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I would like to thank the Chicago Council on Global Affairs for inviting me to give remarks today. It is a pleasure to be here as part of the Marshall Bouton Lecture series.

In a few days, President Trump will be visiting Seoul where he will meet President Moon Jae-In and speak at the Korean National Assembly. On both occasions, the main topic will be the threat of North Korean nuclear weapons.

I know that many of us are concerned about rising tensions with North Korea. So I would like to start with two questions that we have been hearing often lately: Are we at a nuclear tipping point with North Korea? And, if so, what should be done?

First, there is the issue of real North Korean capabilities. North Korea is indeed rapidly developing its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile technologies. On September 3rd, 2017, North Korea detonated its sixth and most powerful nuclear bomb. On September 15th and August 29th, Pyongyang also succeeded in firing two ballistic missiles over Japan. And in July, the regime tested what it claimed were two inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of reaching the continental United States. Despite the tests, there is still disagreement over how long it will take North Korea to develop the ability to strike the United States with a nuclear-tipped missile. Some experts conservatively say 2-3 years and other say less. Few people question anymore whether this is a true North Korean objective. Rather they ask: can we stop them from reaching this nuclear threshold? And, what will North Korea do when they reach this goal? I will return to this point about military capabilities in a moment.

Unfortunately, in recent weeks the second issue, or the “war of words and personalities” between Trump and Kim, has largely overshadowed the primary issue of North Korea’s military capabilities. This game of verbal

nuclear chicken (as some have called it) not only makes it more difficult for us to take the North Korean threat seriously but it also diminishes the U.S.'s credibility and respectability in the minds of both the allies and adversaries. By turning a serious issue into a verbal game, President Trump also seems to have brought himself down to the level of Kim Jong-un and given Kim the equal status that he seeks.

I would argue that North Korea's rapid advancement in WMD capabilities and the frequent exchange of empty rhetoric makes it even more likely that we will reach a tipping point with Pyongyang, if we haven't already. What do I mean by tipping point? I mean the point at which it will be virtually impossible to rollback or even freeze North Korea's nuclear program and the possibility of a military clash, by accident or miscalculation, will expand possibly with catastrophic results.


There are some who believe that we have already reached the point of no return with North Korea and therefore call for acknowledging North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. They think we should focus on managing the problem through "deterrence and containment" much like the United States did the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Those who subscribe to this view advocate a limited form of engagement with the country. Others call for more drastic measures like regime change or various "military options." Those who believe in this view think that the only way to get rid of the North Korean threat is to eliminate the source, which is the Kim regime. Although this is not the first time that we have approached a dangerous point with North Korea, the danger today is higher than any other time. So, whom or what is to blame for this dangerous and precarious situation?

What brought us to this point?

Just a brief historical review of the last 25 years. The first North Korean nuclear crisis was precipitated in March 1993 when Pyongyang declared it was withdrawing from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). I had just assumed the post of South Korean Foreign Minister then and was charged with the task of working with the United States to resolve the crisis. This was another point at which we faced a daunting set of choices. Economic sanctions, military options, and diplomacy were all considered at the time. Nineteen months later, the United States and North Korea signed the Geneva Agreed Framework, which froze the North Korean nuclear program and reinstituted an IAEA inspection regime. It was in exchange for two 2,000 megawatt Light Water Reactors (LWRs), upon the completion of which North Korea promised to dismantle all of its nuclear facilities and program.

Nine years later, in 2003, however, the Agreed Framework was discontinued as North Korea was found to have clandestinely started its highly enriched uranium program (HEU) to build nuclear weapons. When the United States suspended its monthly supply of heavy fuel oil as stipulated by the Agreed Framework, North Korea restarted its nuclear program openly and actively. North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in 2006 and, in 2012, after nearly 10 years of on-again-and-off again negotiations, it became a self-declared nuclear weapons state and even inscribed this status in its Constitution.

Then, what went wrong? What can we learn from the past to deal with the present problem? Was the Geneva Agreed Framework of 1994 defective? True, North Korea cheated. We do not know if, when North Korea signed the 1994 Agreed Framework, it planned to have a clandestine nuclear program later on.




Looking back, we can say that the agreement had both merits and demerits. Critics are quick to note that the agreement allowed at least several years to pass before the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) could conduct the “special inspection” of the undeclared nuclear waste sites. What’s more, the agreement “rewarded” North Korea with benefits such as energy supply and light water reactors.

On the positive side, the agreement put an end to the crisis situation which could have brought about a destructive military clash. It also succeeded in freezing the North Korean nuclear program and activities and enabled continued monitoring of North Korean nuclear activity (or non-activity). In effect it prevented North Korea from engaging in a plutonium-based nuclear weapons development program. Finally, it gave North Korea a stake in implementing the agreement. The prospect of receiving heavy oil and securing light water reactors would give Pyongyang an incentive to “behave,” at least for several years.

So there are valid criticisms of the Agreed Framework as well as valid arguments of why the agreement was successful, at least in part. It is clear, however, that since resuming its nuclear activity in earnest in 2003, North Korea has made much progress in developing the weapon in numbers and capability. North Korea may have developed nuclear weapons anyway regardless of what we had done or not done. Yet, in my view, we can learn something from the two past cases (1992 and 2002), which inadvertently and perhaps ironically contributed to North Korea’s march toward becoming a nuclear weapons state.

One is the 1992 attempt to force a special inspection of North Korea after the IAEA discovery of a “discrepancy” in Pyongyang’s report. The discrepancy was between the amount of plutonium it admitted to have processed and the amount the IAEA suspected North Korea had



produced. The other was the 2002 attempt to probe the North Korean Uranium Enrichment Program after the discovery by the United States that North Korea was engaged in that program. The first case is where we placed more emphasis on probing the past activity rather than maintaining the current inspection regime of North Korean nuclear activities. The second is where we placed more emphasis on the future of North Korean nuclear activity than maintaining the present system of curtailing it.

What I am saying is that, without ignoring or tolerating their past or potential future infringements, we could have handled the cases differently than we actually did.

Today, we have a dangerous and precarious situation in the Korean Peninsula. Whom or what is to blame?


There is plenty of blame to go around for our failure to stop North Korea's nuclear weapons development. The United States blames China for not doing enough to stop the North Korean nuclear program. Koreans blame the United States for not giving enough attention and weight to the seriousness of the North Korean nuclear weapons. The Korean right blames South Korea's two successive progressive governments (Kim Dae-jung and Roh Mu-hyun) for giving financial assistance to spend on nuclear weapons development. The Korean left blames the United States, supported by South Korean conservative governments, for making North Korea feel militarily insecure to the point of feeling it needs to develop nuclear weapons. President Trump blames his predecessors for leaving a "mess" regarding the North Korean nuclear issue for him to fix. On his part, President Trump, with his blustering rhetoric and name-calling, is blamed for contributing to elevating tension on the Korean Peninsula.

The history shows that there are many reasons why we have gotten to this point. It is true that both the United States and China paid insufficient attention to the seriousness of North Korean nuclear problem. China has been more concerned about keeping the North Korean regime afloat than stopping North Korea's nuclear program. The United States has been too preoccupied with and diverted to the Middle East and the Iranian nuclear issue. Only now, as the threat of North Korea's ICBMs to continental United States becomes more real and apparent, Washington seems to be giving the kind of weight and attention to the North Korean problem that it deserves and demands. China seems to be paying more attention to North Korean denuclearization, partly thanks to the "chicken game" President Trump is playing with Kim Jong-un.

Are we facing another turning point - what should be done?

We are clearly facing (or may soon face) another turning point with North Korea. What should be done? And how do we use the lessons of history to help shape better outcomes?

For the South Korean government, even as it is strongly opposed to North Korea's nuclear weapons, its primary concern is preventing the outbreak of military conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Many of those on the left of the political spectrum assert that to avoid conflict more security assurances should be given to North Korea by such means as concluding a "U.S.-North Korea Peace Agreement." The current ROK government places emphasis on preventing the possibility of the U.S. carrying out a pre-emptive strike on North Korea. President Moon Jae-in is trying to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue by joining the United States in increasing pressure (meaning sanctions) on North Korea. But he also wants to be able to exercise veto on any military action that



the United States might wish to take against North Korea. Even though he claims that he has such an assurance from the U.S. president, in case of an actual missile assault on the United States by North Korea, South Koreans are most worried that the U.S. is likely to use force with or without the ROK consent. This is why the U.S. president's rhetorical threats of attacking or destroying North Korea tend to raise South Korean fears of "alliance entrapment."

On the other hand, there are others in South Korea who would like to take stronger and more deliberate action against North Korea. Six years ago, in 2011, Jonathan Pollack of the Brookings Institution wrote a book entitled, "No Exit," to describe the dead-end status of the North Korean nuclear problem. Today, in South Korea, a few additional ideas have been advanced to deal with the North Korean nuclear problem. Those on the conservative side argue that South Korea should arm itself with nuclear weapons because threats, sanctions, rewards, or persuasion will not work with North Korea, they say. If South Korea cannot develop its own indigenous nuclear program, they would like to see the reintroduction of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons.

It is difficult to say exactly what the right combination of carrots and sticks (or engagement and pressure policies) will be to tackle this latest crisis. North Korea's sixth nuclear test and long-range missile launches in recent months present both the need and opportunity for South Korea, together with the United States and other countries, to seek a different but more effective way of dealing with the North Korean nuclear threat. For now, it looks like the international community will continue applying increasing amounts of economic and diplomatic pressure on North Korea to encourage change and to build greater leverage for potential future negotiations. Pursuit of stronger sanctions should be part of a larger

strategy to induce North Korea to choose the path of change, one that allows it to join the international community rather than becoming further isolated from it.

In this effort, a full-fledged cooperation from China is required. The problem is that China has construed its cooperation as a concession or favor to the United States and its allies. In fact, however, China should be working hard to denuclearize North Korea for the sake of its own vital interest, not as a favor to others. China should make an all-out effort to denuclearize North Korea because: 1) Its nuclear weapons can pose a direct threat to all parts of China, which is one of the geographically closest neighbors of North Korea; 2) China can be seriously affected by nuclear accidents or war in the Korean Peninsula. CNN recently reported that citizens of Yanji in Northeast China felt fairly strong rumbling of the earth on September 3rd, the day of North Korea's 6th nuclear test. They are also very worried about possible radioactivity in the atmosphere presumably resulting from the earth collapse of the recent North Korean nuclear testing site; 3) North Korea's nuclear arming not only strengthens the U.S.'s alliance relationship with its allies but also brings its strategic assets closer to and around China; and 4) North Korean nuclear weapons can bring about their further proliferation in East Asia.

Henry Kissinger suggests (in his column, "Kissinger Imagines a Solution to North Korea," WSJ, Aug. 12, 2017) that, rather than holding multilateral or U.S.-North Korean talks, the United States should engage in "geostrategic" talks with China to find common grounds and methods that will make China persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. I am not sure if China has the ability to do it even if it agrees with the United States on the goals and methods. However, even if we

do not depend entirely on a U.S.-China understanding, such as the one Kissinger suggests, we should be openly exploring alternative ideas and proposals for dealing with the North Korean problem.


Therefore, plans for dialogue with North Korea in any form must also be part of the larger strategy. Whether the format for dialogue will be multilateral or bilateral remains to be seen. There is no guarantee that, if talks resume, North Korea's nuclear program and activity would be curtailed. It, however, is certain that without the talks, North Korea will have an unfettered opportunity to proceed with its nuclear program.

What does Kim Jong Un want out of his nuclear bombs and missiles?

Ten, twenty years ago, Kim Jong-il might have wanted nuclear weapons for the survival of his regime and to preserve his own existence. However, Kim Jong-un has made an extraordinary push to hasten the development of high-powered nuclear weapons, to miniaturize them, and produce ICBMs that can reach the continental United States. Why? Because Kim Jong-un wants to achieve more than his father or grandfather did. He wants to reach a position where North Korea can negotiate with the United States on an equal basis—as a nuclear weapons power. He may also want to legitimize internal oppression and forced hardship of the people in the name of external threats and pressures. He also seeks military superiority over South Korea.

We can think in terms of possible scenarios—several of them—that relate to this question. In the order of from most likely to the least likely, I would like to list the following scenarios:

The most likely scenario is one of North Korea muddling through while continuing with the development of nuclear weapons and missiles. North



Korea will also try to manage the situation so that it will not bring unto itself a massive attack (pre-emptive or preventive) or retaliation from the United States. Despite severe international economic sanctions, North Korea may expect to survive it, partly by activation of the private sector economy, partly by flexibility in enforcing the sanctions shown by countries such as China and Russia, and partly incomes coming from illegal means such as cyber operation.

Next comes the possibility of successful consolidation of power by Kim Jong-un and establishing a status quo in favor of North Korea. It may come as a result of some kind of a deal between North Korea and the United States, whereby North Korea would renounce its ICBM capabilities that directly threaten the United States and the U.S. would acquiesce to the North Korean nuclear status quo. This is a scenario that South Koreans are quite concerned about at present.

The third scenario is collapse of the current regime or at least the exit of Kim Jong-un and its substitution by a new group (presumably through a coup d'état), possibly consisting of military leaders. They will be equally belligerent, closed to the outside world, and oppressive internally.

The fourth is change of regime and/or policy in North Korea accompanied by accommodation and reconciliation with South Korea. This may lead to greater inter-Korean cooperation and exchanges, although North Korea would be wary of possible erosion of its control of the people.

The fifth possibility is a catastrophic war involving North and South Korea and the United States. It will most probably end up with a victory by South Korea supported by the United States, but only after many casualties and much destruction on both sides. Although possible as a result of miscalculation or by accidental escalation, this is a rather unlikely

scenario because none of the parties involved want this to occur.

In between the scenarios listed above, it is quite possible that a limited military clash, that does not escalate into a full-scale war, takes place. There is another rather unlikely possibility of the collapse of the North Korean regime and unification of Korea by absorption of the North by the South. A regime collapse and change in North Korea, if and when it comes about, will be more likely the result of implosion rather than external invasion.

In the end, whatever scenario would materialize, nuclear weapons that threaten its neighbors and the United States will not help save the regime as thousands of nuclear warheads could not protect the Soviet empire. In fact, they are likely to weaken the regime by diversion of resources and inviting increasingly stronger external sanctions.

As we continue to seek a better solution to the intractable problem of North Korea's nuclear weapons development, I hope and expect that leaders and able security managers, particularly of the United States, can mend and cope with the current situation with steadiness and prudence instead of empty rhetoric. And I hope that we ourselves will hold them accountable for focusing with deliberate seriousness on the ultimate goal of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. This appears to be the only way to achieve lasting peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia. /End/