

The Prospect of a Hawkish Foreign Policy? Ashton Carter Nomination for US Secretary of Defense. Dangerous Development for the People of Korea

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The recent nomination of Ashton Carter for U.S. Secretary of Defense raises the prospect of a more hawkish foreign policy. In particular, Carter's past positions on North Korea may portend policy choices that could put the lives of Koreans on both sides of the border at risk.

In 1993, Ashton Carter was placed in charge of the task force on North Korea that issued a position paper for the National Security Council. According a Defense Department official, Carter "wanted military options taken very seriously." The paper "was very pessimistic about the prospects for negotiations" and recommended launching an attack on North Korea's nuclear facilities. Many working under Carter were said to have been "appalled" by the report, which suggested that the probability of war would not be very high following an attack. [1]

One year later, the Clinton Administration was moving toward war, which was now seen as not only likely but desirable. According to Ashton Carter, in 1994 he and Defense Secretary William Perry "readied plans for striking at North Korea's nuclear facilities and for mobilizing hundreds of thousands of American troops for the war that probably would have followed." The Yongbyon facility was to be targeted by precision-guided bombs. "We were highly confident that it could be destroyed without causing a meltdown that would release radioactivity into the air." Carter and Perry felt that the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear program "was even more dangerous" than military conflict, and they "were prepared to risk a war to stop it." [2]

As a graphite-moderated reactor, Yongbyon "does have flammable graphite in it," Carter later wrote. "So you need to worry that a fire could start that would sweep all this radioactive junk up from the core and cause a radiological problem downwind. We were very confident we could avoid that." [3]

Carter and his associates were all too ready to risk Korean lives to serve American aims. The assumption that an attack on Yongbyon would not have spewed radioactive material across the Korean Peninsula is questionable at best. Some years later, the South Korean government commissioned a simulation of a strike on Yongbyon and found that if all of the facilities at the site were hit, one quarter of the population within a 50 kilometer radius would die within hours. Nuclear fallout could have spread as far as China and Japan, and the soil throughout the Korean Peninsula would have been contaminated for up to ten years. [4]

In Carter's mind, any response by North Korea would start a war. The presumption was that the United States would be blameless for its initial attack. "[W]e would be calling their bluff," Carter explained. The senselessness of expecting North Korea to acquiesce in being attacked can be gauged by imagining the reverse. If some other nation bombed an American nuclear plant, sending radioactive material billowing across a large swath of territory, would one expect the U.S. to do nothing in response?

"There were substantial risks associated with carrying out that attack," Carter admitted in a 2003 interview. "That was a risk that I certainly felt at the time, and feel now, was worth running in light of the enormous risks to our security associated with letting North Korea go nuclear." [5]

Were North Korea to respond militarily, "U.S. forces, working side by side with the South Korean army and using bases in Japan, would quickly destroy the North Korean army and the North Korean regime," at an estimated cost of tens of thousands of casualties. [6]

South Korean President Kim Young-Sam was not as indifferent to the sacrifice of Korean lives as were officials of the Clinton Administration. "At that time the situation was really dangerous," he later recalled. "The Clinton government was preparing for war," with an aircraft carrier off the coast and U.S. warships preparing for a naval bombardment. As American forces were being deployed, Kim warned U.S. Ambassador James Laney that another war would turn all of Korea into a bloodbath, and South Korea would not move "even a single soldier" in support of the U.S. war. Kim then phoned President Clinton and argued with him for 32 minutes. "I told him there would be no inter-Korean war while I was president. Clinton tried to persuade me to change my mind, but I criticized the United States for planning to stage a war with the North on our land." [7] Although Clinton relented by the end of the phone call, he considered South Korean opposition only a temporary setback and continued to plan for war.

Alarmed at the drift to war, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter intervened directly by flying on a personal mission to Pyongyang for talks with North Korean officials. After the initial talks, Carter phoned the White House, interrupting a council of war then in progress. Carter passed along the news that North Korean leader Kim Il Sung had agreed to engage in negotiations with the U.S. on a final resolution of the nuclear issue. Knowing the White House might be inclined to ignore the prospect of a negotiated settlement, Carter said he had arranged for a CNN film crew to transmit an immediate live broadcast in which he would announce the outcome of his meeting with Kim.

When news of Jimmy Carter's intention was announced to others at the White House council of war, they reacted with indignation. Tuning to CNN, Clinton Administration officials watched with fury as Carter announced a North Korean commitment to negotiate the nuclear issue. "Nothing should be done to exacerbate the situation now," Carter added. The following day, negotiations between Carter and Kim resulted in North Korea agreeing not to reprocess spent fuel at Yongbyon, thereby removing the last excuse the U.S. side had for spurning a diplomatic solution.

A State Department official later reflected "The shocking thing about the Carter visit wasn't that people were disappointed that someone was going. It was that when he got the freeze, people here were crestfallen." [8] Clinton Administration officials wanted a war. According to another former State Department official, "It went down to the wire. The American people will never know how close we were to war. Had [North Korea] not accepted, we had 50,000

troops on the [border]. We were hell-bent about stopping them.” [9]

Unused military plans can always be dusted off for later use. In the days leading up to North Korea’s failed launch of a Taepodong-2 missile on July 5, 2006, Ashton Carter, in an editorial he co-wrote with William Perry, declared, “The United States should immediately make clear its intention to strike and destroy the North Korean Taepodong missile before it can be launched.” Carter admitted, “Our South Korean allies will surely not support this ultimatum – indeed they will vigorously oppose it. The United States should accordingly make clear to the North that the South will play no role in the attack, which can be carried out entirely with U.S. forces and without use of South Korean territory.” Anticipated South Korean opposition was not a factor for Carter in his advocacy of military action in which Korean lives would be lost.

In case North Korea responded to the attack, Ashton Carter and William Perry called for the United States to introduce “U.S. air and naval forces into the region at the same time it made its threat to strike the Taepodong.” [10]

In a striking display of hypocrisy, American outrage over North Korea’s launch in 2006 came just weeks after the United States test fired a Minuteman III ICBM on June 14. The U.S. missile flew 4,800 miles before its three warheads stuck the Kwajalein Missile Range in the Marshall Islands.

Even after North Korea’s Taepodong failed in less than one minute after launch, Ashton Carter rejected criticisms that his call for a preemptive strike was too risky, arguing that “if the U.S. is ever going to defend a line in the sand with North Korea, that is the least provocative way to do it, and next time it will only be riskier.” His presumption was that the U.S. should take military action at some point. The only question was when. “We continue to advise the U.S. government to strike any further Taepodong test missiles before they can be fired,” he and Perry added. [11]

“Diplomacy with North Korea must have a coercive dimension, so economic strangulation and use of military force must be credibly on the table,” Carter has written. “But they can and should be used only when diplomacy has been shown to have been tried and failed.” [12] The Obama Administration steadfastly refuses to engage in diplomacy, claiming that diplomacy has failed even while ignoring the fact that it was the United States which first violated each agreement before North Korea followed suit. The conventional wisdom in the United States is that diplomacy has been tried and found wanting. There can be no dialogue unless the North Koreans first give the United States everything it wants without getting anything in return other than the vague promise of talk. For Carter, this means there remains no impediment to the use of military force.

Ashton Carter is popular with both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party for his technocratic abilities and his eagerness for military action, and he is expected to be easily confirmed as the next U.S. Secretary of Defense. In that role, he will not make policy, but he will be in a strong position to advocate his positions and to influence policy.

Carter has shown a marked disregard for the lives that would be lost in the reckless actions he has proposed. It remains to be seen how much influence he will wield and how U.S. policy towards North Korea may change in the Obama Administration’s remaining two years in office, but it cannot be ruled out that South Korea may find itself in the position of having to block the United States from plunging the peninsula into war.

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Notes

- [1] Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997.
- [2] Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, "Back to the Brink," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2002.
- [3] Interview with Ashton Carter, *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, March 3, 2003.
- [4] "Seoul Simulated Bombing of N. Korean Nuclear Plant," *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), June 6, 2005.
- [5] Interview with Ashton Carter, *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, March 3, 2003.
- [6] Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, "Back to the Brink," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2002.
- [7] "South Korea Stopped US Strike on North Korea," *Agence France-Presse*, May 24, 2000.
- [8] Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997.
- [9] Kenneth R. Bazinet, "U.S., North Korea Near War in 1994," *New York Daily News*, October 19, 2002.
- [10] Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, "If Necessary, Strike and Destroy," *Washington Post*, June 22, 2006.
- [11] Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, "The Case for a Preemptive Strike on North Korea's Missiles," *Time*, July 8, 2006.
- [12] Ashton B. Carter, "The Korean Nuclear Crisis," *Harvard Magazine*, September-October 2003.

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