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THREE CRISES WITH NORTH KOREA

Ashton B. Carter
Co-Director, Preventive Defense Project
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee on Foreign Relations, thank you for inviting me to appear before this Committee to share my recollections about two previous crises with North Korea, and my suggestions regarding the current crisis.

1994

I am not an expert on North Korea. I am fond of saying that there are no real experts on this strange place, only specialists, and they don't seem to have much expertise. I became acquainted with Korean affairs in seat-of-the-pants fashion when I was serving as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy in 1994, when the first of the recent crises over North Korea sprang up.

That spring North Korea was planning to take fuel rods out of its research reactor at Yongbyon and extract the six or so bombs' worth of weapons-grade plutonium they contained. The United States was trying to deal diplomatically with this threat, but in the Pentagon we were also exploring military options. Secretary of Defense William J. Perry ordered the preparation of a plan to eliminate Yongbyon with an airstrike of conventional precision weapons. We were very confident that such a strike would eliminate the reactor and entomb the plutonium, and would also eliminate the other facilities at Yongbyon that were part of North Korea's plutonium infrastructure. In particular, we were confident that we could destroy a nuclear reactor of this kind while it was operating without causing any Chernobyl-type radioactive plume to be emitted downwind -- obviously an important consideration. Such a strike would effectively set back North Korea's nuclear ambitions many years.

While surgical in and of itself, however, such a strike would hardly be surgical in its overall effect. The result of such an attack might well have been the unleashing of the antiquated but large North Korean army over the Demilitarized Zone, and a barrage of artillery and missile fire into Seoul. The United States, with its South Korean and Japanese allies, would quickly destroy North Korea's military and regime – of that we were also quite confident. But the war would take place in the crowded suburbs of Seoul, with an attendant intensity of violence and loss of life – American, South and North

Korean, combatant and non-combatant – not seen in U.S. conflicts since the last Korean War.

Fortunately, that war was averted by the negotiation of the Agreed Framework. The Agreed Framework was and remains controversial, so it is important to know what it did and did not do. It froze operations at Yongbyon for eight years, verified through on-site inspection, until just a few weeks ago. The six bombs' worth of plutonium was not extracted from the fuel rods, and no new plutonium was created during that period. Had the freeze not been operating, North Korea could now have about fifty bombs' worth of plutonium. It is worth noting that under the NPT, North Korea is allowed to extract all the plutonium it wants provided it accounts for the amount to the IAEA. I felt strongly in 1994 that the United States could not accept an outcome of negotiations with North Korea that only got them back into the NPT, still letting them have what would be in effect an inspected bomb program. Our able negotiator's instructions in fact were to tell the North Koreans they had to close Yongbyon. If they asked, "Why can't we just abide by the NPT and make plutonium, inspected by the IAEA, like the Japanese do?" the U.S. replied, "Because you pose a special threat to international security." So the Agreed Framework went well beyond the NPT.

The Agreed Framework did not eliminate Yongbyon, but only froze it. In later phases of the agreement, Yongbyon was to be dismantled. But we never got to those phases. Nor could, or should, the Agreed Framework be said to have "eliminated North Korea's nuclear weapons program." For one thing, while the freeze was perfectly verified, there was no regular verification that elsewhere in North Korea there was not a Los Alamos-like laboratory designing nuclear weapons, or a hidden uranium enrichment facility – which North Korea has in fact recently admitted to having. In addition, way back in 1989 North Korea extracted plutonium from some fuel rods. The amount is unknown but could have been as much as one or two bombs' worth. No one outside of North Korea knows where that plutonium is. No technical expert doubts that North Korea could make a bomb or maybe two out of it – a "starter kit" towards a nuclear arsenal. Again, later phases of the Agreed Framework called for North Koreans to cough up this material, but these phases were never reached. Finally, the Agreed Framework did not stop the development, deployment, or sale of North Korea's medley of ballistic missiles.

So from a threat perspective, the Agreed Framework produced a profoundly important result for U.S. security over a period of eight years – the freeze that is disastrously thawing as we speak. But it was an incomplete result, as events four years later would show.

1998

In August 1998, North Korea launched a ballistic missile over Japan and into the Pacific Ocean. The launch produced anxiety in Japan and the United States and calls for a halt to the implementation of the Agreed Framework, principally the oil shipments that were supposed to replace the energy output of the frozen reactor at Yongbyon (in actual

fact the Yongbyon reactor was an experimental model and was not used to produce power). If we stopped shipping oil, the North Koreans would unfreeze Yongbyon, and we would be back to the summer of 1994.

President Clinton recognized that the United States, relieved over the freeze at Yongbyon, had moved on to other crises like Bosnia and Haiti. Not so the North Koreans. The President judged, correctly in my view, that the United States had no overall strategy towards the North Korean problem beyond the Agreed Framework itself. He asked former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry to conduct a policy review, and Perry asked me to be his Senior Advisor.

We examined several options.

One was to undermine the North Korean regime and hasten its collapse. However, we could not find evidence of significant internal dissent in this rigid Stalinist system – certainly nothing like in Iraq, let alone Afghanistan – that could provide a U.S. lever. Then there was the problem of mismatched timetables: undermining seemed a long-term prospect at best, whereas the nuclear and missile problems were near-term. Finally, our allies would not support such a strategy, and obviously it could only worsen North Korea's near-term behavior, prompting provocations and even war. Since an undermining strategy is precisely what North Korea's leaders fear most, suggesting it is a U.S. strategy without any program to accomplish it is doubly counterproductive.

Another possibility was to advise the President to base his strategy on the prospect of reform in North Korea. Perhaps Kim Jong Il would take the path of China's Deng Xiaoping, opening up his country and trying to assume a normal place in international life. But hope is not a policy. We needed a strategy for the near term.

Summing up the first two options, our report – which is available in unclassified form[1] – stated, "U.S. policy must deal with the North Korean government as it is, not as we might wish it to be."

Another possibility was buying our objectives with economic assistance. Our report said the United States would not offer North Korea "tangible 'rewards' for appropriate security behavior; doing so would both transgress principles the United States values and open us up to further blackmail."

In the end, we recommended that the United States, South Korea, and Japan all proceed to talk to North Korea, but with a coordinated message and negotiating strategy.

The verifiable elimination of the nuclear and missile programs was the paramount objective. Our decision not to undermine the regime could be used as a negotiating lever: much as we objected to its conduct, we could tell the North that we did not plan to go to

[1] "Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations," Office of the North Korea Policy Coordinator, United States Department of State, October 12, 1999. [also available at: http://bcsia.ksg.harvard.edu/publication.cfm?program=CORE&ctype=book&item_id=6]

war to change it. We could live in peace. But that peace would not be possible if North Korea pursued nuclear weapons. Far from guaranteeing security, building such weapons would force a confrontation.

We could also argue that since North Korea had enough conventional firepower to make war a distinctly unpleasant prospect to us, it didn't need weapons of mass destruction to safeguard its security. This relative stability, in turn, could provide the time and conditions for a relaxation of tension and, eventually, improved relations if North Korea transformed its relations with the rest of the world.

After many trips to Seoul, Tokyo and also Beijing to coordinate our approaches, in May 1999 we went to Pyongyang. We presented North Korea with two alternatives.

On the upward path, North Korea would verifiably eliminate its nuclear and missile programs. In return, the United States would take political steps to relieve its security concerns — the most important of which was to affirm that we had no hostile intent toward North Korea. We would also help it dismantle its weapons facilities. Working with us and through their own negotiations, South Korea and Japan would expand their contacts and economic links.

On the downward path, the three allies would resort to all means of pressure, including those that risked war, to achieve our objectives.

We concluded the policy review in the summer of 2000, and I stepped down from my advisory role. Over the next two years, North Korea took some small steps on the upward path. It agreed to a moratorium on tests of long-range missiles. It continued the freeze at Yongbyon. It embarked on talks with South Korea that led to the 2000 summit meeting of the leaders of North and South.

The North also began the process of healing its strained relations with Japan, making the astonishing admission that it had kidnapped Japanese citizens in the 1970's and 80's. And it allowed United States inspectors to visit a mountain that we suspected was a site of further nuclear-weapons work, a precursor of the intrusive inspections needed for confident verification. Whether North Korea would have taken further steps on this path is history that will never be written.

TODAY

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, that brings us to today's crisis.

News reports late last week indicated that not only is the freeze no longer on at Yongbyon, but North Korea is trucking the fuel rods away where they can neither be inspected nor entombed by an airstrike. This is the disaster we faced in 1994. But as this loose nukes disaster unfolds and the options for dealing with it narrow, the world does nothing. This is especially ironic as the world prepares to disarm Iraq of chemical and biological weapons, by force if necessary. What is going on at Yongbyon as we speak is a huge foreign policy defeat for the United States and a setback for decades of U.S. nonproliferation policy. Worse, seventeen months after 9/11 it opens up a new prospect

for nuclear terrorism. There are no fewer than five reasons why allowing North Korea to go nuclear with serial production of weapons is an unacceptable threat to U.S. security.

First, North Korea might sell plutonium it judges excess to its own needs to other states or terrorist groups. North Korea has few cash-generating exports other than ballistic missiles. Now it could add fissile material or assembled bombs to its shopping catalogue. Loose nukes are a riveting prospect: While hijacked airlines and anthrax-dusted letters are a dangerous threat to civilized society, it would change the way Americans were forced to live if it became an ever-present possibility that a city could disappear in a mushroom cloud at any moment.

Second, in a collapse scenario loose nukes could fall into the hands of warlords or factions. The half-life of plutonium-239 is 24,400 years. What is the half-life of the North Korean regime?

Third, even if the bombs remain firmly in hands of the North Korean government they are a huge problem: having nukes might embolden North Korea into thinking it can scare away South Korea's defenders, weakening deterrence. Thus a nuclear North Korea makes war on the Korean peninsula more likely.

Fourth, a nuclear North Korea could cause a domino effect in East Asia, as South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan ask themselves if their non-nuclear status is safe for them.

Fifth and finally, if North Korea, one of the world's poorest and most isolated countries, is allowed to go nuclear, serious damage will be done to the global nonproliferation regime, which is not perfect but which has made a contribution to keeping all but a handful of nations from going nuclear.

Therefore, the United States cannot allow North Korea to move to serial production of nuclear weapons. As the U.S. attempts to formulate a strategy to head off this disaster, I would suggest that we keep four factors in mind:

1. No American strategy toward the Korean peninsula can succeed if it is not shared by our allies, South Korea and Japan. Their national interests and ours are not identical, but they overlap strongly. They can provide vital tools to assist our strategy, or they can undermine our position if they are not persuaded to share it. Above all, we must stand shoulder-to-shoulder with them to deter North Korean aggression.
2. The unfreezing of Yongbyon is the most serious urgent problem. North Korea also reprocessed fuel rods at Yongbyon way back in 1989. In that period, it obtained a quantity of plutonium that it did not declare honestly to the IAEA, as it was required to do. How much is uncertain, but estimates range as high as two bombs' worth. Whether North Korea has had a bomb or two for the past fifteen years is not known. But for sure it is today only a few months away from obtaining six bombs. The North Koreans might reckon that's enough to sell some and have some left over to threaten the United States and its allies. North Korea also admitted last October that is aims to produce the other metal from which nuclear weapons can be made – uranium. It will be years, however, before that effort produces anything like the amount of fissile material now being trucked from Yongbyon.
3. President Bush has indicated that he intends to seek a diplomatic solution to this crisis. It is possible that North Korea can be persuaded to curb its nuclear ambitions,

but it might be determined to press forward. Therefore we need to view diplomacy as an experiment.

4. In any diplomatic discussion, the United States must ultimately obtain the complete and verifiable elimination of North Korea's nuclear program. There is much debate over what the United States should be prepared to give in return, and an aversion, which I share, to giving North Korea tangible rewards that its regime can use for its own ends. But it would seem to me that there are two things the United States should be prepared to do.

   First, I earlier indicated that there is little reason to have confidence that North Korea will collapse or transform soon, and little prospect that the U.S. can accomplish either result in the timescale required to head off loose nukes in North Korea. That being the case, a U.S. decision not to undermine the regime could be used as a negotiating lever: much as we object to its conduct, we can tell the North that we do not plan to go to war to change it. We can live in peace. But that peace will not be possible if North Korea pursues nuclear weapons. Far from guaranteeing security, building such weapons will force a confrontation. As noted above, we can also argue that since North Korea has enough conventional firepower to make war a distinctly unpleasant prospect to us, it doesn't need weapons of mass destruction to safeguard its security. This relative stability, in turn, can provide the time and conditions for a relaxation of tension and, eventually, improved relations if North Korea transforms its relations with the rest of the world.

   Second, at some point Yongbyon must be dismantled, as must the centrifuges for enriching uranium, the ballistic missiles and their factories, and the engineering infrastructure that supports them. The U.S. can surely suggest to North Korea that we participate in this process, both to hasten it and to make sure it takes place. This assistance would be similar to the Nunn-Lugar program's historic efforts to prevent loose nukes after the Cold War.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 make clear that if nuclear weapons are controlled by a country enmeshed in social and political turmoil, they might end up commandeered, bought or stolen by terrorists. Who knows what might happen to North Korea's nuclear weapons as that state struggles to achieve a transformation, possibly violent, to a more normal and prosperous nation.

Once nuclear weapons materials are made -- either plutonium or enriched uranium -- they are exceedingly difficult to find and eliminate. They last for thousands of years. There is no secret about how to fashion them into bombs. They can fall into the hands of unstable nations or terrorists for whom Cold War deterrence is a dubious shield indeed. These facts describe America's -- and the world's -- dominant security problem for the foreseeable future. It is of the utmost importance to prevent the production of nuclear materials in the first place. Therefore the main strategy for dealing with the threat of nuclear weapons must be preventive. Our most successful prevention programs (such as the Nunn-Lugar program) have been done in cooperation with other nations, but in

exceptional cases it may be necessary to resort to the threat of military force to prevent nuclear threats from maturing.

THE HONORABLE ASHTON B. CARTER

Ashton Carter is Co-Director, with William J. Perry, of the Preventive Defense Project, a research collaboration of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and Stanford University and Professor of Science and International Affairs at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

From 1993-1996, Carter served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, where he was responsible for national security policy concerning the states of the former Soviet Union (including their nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction), arms control, countering proliferation worldwide, export controls, and oversight of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and missile defense programs; he also chaired NATO's High Level Group. He was twice awarded the Department of Defense Distinguished Service medal, the highest award given by the Pentagon. Carter continues to serve DoD as an adviser to the Secretary of Defense and as a consultant to DoD's Defense Science Board. From 1998 to 2000, Carter served in an official capacity as Senior Adviser to the North Korea Policy Review, chaired by William J. Perry.

Before his government service, Carter was director of the Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and chairman of the editorial board of *International Security.* Carter received bachelor's degrees in physics and in medieval history from Yale University and a doctorate in theoretical physics from Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar.

In addition to authoring numerous scientific publications and government studies, Carter is the author and editor of a number of books, including *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America* (with William J. Perry). Carter's current research focuses on the Preventive Defense Project, which designs and promotes security policies aimed at preventing the emergence of major new threats to the United States.

Carter is a Senior Partner of Global Technology Partners, LLC, chairman of the Advisory Board of MIT Lincoln Laboratories, a member of the Draper Laboratory Corporation, and the Board of Directors of Mitretek Systems, Inc. He is a consultant to Goldman Sachs and the MITRE Corporation on international affairs and technology matters, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Aspen Strategy Group, and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.