

Senator John Kerry
Opening Statement for “Breaking the Cycle of North Korean Provocations”
March 1, 2011

Before we get started, let me say a word about the demonstrations that have changed the world in recent weeks. And, while momentous in their own right, I’m not talking about Madison, Wisconsin.

The lesson from the Arab awakening is an uplifting one. Across North Africa and the Middle East, we have seen people rise up in peaceful pursuit of human rights and democracy. In Tunisia and Egypt, we have seen the power of ordinary people to cast off the restraints of autocracies.

We also have seen a tyrant turn guns on his own people. Colonel Moammar Qaddafi is a brutal man, and the United States and its allies have a responsibility to help the Libyan people end his four decades of repression.

Events sweeping the Arab world have powerful implications for America’s foreign policy. We are planning hearings to explore those implications in the coming weeks and have invited key administration officials to testify.

But we are here this morning to discuss troubling events half a world away from the Middle East, on the Korean Peninsula. Even as we grapple with the crisis of the moment, we must find time to deal with other pressing concerns.

We need to find a way to break North Korea’s cycle of provocation and nuclear expansion. We need to find the right American policy, in concert with South Korea and Japan, to persuade the North to abandon its reckless behavior.

We will hear first from Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Kurt Campbell. Kurt was leading a delegation to Christchurch last week when a tragic earthquake struck. Let me take this opportunity to offer my deepest condolences and best wishes on a speedy recovery to the people of New Zealand. Testifying alongside Assistant Secretary Campbell is Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, the Administration’s Special Representative for North Korea Policy. He also happens to be a friend and constituent of mine and Dean of the Fletcher School at Tufts University. I’m glad to see you both here with us today.

Last year was the most dangerous on the Korean Peninsula since the end of the Korean War in 1953. We must do everything within our power to avoid further deterioration and put the Peninsula back on a path to peace and stability.

North Korea is making that hard. It has expanded its nuclear and ballistic missile programs in defiance of the UN Security Council. It has engaged in reckless attacks on a U.S. friend and treaty ally, South Korea. We must not forget that 46 South Korean seamen died when North Korea sank the Cheonan a year ago and that four people were killed later in the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island.

The U.S. response has been measured but firm. We have strengthened sanctions and intensified coordination with our key allies, South Korea and Japan. We also have stepped up efforts to convince China to help bring the North back to the negotiating table.

So far, international initiatives have not stabilized the situation, much less brought about a change of course in the North. As Asia expert Dr. Victor Cha so aptly put it, North Korea is the “land of lousy options.” But lousy options don’t allow us to opt out. Instead, they increase our responsibility to choose policies that will advance our vital national security interests and those of our allies.

That brings us back to today’s quandary. It has been more than two years since the last round of the Six Party Talks on eliminating nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. It’s no coincidence that this long silence has been marked by North Korea’s dangerous and destabilizing conduct.

Senator John Kerry
Opening Statement for “Breaking the Cycle of North Korean Provocations”
March 1, 2011

Now, we all have grown weary of North Korea’s brinksmanship – a habit of ratcheting up tensions, followed by suggestions of ways to negotiate back from the brink, followed by concessions, and a repetition of the process. We need to break this cycle. We need to seize the initiative.

The risks of maintaining the status quo are grave. North Korea would likely build more nuclear weapons and missiles. It may well export nuclear technology or even fissile material. And the next violation of the armistice could escalate into wider hostilities that threaten U.S. allies and interests.

Given these very real risks, the best option is to consult closely with South Korea and launch bilateral talks with North Korea when we decide the time is appropriate. Fruitful talks between the U.S. and North Korea can lay the groundwork for resumption of the Six Party Talks. Right now, we simply cannot afford to cede the initiative to North Korea and China because neither country’s interests fully coincide with ours.

Let me be clear: We must get beyond the political talking point that engaging North Korea is somehow “rewarding bad behavior.” It is *not*. We will set the time and place and we will negotiate in good faith. Talks will be based on our national security interests and those of our allies.

We don’t know what renewed diplomatic engagement can accomplish. We do know this: Our silence invites a dangerous situation to get worse.

Finally, let me say a few words about our compelling humanitarian concerns in North Korea. I’m glad that Ambassador Bob King – our Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues – could be in the hearing room this morning.

Our country has long and wisely separated humanitarian concerns from politics. Consistent with that tradition, we should consider additional food aid to the North. But it should be based on demonstrated need and our ability to verify that food will reach the intended recipients. In fact, a broader humanitarian engagement might hold the most long-term promise of unlocking the nuclear puzzle and enhancing regional peace and security.

Our first panel will be followed by three experts from the private sector. Bob Carlin is a veteran Korea watcher with the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University. Marcus Noland is an economist with the Peterson Institute for International Economics. And Gordon Flake is a northeast Asia expert and executive director of the Mansfield Foundation.