

The problem posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons is of worldwide concern

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I want to thank Mrs. Moon for her efforts to bring the United States and other like-minded countries together to focus on this issue and see what can be done in the context of working with one another, working with like-minded countries and the region -- ultimately working with the North Koreans themselves on finding a solution, finding a better way forward. There's no question the issue has been very difficult over the decades. I myself worked on this question during President Bush's administration back in 2005–2009.

Speaking about the relationship with the Republic of Korea, obviously it's one that goes back a long way but it certainly goes to those dark days during the Korean War in 1950, in the 1950s generally, where the US demonstrated, I think, a remarkable capacity to understand a problem many kilometers away from its shores and to remain working on that problem and to make clear that it had the staying power to deal with it. It is now 2021, over seventy years since we helped defend South Korea against the very brutal attack from North Korea.

I think it's important for all to understand that this is enduring. This is not a question of whether US relationships or US interests in the region are up for grabs or about to be changed. These are issues the US wants to work on with the countries in the region, especially with the Republic of Korea to find a solution to the problems on the peninsula.

The problem posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons is of course a problem of worldwide concern. After all, there are international agreements, the nonproliferation treaty being the centerpiece of those, that make clear that North Korea's efforts to create a nuclear force is something that we cannot accept. The North Koreans have claimed that other countries have been successful. Why can't we? They've come up with many excuses why they think they need nuclear weapons. But the enduring fact is that North Korea does not need nuclear weapons. North Korea needs a relationship with its region and a relationship with the world. The US has on a number of occasions put this forward as something we are prepared to work with North Korea on.

But we are not prepared to work with a nuclear North Korea. We are not prepared, and I would say, never will be prepared, to work with a nuclear North Korea, one whose centerpiece of security is based on the idea that it could threaten its neighbors. We need to make very clear to the North Koreans, that that is not on the table.

We also need to be very clear to the North Koreans that it's not just the nuclear issues that are on the table; it's the overall approach by North Korea that aims to create a circumstance where the US somehow tires and somehow waivers in its commitment to the region. That too is not on the table, and that too is something that is not going to happen. The US is very firmly committed to South Korea not only because of North Korea but because of two other factors, which lie between the US and South Korea. South Korea is a major trading partner for the US.

Many people of Korean descent live in the US. They are our citizens, American citizens. The US has a commitment to this part of the world because this part of the world is, in some [abstract] respect, part of the United States. The US of course seeks no territory in northeast Asia; it seeks no monopolies in northeast Asia, the US simply seeks to have good relations in this region.

What can be done?

The new administration in the United States has taken some time to study the issues. That is important because when you look at what has happened over the years, you can see that many different projects, many different approaches, have not ultimately been successful.

I would say the proposition the US needs to advance along with other countries is to convince North Korea that it could have a better future without nuclear weapons than with nuclear weapons. There are those who say North Korea has somehow invested much time and energy on nuclear weapons and surely we cannot expect North Korea to back away from this long-standing commitment to develop these weapons. In fact, I would say what North Korea needs to contemplate is what kind of future it could have without these weapons versus a continuation of its isolation and frankly its sheer poverty in trying to maintain these weapons. North Korea needs help with its economy. It needs help with the humanitarian basis for its people, who every day face difficult problems, whether from climate change or simply from the grinding poverty that people there have faced for many years.

The US needs to work very closely with the Republic of Korea. After all, the Korean Peninsula belongs to the Korean people. So the US should avoid, in any circumstance, the perception by Korean people that somehow the US only cares about its own interests. It cares about a broader set of interests; it cares about a broader "symphony," where people may play different notes, but it comes together in the idea that this region should offer to be exporting not just goods and services but also stability to the rest of the world.

What's important is that the US and the Republic of Korea work together. The Republic of Korea may want to approach things differently. They may want to deal, for example, with the humanitarian catastrophes that loom every year in North Korea due to its inability to manage its fight against climate change, even to manage some of the public health issues that have clearly bedeviled North Korea, especially Covid.

So the US needs to work on the relationship with South Korea to make sure that what South Korea does is of no surprise to the US and complements the issues in the US. The US needs to maintain its security commitment to South Korea, and the best way to do that is to maintain troops in South Korea, and that is what the US has done. These troops are not a threat to North Korea but these troops are there in the event that the North Koreans get ideas of repeating what they did in 1950. The North Koreans should know that the US stands by South Korea and will remain so.

The North Koreans have often talked about how they regard any exercises between the South Korean and US troops as somehow threats against them. Well, in fact these exercises, as any military person knows, are exercises designed to make sure that the US and the Republic of Korean forces are able to work together in peacetime but also in the event that they are called upon to defend the Republic of Korea.

I hope there could be some kind of understanding of what the Chinese want. I do not believe that China is in any way interested in a nuclear North Korea. I think China shares our goals in that regard, so I think there ought to be some effort to reestablish the patterns of cooperation between the US and China, and what better place to start that than on the North Korean challenge?

China has some responsibility to solve the problem of the nuclear weapons in North Korea, the Republic of Korea has this challenge as well. We all do. And I think we all should commit ourselves to the process of dealing with this. I think we should commit ourselves to being strong in the event that deterrence is needed in the event that North Korea ultimately does not see the problem the way we do. But we also should keep open the door to negotiation and maintain to the North Koreans that we are prepared to sit down and discuss it with them. We should put a lot of things on the table -- things in terms of what a future relationship with North Korea might look like. But what would not be on the table, and the North Koreans perhaps need to understand this better than they do today, is the quality and indeed the quantity, of the US relationships with these other partners, especially Republic of Korea.

North Korea should look at its own interests and not look to see that it somehow is its interest to weaken the US-Republic of Korea relationship or weaken the US commitment to the region, because that is not going to happen. What North Korea needs to decide is whether they could have a better future without these weapons or do they need to continue these weapons programs? I hope they come to the understanding that what they need to do is to sit down with the US, with the Republic of Korea, with China, with Japan and understand that they can have a better future but a future without nuclear weapons. I hope these few thoughts will be helpful to you in your deliberations.