

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

North Korea: Teleconference With Carnegie Experts

Participants:

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Thursday, June 26, 2008

George Perkovich: I would just begin briefly by saying that I thought the president's statement was a good summation of the logic in what's happened here—which is to say that this action by both North Korea and then the U.S. in response is a first step in a step-by-step process that's been a long time in coming. So, it's obviously welcome and a good sign. One doesn't have to agree with the rendition of history as to why it took so long to acknowledge that it is a positive step.

Douglas Paal: I share George's view on this. We've taken a long time to get to this stage. We've still got the important final effort that lies ahead in so-called "Phase Three," which you should all be familiar with, which the U.S. intends would turn over however many nuclear weapons or parts from nuclear weapons and material that the North Koreans have. There's a lot of debate in the observers' community about whether there's going to be progress during the Bush administration's remaining time in office on this score and there's even some who hold out a little bit of hope that it might be completed. More likely, you'll find people, including myself, who believe it will not be completed in the time allowed to the Bush administration. I think it was important for the president and his legacy to get out today and claim what I would characterize as sort

of two-thirds progress on the nuclear issue before too much time passed.

Sharon Squassoni: I would just add that all of this is positive, but that President Bush in his statement also identified a few things such as human rights, uranium enrichment, North Korea's nuclear testing and proliferation, and he also mentioned ballistic missile sales. All of these things are concerns for the U.S. that will come down the line. He also said that—kind of warned the North Koreans—that if they're not going to behave in this process that there may be some consequences. So, I think he was putting out a red flag there that “yeah we're making progress, this is very positive, but there's still a lot to resolve in this relationship.”

Question: One question I had was whether you think there's any realistic chance that Congress would be able or interested in blocking the removal from the terror list within 45 days.

Douglas Paal: My understanding is that there's going to be some opposition on the Hill and the president's characterization of his announcement was intended to mute some of that opposition by saying the fact that this terrorist designation will be lifted, but will still permit the administration to come back and address our concerns as we go forward, and that other means will be available to the U.S. beyond the terrorist list designation. So I very strongly suspect that Congress will not be able to block this, but there will be ample opportunity to voice Congressional concern that the president is either being too trusting of North Korea or is moving too prematurely.

Sharon Squassoni: I would just add that I think that those warning lines by the president specifically saying that next 45 days will be key was a nod to the role of Congress here. And I agree that there will be some political heat on the Hill, but you also have to look at how long Congress will be in session over the next 45 days. We have a couple of recesses coming up.

Question: The overall look at this and its effect on the reality of seeing that North Korea is meeting all of these stipulations that we have on it, what is this realism of that being the case, knowing North Korea?

George Perkovich: I'll take a stab at that, which is to say that everyone involved in this process is aware of the history, although some may have a more one-sided view of that history than others, but it's clear that—again as the president said—we are involved in a step-by-step process and it's always thus with the North Koreans, as with others. And so the idea here is that North Korea has taken a very important step, and that's why it's very important that the president then made the announcement he did about what the U.S. is doing or preparing to do with Congress. This is in response to a step that North Korea is taking. In a way we're obligated to take that step because that's the step-by-step process that the six parties have agreed to. I don't think there's any illusion, actually, that one takes for granted the steps that will follow and that will ultimately get to the destination of complete removal of North Korea's nuclear capabilities and, as well, the complete delivery of benefits and recognition by the U.S. But there's a realism that this will be step-by-step and here is a step that is being taken that's worthwhile. So I don't think there's naiveté about this. It think that's why it's a step-by-step process.

Douglas Paal: One of the concerns has been that until the people that actually built these nuclear facilities are otherwise out of North Korea, it will always be the capacity to go and start again if there's a breakdown in relations, or if they decide they need to go back the nuclear route. So, that's kind of a theoretical "how many angels on the head of a pin" kind of argument about the future capability to go back on their pledges. But what you have in this case is the real dismantlement and disablement of the processing facility, the fuel fabrication facility, and the reactor itself—actually two reactors. They were not in great shape to begin with, they've deteriorated greatly. They're now going through the final step of—I think tomorrow or tonight—blowing up the last cooling tower, but there's no way that reactor could be put back into position, in exchange for which the U.S. is basically doing something quite theoretical—lifting them from the terrorist list and removing them from the Trading with the Enemy Act list are not going to change the lives of North Korea anytime soon. For example, under the terrorist list they were sanctioned for getting loans from international organizations. North Korea has withdrawn from just about every international organization that gives a loan, so they have to negotiate their way back to achieve any benefits from this in my view.

Question: The fact that the U.S. is moving forward with this despite the fact that the this declaration does not talk about the highly enriched uranium and the interaction with Syria, is that kind of like approving a term-paper that has not been finished?

George Perkovich: No. In a sense, is it ideal? I mean, if we were negotiating with ourselves then obviously you would get a different schedule and a different outcome, but the other party gets a say in this and so they're not going to do all of the steps that get us to zero and

complete understanding of everything they've done because that's not what they agreed to. And so in any negotiation, you'd rather get everything you want, but because there's another party, you don't actually get everything you want. So they're agreeing to what they said they would. They're beginning to implement it and we are to. I would use it a different way, if you want to use your class metaphor, you could say "well, this is the first paper, and on the syllabus there's four papers and a final exam." And so you wait until the end to get the ultimate grade, but this is the completion of the first assignment.

Sharon Squassoni: I would just add a couple of things. There are certainly some parts of this agreement or these developments that are symbolic. The destruction of the cooling tower—that's symbolic, because the insides had already been taken apart. The Trading with the Enemy Act and taking North Korea off the State Sponsors of Terrorism list, those are symbolic, because it's not going to have a big impact on U.S.—North Korean trade. However, that cooling tower was reportedly very important to the North Koreans, and so they're giving up that very symbolic thing and, as well, the Trading with the Enemy Act and the State Sponsors of Terrorism—those were important to the North Koreans and so the U.S. is making those important concessions. There's some real stuff here though, and that is the North Koreans have or are agreeing to give inspectors access, not just to the waste, but also all of these historical documents which are critical in being able to verify how much plutonium they've been able to produce. This has been a problem for us since 1994—actually verifying what the North Koreans had done all along. So I think that certainly there is pressure on the Bush administration, within the Bush administration, to make some kind of progress

before they leave office, but I would argue that there is some real progress here.

Question: Do you think that we will know through this process how many nuclear weapons North Korea has?

George Perkovich: The question assumes, as perhaps all of us do, that they have actually made nuclear weapons beyond the devices that they test. I don't know that that's an established fact. So, for example, one doesn't know. And I think the president addressed this and Steve Hadley did. What we have gotten in terms of a commitment from the North Koreans and where we would be able to verify is how much plutonium they've produced. But that will be key, and that's one of the valuable things about access to the reactor core which was mentioned, because you can do through nuclear archaeology, if you get access to a core, you can fairly well inform yourself about how much plutonium was produced and when. That's the key—we want all the plutonium in whatever form it's in. If it's in weapons, fine. But we don't actually know that it is in weapons. It could be in metallic-like plutonium spheres which the North Koreans have shown to a visiting former director of the Los Alamos lab years ago. That could be one of the forms in which the plutonium exists, and whether there are actual weapons or in what form, we don't know.

Question: Right, but you're saying what we don't know. I'm saying if the intelligence estimates are accurate, that they do have at least one and maybe multiple weapons, through this process—do you think knowing the North Koreans—that we will actually find out whether they do have weapons or not?

Douglas Paal: The opinions of people who have been involved in this process are quite varied on this. Jack Pritchard, who was a negotiator in the Bush administration, has said fairly recently, after a visit to the north, that they're never going to give up their weapons. He assumes they've actually got some weapons that they've made, and that there's going to be a very high price for further progress of actually revealing what they have, largely in terms of a light-water reactor—resumption of the two light-water reactor projects in North Korea. But other people say “no committed negotiation, either bilateral or multilateral, can get us to the point that the north will deliver its weapons.” It's largely where you stand that leads you to your belief about the possibility of resolving this ultimately, but it's certainly going to be a very tough test in the next few months for this administration to try to bring that to conclusion.

George Perkovich: Personally I've never felt—well not never—that the North Koreans would actually hand over the last increment of plutonium, let's say, but as desirable as that is, the realistic objective and important priority should have been and now is to have them moving in the right direction. In other words, rather than increasing their production and increasing their threatening activities—whether its plutonium production, nuclear testing, exports, and so on—the objective of policy should be to get them to stop and then incrementally move in a positive direction. And that's exactly what we're reflecting on today. That's exactly what the step-by-step process is. So, we can leap to the ultimate destination and kind of speculate whether they'll actually do it. My own thought has been I didn't see how or why the North Koreans would, but you can have the world become much more secure along the way, even if you don't actually get to that destination.

Question: A follow-up to your last answer. Why do you think, then, that the North Koreans actually went this far, going much further than the freeze they did in the 1990s at Yongbyon, concrete steps to destroy portions of Yongbyon? What do you believe is North Korea's ultimate goal in this as they hold out the possibility that they may give up their nuclear arsenal?

George Perkovich: My sense is that they want full normalization of relations with the U.S. They want to eventually get to a point where they trust or believe that the U.S. will both not invade them, isolate them, try to bring them down, but will live with them and engage with them. And also in that process, in kind of an interesting way, help protect or balance the North Koreans against their neighbors as well. There's a way that they could welcome a relationship with the U.S. and a presence there. The reason I said that I didn't see how the North Koreans would ultimately give up their last quantum of nuclear material is that it's so hard for them to trust the U.S. and that the U.S. actually wants this kind of relationship. But I think that's what's in it for them, that's what they're seeking, and they have basically the same view towards us as we have of them. Are they really going to deliver? Are we going to get jerked around at the end? And so that's why you do things step-by-step. One of my reasons, again, for not having thought that they would ultimately deliver is I have doubts about the U.S. Congress and the U.S. capacity to stay in this for the long-term and deliver everything we're supposed to deliver. And if you were the North Koreans, you'd have doubts too.

Doug Paal: There are lots of problems getting to final stages that most people would like in Congress, and that is to get rid of the potential for nuclear weapons in North Korea. Looking at it from the North Korean perspective additionally, they have obtained three things by

creating the impression that they have a nuclear capability. The first is a deterrent against the United States using force against them. The second is a deterrent against Japan, which they have been interested in having for some time. Whether you agree that they need it or not is another matter. And the third is to reward the military with something concrete that gives them a lot of strength in exchange for their support for the current regime under Kim Jong Il. It's been my belief that unless we can address those three sources of concern on North Korea's part we're not going to get to the point of the nuclear weapons. The hardest may be just satisfying the military. We might persuade them that the U.S. is no longer a threat through the ongoing negotiations that will follow and a framework agreement for maintaining peace on the Korean peninsula which is anticipated in the documents that have led to this stage and the agreement. The Japanese as well have their own issues with respect to the abductees, the issue of which has not been completely resolved. The Japanese are taking a forbearing stance right now on this. They are holding back on their very substantial commitments, multi-billions of dollars in assistance to North Korea until they get satisfaction that they have the answers to the question of what happened to Japanese young people that were taken to North Korea against their will. It's a very complicated set of issues. It's not just the U.S. Congress who are going to be persuading the Japanese, who are holding out the possibility of some substantial benefit to North Korea.

Question: As this deal comes out and the Bush administration comes to an end, how do you put this into the broader context of their counterproliferation legacy? You have the Libya example, although that relationship doesn't seem great now. You have the Iran stuff, the North Korea stuff, you have now these moves on the 1-2-3 agreement with Russia and some of these MOUs that the Bush

administration wants to sign on nuclear cooperation with all states. If you had to sum up where we are as this administration comes to an end on counterproliferation activities with this North Korea episode now, how would you sort of tie it together?

George Perkovich: My thought is, as on many things, including climate change, the administration has, to its credit, eventually recognized reality. It's usually taken about six years after other people recognized it for them to do it, but then they did. The reason for that, in my opinion, was the very strong minority within the administration that was ideologically committed against certain propositions, whether it was the climate change issue or in the nuclear case—it was against negotiations with evil regimes. It's the axis of evil reflected. We must remember that the axis of evil, those three states—Iran, Iraq, North Korea—they qualified for the axis of evil on proliferation grounds. The predicate for all of this was that they were seeking to acquire nuclear, chemical, biological weapons and were posited to be willing to use them. That was the core of the administration's counterproliferation policy at the beginning, matched with ballistic missile defense. So it was a very, as Tom Powers wrote recently, it was kind of a Dirty Harry approach to nonproliferation issues, which is—the law and the treaty approach doesn't work, it takes too much time, it's too easy on the bad guys. You get a big gun and you don't negotiate. You go out and impose your will. That was the original approach. It was applied in Iraq with self-evident results. On North Korea, they recognized after a time that it wasn't working and the most obvious recognition was when the North Koreans tested in 2006. It's hard to have a less productive policy than one that enables a country to produce more plutonium than go out and test a weapon despite all of the pressure against it. By then the administration had, I would argue, learned and started the six-party talks and there they

were absolutely right and they deserve credit for saying, “Look, this shouldn’t be seen as a bilateral issue and it shouldn’t be treated as a bilateral issue. It’s a regional and indeed global issue and the other powers should get involved.” I think that was absolutely right. It then took them awhile longer still to realize that the North Koreans really wanted was a bilateral relationship with the U.S. That was an additional period of learning. Many people were telling the administration that but it took awhile. On Iran we are still kind of a little further behind the learning curve on North Korea but there is this adaptation and adjustment to reality that again doesn’t seem to have been fully accepted. So you have Secretary Gates, you had Admiral Fallon before he had to depart, trying to clarify—look, there’s no solution here that’s coercive and military—it has to be diplomatic and international. I think the administration is getting to accept that at this point, which is very late in the game. There is also a realization that came over time that ballistic missile defense wasn’t going to be the solution to this problem. I think what you’re going to get at the end is there are going to be reviews written of the administration’s performance in this area and it’s not going to be a great grade but it’s not a failing grade. To the extent that it’s not a failing grade, it’s a result of their having adapted and finally recognized that a rather traditional approach to this issue exists for a reason.

Doug Paal:

Just to add a further thought, we were able to engage the Chinese on the North Korean issue, partly because the Chinese had signaled to the North not to go so far as to test a device. When they rejected Chinese advice despite their dependency on China for many sources of supply, the Chinese were angry and were willing to support the UN resolution to sanction North Korea for the first time. Secondly, they were willing to put direct pressure on them to come more

forward on the six-party talks. What we see now in looking at the Iranian issue is that the Chinese are not there yet on Iran. In fact, the Chinese, while they have been going through the motions with us on trying to sweeten the packages that are put forward before the Tehran authorities, they are meanwhile doing deals as the Europeans retreat from Iran. They're signing new gas and oil deals, for example, they're providing equipment that was previously provided by the Europeans but now has been withdrawn by the Europeans. Getting the Chinese to focus on Iran and getting the focus on Korea has produced different results, and that should be part of the overall assessment of the administration's performance as well.

Sharon Squassoni: I might be a little more negative than you George, on this, because we haven't talked about Pakistan. I think that the Bush administration has really fallen down there, especially in the role of A. Q. Khan. On Libya, we got lucky in a lot of ways, and that helped us with respect to discovering what Iran was up to in their centrifuge enrichment program. But we fell down, we haven't nurtured that relationship, we haven't done a lot of things that the Libyans were expecting. I think when you look particularly at North Korea, a lot of people criticize the Bush administration, saying that—we're not just back to square one or square zero as we were in 2002—we're behind the curve because they tested a device in October of 2006. I would say at this point, if we had a little more traction on their uranium enrichment program, which I'm not entirely convinced has proceeded that far, but if we had a little more traction there and if we had a little more traction on whatever cooperation they were engaged in with Syria, we might be a half step ahead of where we were in 2002. So when you look at Libya, Pakistan, Iran, North Korea, and Russia, maybe I wouldn't give them a failing grade, but I would say,

“Wow, they were dealt, in some respects, a bad hand, but they really haven’t done much there in terms of solutions.”

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