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ALTERNATIVES TO LETTING NORTH KOREA GO NUCLEAR

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

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me back to testify before this Committee on the loose nukes crisis in North Korea. In my last appearance I described why this was a crisis, how enormous the stakes are for our security, and my recollections of the last two crises in 1994 and 1998. This time you have asked me to analyze the prospect for direct talks with North Korea, and I am happy to do so.

Why talk to North Korea at all?

When he appeared here before this Committee shortly before me on February 4th, Deputy Secretary of State Armitage indicated that the U.S. government intends to conduct direct talks with North Korea. This is the right decision for the Bush administration.

But it is worth pausing to ask why.

After all, North Korea's record of honoring its agreements with us is, to put it charitably, mixed. While the North kept the plutonium-containing fuel rods at Yongbyon under international inspections and its reactor frozen for eight years, ending this freeze only a few months ago, we now know it was cheating on other provisions of its international agreements by enriching uranium. This means, at a minimum, that any future understandings with North Korea will need to be rigorously verified.

In addition, the government of North Korea is very far, once again to put it charitably, from sharing our values.

Still, one is led to direct talks by reasoning through the full range of alternatives and from seeing the relationship between the m.

One alternative is to let North Korea proceed to go nuclear, but to isolate, contain, and await the collapse of the North Korean regime.

President Bush said in his State of the Union message that “nuclear weapons will only bring isolation, economic stagnation, and continued hardship” to North Korea. Isolation must seem like pretty light punishment to the most isolated country on earth.

Those who speak of containment envision a hermetic seal around North Korea, embargoing imports and interdicting shipments of exports, especially ballistic missiles. But the export we should worry most about is plutonium. After North Korea gets five or six more bombs from the fuel rods at Yongbyon, it might reckon it has enough to sell to other rogues or, far worse, to terrorists. It is entirely implausible that we could effectively prevent a few baseball-sized lumps of plutonium from being smuggled out of Yongbyon. Not only is a nuclear weapon-sized quantity of Plutonium-239 small in size, but it is not highly radioactive and does not emit a strong signature that could be detected if it were to be smuggled out of North Korea to a destination where terrorists could receive it.

The problem with awaiting collapse in North Korea’s regime is that there is no particular reason to believe it will occur soon, and in the meantime North Korea can create lasting international damage – damage that will extend beyond the Korean peninsula and beyond the lifetime of the North Korean regime.

In my last appearance before the Committee, I cited the five reasons why letting North Korea move to serial production of nuclear weapons is a disaster for U.S. and international 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 weakens deterrence, thereby making 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 problem nations from going nuclear.

It appears from reading the press that the path of letting North Korea go nuclear, coupled with isolation, containment, and awaiting collapse, is the path we are on at this moment. This is the worst alternative.

A second alternative is to use military force to arrest North Korea's race to nuclear weapons. I described previously the attack plan on Yongbyon we devised in 1994, the last time North Korea was moving towards reprocessing at Yongbyon. A strike with conventionally-armed precision weapons at Yongbyon's fuel rods and reprocessing facility would not eliminate North Korea's nuclear program, but it would set it back for years. If we were to strike Yongbyon, North Korea would have a choice. It could respond by lashing out at South Korea through an invasion over the DMZ, but that would precipitate a war that would surely mean the end of the North Korean regime. There is no guaranteeing that the North would not make such a foolish choice. But that is the risk we must run in this option; it is the risk worth taking to avoid the disaster associated with the first alternative of letting North Korea go nuclear. As a practical matter, we are in a much better position to threaten or conduct such a strike if we have previously made an effort to talk North Korea out of its nuclear programs. Even if you are a pessimist about the success of talks, therefore, they are a prerequisite for exercising this alternative.

The third alternative is to try to talk North Korea out of its nuclear ambitions. A year ago I would have assessed that it was likely we could reach an agreement on terms acceptable to us to stop North Korea's nuclear programs and ballistic missile programs in a verifiable way. Since then we have let our options narrow. Now I fear that North Korea might have concluded that it could dash over the nuclear finish line into a zone where it is invulnerable to American attempts to force regime change, since it suspects that is our objective. We must therefore view talks as an experiment. If the experiment succeeds, we will have stopped North Korea's nuclear program without war; if it does not, it was in any event the necessary step towards making the alternative of military force realistic.

How should direct talks be conducted?

It is clear that the United States cannot conduct direct talks with North Korea while it is advancing its nuclear programs. We must therefore insist that during talks, North Korea reinstate the freeze at Yongbyon. In return the United States can refrain from any military buildup on the peninsula.

Secretary Armitage indicated that the U.S. would participate in direct talks, meaning that Americans and North Koreans would be in the same room. This is necessary. We cannot outsource our deepest security matters to China, Russia, or the United Nations. Only the U.S. can convincingly tell North Korea that it will be less safe, not more safe, if it proceeds with nuclear weapons – and this is the crux of the matter.

Others can be in the room at the same time, and having them with us in the room might be advantageous. Certainly we will have a richer set of sticks and carrots if our negotiating strategy is closely coordinated with our allies, Japan and South Korea – and

coordination is necessary in any event to maintain the critical alliance relationships that buttress our entire strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. In the past we have conducted parallel bilateral negotiations – U.S.-DPRK, ROK-DPRK, and Japan-DPRK all in coordinated fashion – rather than meeting in one room with North Korea. But when we have done this, we have been careful to coordinate closely with Japan and South Korea.

China and Russia have also strongly supported the proposition that North Korea must not go nuclear. But their influence is not apparent, at least to me. They might be more willing to play a constructive role once we have set out a strategy into which they can play.

The United Nations can also play a critical role, particularly if North Korea were to agree to IAEA inspectors returning. We should continue to proceed at the U.N., but as a complement, not a substitute, for direct talks.

What should be the U.S. position in direct talks?

We should enter direct talks with a clear sense of our objectives. At the top of the list, above all other objectives we might have with North Korea, should be the complete and verifiable elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons (both plutonium-based and uranium-based) and long-range missile programs nationwide. This objective includes, but goes beyond, all the obligations contained in previous agreements made by North Korea.

The United States should also make it clear to North Korea that it cannot tolerate North Korean progression to reprocessing or any other steps to obtain fissile material for nuclear weapons, and that we are prepared to take all measures of coercion, including military force, to prevent this threat to U.S. security.

In return, there are two things that it should be easy for the United States to offer.

First, we should be prepared to make a pledge to North Korea that the U.S. will not seek to eliminate the North Korean regime by force if North Korea agrees to the complete and verifiable elimination of its nuclear weapons and long-range missile programs. Absent a realistic plan or timetable for regime change, we must deal with North Korea as it is, rather than as we might wish it to be. Turning a reality into a pledge should not be difficult.

Second, we should be prepared to offer assistance for weapons elimination, as the U.S. has done to the states of the former Soviet Union under the Nunn-Lugar program.

Over time, if the talks are bearing fruit, we can broaden them to encompass other issues of deep concern to the United States, such as conventional forces, avoidance of provocations and incidents, and human rights; and to North Korea, such as energy security and economic development. We should also offer a longer-term vision of gradual and conditional relaxation of tension, including the possibility of enhanced economic contacts with the United States, South Korea, and Japan.

The U.S. diplomatic position should be a component of a common overall position shared with our allies, in which we pool our diplomatic tools – carrots and sticks. In a shared strategy, we will also need to pool our objectives, so that we are seeking a set of outcomes that South Korea and Japan also share.

If an agreement emerges from direct talks, it will supercede and replace the 1994 Agreed Framework, which has been controversial in the United States and, it appears, not entirely to the liking of the North Korean leadership, either. As in 1994, the agreement must of course include the freezing and progressive dismantlement of the plutonium program at Yongbyon. We now know it must also include verifiable provisions for eliminating the uranium enrichment program. To the Agreed Framework's emphasis on nuclear weapons must also be added verifiable elimination of North Korea's ballistic missile program.

In return, the U.S. and its allies must make it convincing to North Korea that forswearing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles is its best course – the only safe course.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, as I stressed earlier, I am by no means certain that a diplomatic approach including direct talks will succeed. But it is a necessary prelude to any military action, and it is far preferable to standing back and watching the disaster of North Korea going nuclear.