

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman John F. Kerry
Opening Statement for North Korea Back At The Brink?
June 11, 2009

Chairman Kerry Opening Statement At Hearing On North Korea

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) released the following opening remarks at the hearing titled, “North Korea Back at the Brink?”

Full text as prepared is below:

We are here today to discuss recent troubling developments on the Korean Peninsula and the road ahead in dealing with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. We will hear first from the Administration’s point man on North Korea— my friend and constituent, Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, who is also Dean of the Fletcher School at Tufts University. We will also hear an expert panel of witnesses who together have more than 100 years of experience dealing with the challenges we face in North Korea.

North Korea’s test of a long range ballistic missile last April, followed by its second nuclear test last month, are reckless and irresponsible acts that do nothing to advance North Korea’s security. And I was pleased to see that last night in New York, the Permanent Five Members of the UN Security Council agreed to speak with one voice and tell North Korea that its conduct is unacceptable.

The draft Security Council Resolution, which we expect to be voted on soon, imposes a sweeping new arms embargo on North Korea and also bans financial transactions linked to the North’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. Significantly, it calls upon member states to inspect all cargo to and from North Korea—on the high seas, at seaports, and at airports – if countries have reason to believe the cargo contains material related to North Korea’s nuclear program or other weapons programs.

The Obama administration should be commended for this strong, united outcome, and China deserves recognition as well. As North Korea’s ally and largest trading partner, China can play a decisive role in the peaceful resolution of this crisis. I was in China when North Korea conducted its second nuclear test, and I am convinced that China shares our opposition to the North’s pursuit of nuclear weapons.

We can all be forgiven for feeling that we’ve been here before. As one knowledgeable observer wrote to me recently, we are now “hip deep into the third North Korean nuclear crisis.”

The first crisis ended in 1994 with the signing of the Agreed Framework, which froze the North’s production of plutonium for eight years.

In 2002, the Bush Administration confronted North Korea with allegations that it was cheating on the Agreed Framework. But the Bush administration ruled out direct talks to resolve the issue. The result was the second nuclear crisis – the demise of the Agreed Framework, North Korea’s withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and the quadrupling of North Korea’s stockpile of fissile material.

Today, we confront a more dangerous North Korea that says it is determined to bolster its nuclear deterrent in defiance of its neighbors and other members of the international community.

How we deal with North Korea this time around will have grave implications for maintaining peace and stability in Northeast Asia, for our alliances with South Korea and Japan, and for our global nonproliferation efforts.

Step one is getting a unified response from the UN. That result appears imminent. But then we must resist the temptation to go into a defensive crouch. The past teaches us that benign neglect is not a viable option.

America must lead efforts to stop the current negative cycle of action and reaction and begin the hard diplomatic work needed to deliver results.

As we seek to engage, we should remember the counsel of former Secretary of Defense William Perry, who advised us to deal with North Korea, “as it is, not as we would wish it to be.” We should not assume that North Korea sees the world the way we do.

Recent developments should convince us to test our assumptions about North Korea and its motives. For instance:

- Is North Korea really just trying to get our attention? They already had it: from day one, the Obama administration made a point of offering to engage directly. Given events of the past six months, it seems equally possible that North Korea has become consumed with issues surrounding leadership succession and North-South relations, and therefore is inclined to adopt a brash, defiant posture against external pressure.
- Some observers have concluded that diplomacy with North Korea is essentially hopeless. I disagree. However imperfect a tool, diplomacy has paid dividends in the past, and could again in the future.
- Finally, it is a common assumption that North Korea will sell “anything to anyone.” North Korea’s export of nuclear technology to Syria appears to prove the case. But isn’t it worth *testing* whether a combination of multilateral enforcement initiatives – such as the Proliferation Security Initiative – combined with cooperative threat reduction efforts championed by Senator Lugar, could alter the North’s conduct?

As we test our assumptions and examine our options, we must consider not only who is at the table – whether to attempt to reinvigorate the Six Party Talks, launch bilateral negotiations, or devise a new architecture – but also consider how to prioritize the many issues that demand attention – including nuclear proliferation, human rights, regional peace and security, economic development, and humanitarian concerns.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on each of these questions, and more broadly, to getting their advice on how the United States, in concert with our allies and negotiating partners, can promote peace and security on the Korean Peninsula.

Finally, I know I speak for every member of this Committee when I say that we are also deeply concerned for the fate of two American journalists – Laura Ling and Euna Lee – who are under detention in North Korea. We urge North Korea to do what is right, and promptly and unconditionally release them from custody.

SECOND PANEL: Victor Cha is former Asia Director at the National Security Council and a professor at Georgetown University. Evans Revere is the President of Korea Society, and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs. Leon Sigal is a Professor at the Social Science Research Council in New York and author of “Disarming Strangers,” a diplomatic history of the 1994 Agreed Framework. Nancy Lindborg is President of Mercy Corps, and has worked inside North Korea to help deliver food aid to women and children in many of the poorest parts of the country.

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