



Hagel 2007 Speech: North Korea 'Moving in the Right Direction'

By: Joel B. Pollak – February 20, 2013

In a speech to the Cato Institute in July 2007, then-Sen. Chuck Hagel claimed that relations with North Korea were "moving in a positive" direction because of multilateral talks with the regime of Kim Jong-Il, rather than the path of confrontation the Bush administration had chosen with Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Hamas in Gaza.

The speech, entitled "America's Next Steps in Iraq," was an attempt to draw conclusions from the then-ongoing conflict in Iraq for U.S. foreign policy more generally. (Cato has made a video excerpt available, which does not include the North Korea comments; the full video of the speech is apparently no longer available, though the full audio is.)

Hagel argued that President George W. Bush had generally frustrated U.S. interests by refusing to extend dialogue with most rogue regimes, and that a more active diplomatic strategy would succeed.

An example where the U.S. was succeeding, Hagel said, was North Korea:

And we started to actually do some heavy lifting in the way of diplomacy, and using all the instruments of a great nation's power, and we have more than any nation on earth, by far--no one's even in our universe. But that was a good example of how we eventually started being smart in the use of our power, wise in the use of our power.

Hagel went on to praise the six-party talks through which the U.S. and other nations were dealing with North Korea.

Hagel acknowledged that the North Korean regime was prone to cheating on agreements, and that progress would be slow and complicated. "This is a tough situation, North Korea," he admitted. Yet he said that if the U.S. abandoned talks with North Korea, the inevitable outcome was war--which may, he said, be what some in the Bush administration wanted. The lack of engagement with North Korea also meant that the U.S. had less intelligence about the regime, he added. "But finally, I believe, we're starting to move in some direction."

The focus of Hagel's remarks was an attack on the "surge" of additional troops to Iraq, which Hagel said would not work and would merely lead to more bloodshed. "We continue to

perpetuate a failed policy in Iraq, by any measure," Hagel said. He added: "Things are far worse today than when we got there," referring to the quality of life of ordinary Iraqis.

Hagel compared the Iraq conflict to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, saying that "there will be no military solution" to either. The answer to the violence began, he said, with removing "the American face" from the new political system in Iraq, since the U.S. was not trusted and was seen merely as an occupying force by Iraqis and others within the region.

"How do you stop the cycle of violence?" Hagel asked. "It is not putting more American troops in Baghdad in the middle of a civil war." He acknowledged that Al Qaeda was in Iraq, but that is "not the center of the problem" against the terror organization, Hagel said. Rather, he said, the main front against Al Qaeda was along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. While pursuing terrorists there, he said, the U.S. should use diplomatic means to bring Iraq's neighbors to the table to discuss the country's security situation, and its future.

The ultimate solution to the violence, he said, might involve a partition of Iraq. He recommended using an international mediator "to take the American footprint off of this." He also backed a timeline for the beginning of a U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq, denying that setting a timeline would mean that Congress was micromanaging military affairs.

Hagel also criticized U.S. policy towards the Palestinians, Syria, and Iran, tracing the problems in each case to one common factor: namely, what he called the refusal of the Bush administration to talk to the rulers of each. "We are good at bludgeoning people in press conferences, and threatening people, and warning people, but that doesn't fix the problem."

Despite the progress cited by Hagel in talks with North Korea, the regime withdrew in 2009 after a failed satellite launch that resulted in condemnation by the UN Security Council. North Korean also detonated a nuclear device last week in a test that is suspected of having been coordinated with Iranian observers.

The Iranian regime has also rejected bilateral talks with the Obama administration, and the Syrian regime is engaged in a bloody civil war in which it has killed tens of thousands. The Hamas regime in Gaza rejects talks with Israel except through intermediaries, and has yet to achieve reconciliation with the Fatah organization, its Palestinian rival.

Meanwhile, the "surge" in Iraq is generally judged to have succeeded in stabilizing Iraq, and has made the recent withdrawal of U.S. troops possible.