's September 2005 promise to denuclearize.

As a tactical matter, Pyongyang is asserting that the annual ROK-U.S. Ulchi-Freedom Guardian military exercises, which in 2014 will include representatives of ten United Nations' sending states, are a *casus belli*. It seeks to portray these routine, defensive, and transparent drills, which have helped ensure peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula for some 40 years, as a pretext for its provocative behavior and its weapons programs. Meanwhile, North Korea maintains — and frequently exercises — its own million-plus standing military, the largest per capita armed force in the world.

Six Party Diplomacy

The Six-Party Talks have regrettably been dormant since the DPRK walked out and declared the process "dead" in 2008. North Korea's 2009 Taepo Dong-2 launch and nuclear test then undermined the modest progress that had been made pursuant to the September 2005 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks. Since then, robust diplomatic interaction with the other four parties strengthened five-party unity on the end goal of the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. As a result, Pyongyang hears a uniform and clear message from all five parties, strongly echoed by the international community, that it will not be accepted as a nuclear power, that it must live up to its denuclearization obligations, and that authentic and credible negotiations must be marked by concrete denuclearization steps.

On this point it is important to be clear. None of the Five Parties insists North Korea denuclearize before returning to the negotiating table. But we have underscored we need to see an early and demonstrable commitment by the DPRK to denuclearize. This means the onus is on North Korea to take meaningful actions toward denuclearization and refrain from provocations.

Despite the DPRK's recidivism over the last half-decade, we remain committed to authentic and credible negotiations to implement the September 2005 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks and to bring North Korea into compliance with its international obligations through irreversible steps leading to denuclearization. But we will not engage in talks for the sake of talks and we will not compensate North Korea for the temporary absence of bad behavior. A resumption of Six-Party Talks makes sense if, and only if, there is plausible reason to believe that North Korea is prepared to negotiate seriously. North Korea knows this, but we have not yet seen signs that Pyongyang is prepared to meet its commitments and obligations to achieve the core goal of the September 2005 Joint Statement: the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner.

Inter-Korean Relations

The Republic of Korea is firmly at the center of our diplomatic efforts. There is no daylight between Washington and Seoul on the issue of what we expect from North Korea. As President Obama emphasized during his public remarks in Seoul in April, the United States supports President Park's vision and desire for peaceful, progressive unification, as outlined in her March speech in Dresden, Germany. We hope to see Pyongyang take up President Park on her offer of an improved inter-Korean relationship. The DPRK — and the region — only stand to gain from embracing her principled vision.

The Role of China

Although we believe that there is more China can do in terms of bringing necessary pressure to bear on North Korea so that it concludes it has no choice but to denuclearize, Beijing has done a great deal. As North Korea's last remaining patron, the PRC has a critical, indeed unique, role to play in addressing the North Korean nuclear challenge.

That is why North Korea remains at the top of our bilateral agenda with China, and why it figured prominently in Secretary Kerry's discussions in Beijing in early July at the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. We welcome the steps the PRC has taken to signal its opposition to the DPRK's nuclear weapons program, including through its stated commitment to fully implement UN Security Council sanctions concerning North Korea. China voted in favor of two new rounds of UNSC sanctions and in September last year published a 900-item control list banning the export of many dual-use items to North Korea.

The United States and China share an interest in the peaceful denuclearization of North Korea. Beijing agrees with us on what North Korea needs to do – we have had the “what” of denuclearization nailed down since we negotiated the September 2005 Joint Statement. We are therefore now focused on coming to agreement on the “how” and the “when” of denuclearization. Can China do more to exercise its unique levers of influence over Pyongyang? Of course. And we remain in close touch with Beijing about ways we can work together to bring the DPRK to the realization that it has no other viable choice but to denuclearize.

Sanctions

We have no misconceptions about North Korea's willingness to give up its arsenal voluntarily. All of North Korea's actions over the past few years, from its nuclear tests to the amendment of its constitution to declare itself a nuclear state, signal that it has no interest in denuclearizing. We take this threat seriously, and remain ironclad in our commitment to the defense of our allies, the Republic of Korea and Japan. Together with our allies and partners, we are working to shift Pyongyang's calculus from believing that a nuclear program is necessary for regime survival to understanding that such a program is incompatible with its national interests.

To do that, we continue to use the multilateral and other tools at our disposal to increase the cost of North Korea's illicit activities, to reduce resources earned through weapons exports that are subsequently reinvested in the WMD program, and to sharpen Pyongyang's choices. Over the past two years, we have substantially upped the cost of these activities — particularly its proliferation and weapons sales abroad — by tightening the web of sanctions around the DPRK. We continue to work with a range of partners across the international community to improve implementation of UN Security Council sanctions, particularly those that target the illicit activities of the North's diplomatic personnel and cash couriers, its banking relationships, and its procurement of dual-use items for its WMD and missile programs.

Full and transparent implementation of these resolutions by all UN member states, including China, is critical. We are working closely with the UN Security Council's DPRK sanctions committee and its Panel of Experts, like-minded partners, and others around the globe to harmonize our sanctions programs and to ensure the full and transparent implementation of UNSCRs 1718, 1874, 2087, and 2094, which remain the heart of the multilateral sanctions regime. As a result, we have seen greater actions taken by Member States to prevent illicit North Korea trade in arms, WMD-related material and luxury goods, most notably with the seizure by Panama of a substantial amount of military gear on the North Korean ship Chong Chon Gang. The Panel's annual report documented in further detail the numerous actions that States have taken to enforce UN sanctions and prevent further DPRK proliferation. It is clear that UN sanctions are having an effect and are diminishing North Korea's ability to profit from its illicit activities.

The United States has expanded outreach to countries that have diplomatic or trade relations with North Korea to press them not to engage in military, WMD or other illicit activities banned by UN resolutions and U.S sanctions. Burma's announcement that it would end its military relationship with North Korea and comply with the UN resolutions is the best example of these efforts, which will continue. We have also designated a number of key proliferators — and the banks and other front companies that support them — pursuant to our domestic sanctions authorities. The United States will continue to take steps to strengthen and bolster the existing sanctions regime, both through work in the UN context and through our own national measures.

Deterrence

The U.S.-ROK alliance, having celebrated its 60th anniversary, is stronger than ever. From our day-to-day combined efforts to maintain peace and stability on the Peninsula, through our Combined Forces Command, to the counter-provocation and counter-missile planning our Department of Defense and Joint Staff colleagues engage in with their South Korean counterparts, we send a strong deterrence signal to North Korea that the security it is seeking is not to be found in nuclear weapons.

Our growing U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral security cooperation also sends a powerful message of deterrence to Pyongyang, as seen most recently in our trilateral Search and Rescue Exercises, our July 1 Chiefs of Defense meeting between Chairman Dempsey and his counterparts in Seoul and Tokyo, the June 1 trilateral defense ministerial led by Secretary Hagel at the Shangri La dialogue, and my own periodic discussions with my able Korean and Japan counterparts. Other measures we have taken in the region to strengthen bilateral and trilateral missile defense cooperation are also inextricably tied to our larger diplomatic strategy of building and maintaining a strong diplomatic consensus opposed to a nuclear North Korea.

Human Rights

While denuclearization remains an essential focus of U.S. policy, so too, is the welfare of North Korea's nearly 25 million people, the vast majority of whom bear the brunt of their government's decision to perpetuate an unsustainable, self-impoverishing, military-first policy. As the UN Commission of Inquiry concluded in its impressive and sobering final report published this February, systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed by the DPRK, its institutions, and its officials.

I defer to my colleague, Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues Robert King, to brief you on our policy on North Korean human rights. Ambassador King's energetic and inspired efforts for over three years have demonstrated that the human rights issue remains a top priority and constant focus of the United States. He — and we — will continue to make clear to Pyongyang and the rest of the international community that U.S.-DPRK relations cannot fundamentally improve without progress on the human rights issue.

The U.S. government is deeply concerned about the well-being of the people of North Korea. We commend the non-governmental organizations and their staffs of skilled, tough-minded, and principled men and women who work with ordinary North Koreans at the grass-roots level to improve conditions for those who are not members of the elite, residing in relative comfort on Pyongyang. These men and women work tirelessly to feed, care for, and otherwise help sustain the ninety percent of North Koreans left to their own devices by the regime.

We believe those responsible for the human rights violations taking place in the DPRK must be held accountable for their ill treatment of their fellow citizens. We applaud the decision of the Republic of Korea to host the field office of the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to begin this work.

The Importance of Protecting American Citizens

The State Department makes clear in its DPRK travel warning that foreign visitors may be arrested, detained, or expelled for activities that would not be considered criminal outside North Korea. The list of serious transgressions is long. It includes involvement in religious or political activities unsanctioned by the DPRK regime, unauthorized travel, and unauthorized interaction with the local population. Given the serious risks involved, we strongly recommend against all travel by U.S. citizens to North Korea.

Despite the risks, a number of tour operators — mainly run out of Beijing by Westerners — organize highly-regimented trips to North Korea, principally to Pyongyang. Let me make this clear: tour operators cannot protect our citizens. We ask U.S. citizens contemplating travel to North Korea to understand the consequences of their decision.

Three U.S. citizens are, today, being held by the DPRK regime. We have no higher priority than the health and well-being of American citizens. We are doing all we can to seek their release so they may reunite with their families. Their continued detention also constitutes a serious impediment to improved U.S.-DPRK relations; it frankly renders disingenuous Pyongyang's assertion it wants a better relationship with the United States. Our thoughts are with our fellow citizens, and we will continue to advocate for their freedom — day in and day out — until we succeed. We remain grateful for Congress' steadfast support in these efforts.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Mr. Chairman, our policy aims to bring the DPRK to the realization that it must take the steps necessary to end its isolation, respect the human rights of its own people, honor its past commitments, and comply with its international obligations. Each outrageous act North Korea commits, discredits the DPRK's self-serving assertion that it is driven to act belligerently by others' hostility. It is increasingly clear that North Korea is developing nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles to prolong the Kim regime and obtain material and political benefits from the international community. By creating a strategic challenge to the United States, the DPRK hopes to strengthen its narrative that the U.S. is responsible for North Korea's bad behavior and uniquely on the hook to mitigate it. It is not. North Korea is responsible for North Korean actions, and resolving the DPRK nuclear problem is a multilateral task, just as the DPRK's original aggression against the South was met with a strong response from the United Nations. Standing up to North Korea requires a sustained and concerted effort by all of the countries in the Six-Party process, and indeed the entire international community.

The DPRK leadership in Pyongyang faces ever-sharper choices. North Korea will not achieve security, economic prosperity, and integration into the international community while pursuing nuclear weapons, threatening its neighbors, trampling on international norms, abusing its own people, and refusing to fulfill its longstanding obligations and commitments.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.