



Security and Stability in the Asia-Pacific Region

by William J. Perry (Part 2 of 2)

An earlier version of this article was given as remarks to the Pacific Forum CSIS's Annual Board of Governors Dinner on January 19, 2000 in Hawaii. This appears as the second in a two part series, see PacNet 18, May 5, 2000 for Part 1. Please note that Dr. Perry's remarks antedate the announcement of the inter-Korean summit.

A major concern with past U.S. security strategy is that the nuclear calculus has undergone a change. For most of the last few decades, nuclear weapons played no explicit role in Asia-Pacific security. But in the last few years, this has changed, and the only question is how far-reaching the changes will be. India and Pakistan have tested nuclear weapons and declared themselves to be nuclear nations. They have programs underway to adapt this nuclear capability to delivery systems, including ballistic missiles, and to produce these weapons in some quantity. It is only a matter of time until they deploy nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles. I believe that this greatly increases the danger that nuclear weapons will be used, either in anger or through a failure of command and control.

And there is another example of proliferation in Asia – one that could be even more dangerous. Six years ago, the United States and the Republic of Korea came close to a military conflict with North Korea over its nuclear program. The North Korean nuclear facility at Yongbyon was about to begin processing nuclear fuel, which would have provided enough plutonium to make about a half-dozen nuclear bombs. The United States believed that the introduction of these nuclear weapons could upset the deterrence posture on the Peninsula and was within a day of imposing severe sanctions. However, North Korea said it would consider the imposition of these sanctions as an act of war, and proclaimed it would turn Seoul into a “sea of flames.” Some argued that this was only rhetoric, but as Secretary of Defense at that time, I believed this threat had to be taken seriously. So I undertook a detailed review of our war contingency plan and began preparations for sizable reinforcements to our troops in South Korea. In the event of a war, I was confident of a decisive allied victory, but one that would have high casualties on all sides. Fortunately, that crisis was resolved not by war, but by diplomacy, which led to an agreement known as the Agreed Framework. The Agreed Framework provided for a freeze at Yongbyon, followed in time by the dismantlement of those facilities.

Today the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon remain frozen. That result is critical for security on the Peninsula, since during the last five years those facilities could have produced enough plutonium to make many dozens of nuclear bombs. However, the dismantlement of Yongbyon awaits construction

of the light water reactor called for in the Agreed Framework, and that construction is still several years away. Therefore production of plutonium could restart in a few months if the Agreed Framework were to be terminated.

A little over a year ago we appeared to be headed for another crisis like the one in 1994. North Korea had begun the serial production and deployment of a medium-range ballistic missile capable of reaching all of Japan. Additionally, the DPRK undertook the design of two long-range missiles that could reach targets in parts of the United States, as well as Japan. These missiles aroused major concern in both the U.S. and Japan because we believed that the North Koreans would employ nuclear warheads on them. This concern came to a head on August 31, 1998, when North Korea flew one of these missiles over Japan in an attempt to launch a satellite. This test firing provoked a strong reaction both in United States and Japan, and led to calls for a termination of the funding which supported the Agreed Framework. But if the Agreed Framework were to be terminated, there is no doubt that North Korea would respond by re-opening the nuclear facility at Yongbyon. And this, in turn, would allow North Korea in a few months to produce the plutonium that would allow them to put nuclear warheads on their missiles.

During this turbulent and dangerous period, the United States Congress called for, and President Clinton agreed to establish, an outside Policy Review. President Clinton asked me to head this review. I accepted this unwelcome request because I believed that getting this crisis resolved was vitally important for Americans, for Koreans, for Japanese – indeed, for all nations in the region. In the course of the study, I had extensive consultations with our allies, Japan and the Republic of Korea, beginning the very first week of the study. Most important, six of these meetings were held at a tripartite level, which I believe made a very significant contribution to our success. In fact, whatever else results from the study, the new trilateral cooperation is in and of itself a very significant development.

The first conclusion of the study is that the military correlation of forces on the Korean Peninsula strongly favors the Allied forces, even more than during the 1994 crisis. I believe that this is understood by North Korea. Therefore, deterrence is strong – but it could be upset by the introduction of nuclear weapons, especially nuclear warheads on ballistic missiles. The second conclusion is that there has been no production of fissile material in North Korea since the Agreed Framework came in force – but that production at Yongbyon could restart within a few months if the Agreed Framework were aborted. The third conclusion is that a security strategy based on the Agreed Framework has worked these past five years – but is unsustainable in the face of continued North Korea firings of long-range missiles, since these firings undermine the necessary support for the Agreed Framework.

The fourth conclusion is that North Korea has been undergoing terrible economic hardships, including widespread famine – but these hardships are unlikely to cause the regime to collapse. Therefore, we must deal with the North Korean regime as it is, not as we would wish it to be.

Based on these conclusions, the Policy Review recommended that the allies should establish two alternative strategies. If North Korea is willing to forego its long-range missile program as well as its nuclear weapons program, we should be willing to move in a step-by-step path to a comprehensive normalization of relations. Alternatively, if North Korea does not demonstrate by its actions that it is willing to remove the threat, we must take actions to contain the threat. I think that I understand as well as anyone that threat containment is expensive and dangerous, so obviously I prefer the first strategy. But the United States cannot unilaterally enforce the first strategy since its viability depends on cooperation from North Korea.

Our policy team scheduled a trip to North Korea late in May of 1999. We had four days of serious discussions – with a total absence of polemics. The North Koreans were clearly interested in normalization, but just as clearly conflicted – they regarded their missile program as important to their security. Therefore we reached no decisions on missiles in Pyongyang. In follow-on talks at Berlin late last fall, a small but positive step was taken. Both sides agreed to begin high-level talks, and each side agreed to take an action that would create a positive environment for the talks. The United States agreed to ease some of the sanctions on consumer products that it had imposed on North Korea after the Korean War. The North Koreans agreed to suspend missile tests while the talks were underway.

So where do we stand now? The Policy Review is finished. I discussed its conclusions in full detail with President Clinton, President Kim Dae-jung, and then-Prime Minister Obuchi, who all fully supported its recommendations. I have fully briefed key members of Congress, who appear to be willing to give our recommendations a chance to play out. Additionally, I have briefed the Chinese and the Russians on the review and asked for their support in its implementation. North Korea has not yet set a date for the high level talks, but has agreed to restart the missile discussions, presumably to be followed by the high level talks. I have told President Clinton that I believe that we should pursue these talks with the North Koreans seriously and creatively. But I have warned him that it will be extremely difficult to reach an agreement that will be acceptable to all involved parties: the North Koreans, our allies, and the American Congress. Therefore I have told the president that the United States should “keep its powder dry.” In particular, that we should make no reductions in military deployments or readiness during the talks.

In sum, my conclusion is that the three-pronged U.S. strategy, that for the last few decades has been key to security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, is now under great pressure. But if this strategy were to fail, it is not at all clear what would replace it or how security and stability in the region would be maintained for the next few decades as they have been the last few decades. So I suggest to you that not only is the Cold War over, so also is the post-Cold War era –

an era where it was sufficient to adapt and fine tune the security strategy that got us safely through the Cold War. We are struggling to formulate a new strategy for this new era – an era for which we do not yet have a name, much less a strategy. I am not wise enough to define that new strategy for you today, but I do believe that there are three clear guidelines for any new strategy:

1. Because of the unprecedented destructive power of weapons of mass destruction, war cannot be an acceptable instrument of foreign policy in the twenty-first century, as it was in the twentieth century.

2. Because of the unprecedented development in technology, especially in communications and transportation, we are one world. This is not a proposal I am making, nor a theory I am propounding – it is, I believe, an existential reality. Somehow our political and economic policies must recognize that reality. In particular, it is clear that any American security strategy must be formulated in full cooperation with our allies in the region and with full consideration of the interests of other powers in the region.

3. For the foreseeable future, the United States will be world’s leader in military strength, economic strength, and technology.

The bad news is that the United States did not seek this leadership, and often does not know how to use it – we seem to oscillate between not using it at all or using it in ways that seem arrogant to other nations. A few years ago, during my last meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Rabin, he told me: “The U.S. is the only nation in history that has had dominant military and economic power, and did not use it for imperialistic ends.” So that perhaps is the good news – at least we know how not to use our power. I hope, in time, we figure out how to use it – and to use it in ways that benefit the security and stability of all nations, not just our own.

In the meantime, Americans should work to sustain, and other nations should come to appreciate: the robustness of our free market system, the vitality of our free society, and our rejection of imperialism. These can serve as a beacon to all nations as they move forward – learning from the tragedies we all suffered in the last century and full of hope for the new century.

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