Let me quote from my last year’s speech here in May 2011:

- I was here a year ago [that would be 2010] talking about the North Korea nuclear problem, and we haven’t made any progress in the last year. And as I think I’ll make depressingly clear in my talk, we’re not very likely to make progress in the next year.
  - So for those of us who work North Korea, we feel like we’re living in the Bill Murray movie “Groundhog Day,” where every day we wake up and it’s the same thing over and over. But as some have said as well, at least you have a lifetime employment guarantee working North Korea because we’re very unlikely to ever solve it.

- [Then I said] If we boiled down my remarks, it’s going to be North Korea is unwilling to change. The U.S. administration right now feels no pressure to change its current policy towards North Korea. South Korea feels no inclination to change its principled policy towards North Korea. China is unwilling to help make North Korea change, so that’s where we are. And that’s, again, why we’re living in “Groundhog Day.”

- [And eventually I concluded my talk with] I think we’re stuck in neutral. And I’ll probably be here next May giving probably the same speech.
  - [I missed it by a week since it is actually June]

Peter – and all of you – would be disappointed if I simply told you to go back and read the transcript from last year and sat down.

- So, instead, let me point out a few new events that did occur during the past year, though they didn’t bring about hoped-for change. Then I’ll look at how the rest of 2012 will play out.

Event #1 – the death of Kim Jong-il and the ascension of Kim Jong-un or “passing the baton from Dr. Evil to Mini-me.”

- North Korea leadership succession “Appears to be on track
  - Kim Jong-un has acquired all the necessary titles of power.
In a uniquely NK twist, KIS and KJI retained their titles despite the inconvenience of death, making NK the world’s first necro-oarchy (a nation ruled by dead people).

- No evidence of resistance from the leadership elites
- Little likelihood of popular uprising (a “kimchi revolution”)…for now, although the increasingly flow of information and number of cell phones may serve as a future catalyst

- That said, sudden leadership change remains a very real possibility
  - Given opaqueness of NK, factors leading to an overthrow or collapse could be present even now
  - Even IC would have trouble predicting
  - Regime collapse could lead to a number of dire scenarios of implosion or explosion

- However, even a stable North Korea acts in destabilizing ways
  - We may have a new leader, but he is pursuing the same dangerous policies of his predecessors
  - Indeed, KJU may feel compelled or forced by those around him to go even further than his predecessors in seeking to influence Seoul and Washington
  - KJU is more likely to miscalculate than KJI and may stumble across a redline his father would have know to have stopped at.
    - Perhaps unaware SK is more likely to respond to another attack
      - Allied policymaking and crisis management is constrained by the fact that we know even less about the NK leadership and its decision-making process now than before.
      - We are less certain about how NK will behave and less able to predict NK’s actions

Event #2 – the Leap Day Agreement - The Bumpy Road Back to Engagement

During last year’s talk, I discussed how the Obama administration had come in with euphoric expectations. But after NK did a series of provocations in 2009, it reversed course and adopted a much firmer and hardline policy.

- It implemented the very policy it had criticized so harshly during the campaign.
The Obama administration then vowed that it would maintain pressure on North Korea until the regime implemented its denuclearization pledges. U.S. officials emphasized that merely returning to the Six Party Talks was insufficient for Washington to remove the sanctions.

- Yet, by late 2011, after a nearly two year hiatus, the Obama administration agreed to resume dialogue with Pyongyang. The Obama Administration became increasingly uncomfortable that a total lack of contact with North Korea would increase the likelihood that the regime would resort to provocative actions to regain attention.

U.S. acquiescence to re-engage North Korea was based on the premise that doing so would compel Pyongyang to refrain from any provocative behavior, including nuclear and missile tests, as long as dialogue dragged on.

Bilateral meetings between U.S. and South Korean negotiators with their North Korean counterparts in late 2011 and early 2012 eventually led to the short-lived Leap Day Agreement of February 2012.

- The Obama administration correctly downplayed the significance of the agreement, emphasizing that it simply enabled additional bilateral meetings to debate the agenda for a possible resumption of Six Party Talks. Even a return to multilateral negotiations would only be the diplomatic equivalent of putting weary boxers back in the ring for round two of a 15-round bout.

Even this limited progress was unsustainable after Pyongyang announced only two weeks later that it would launch a long-range missile which it eventually did in mid-April.

- Despite Pyongyang’s attempts to portray the launch as a peaceful civilian satellite program, it was an unequivocal violation of U.N. resolutions 1718 and 1874, which precluded any North Korean “ballistic missile activity.”

The Obama Administration was rightly criticized for accepting oral assurances and vaguely worded text from Pyongyang as a basis for a diplomatic agreement.
The administration scrambled to defend itself, but it was a losing cause since negotiators were universally derided for their naïveté and having the accord so quickly and blatantly blow up in their faces.

The launch not only pulled the plug on the bilateral US-North Korean agreement but also made any return to negotiations unlikely for the foreseeable future.

Because diplomatic efforts to address the NK nuclear and missile issues are not on the horizon, Pyongyang will continue expanding and refining those threats.

So, the US and its allies need to take appropriate steps to defend themselves against the rising NK and CH threats.

The Obama Administration has announced its much-vaunted “Asia Pivot”

- Good strategy –
  - Should be a stronger focus on Asia
  - It is a multi-faceted and comprehensive strategy, using all the instruments of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic
- But, less than meets the eye
  - First, dispense with political slogans
    - “US is back in Asia” – we never left
    - Admiral Greenert, CNO, commented that the US already has a large presence in the Pacific and downplayed speculation of redeployment of forces.
      - “It’s not a big buildup in the Far East. We’re there, we have been there, we will continue to be there.”
    - Not a new grand strategy. Much/most of strategy is a continuation from previous administrations and reflects longstanding US policy.
    - Even the Sea Air Battle Strategy is evolutionary rather than revolutionary
    - Economic aspect was initiated by Bush (KORUS and TPP)
- Security component
Heavy on rhetoric, light on follow-through

- Obama: “Asia is a top priority – reduction in US defense spending will not – I repeat – will not – come at the expense of the Asia-Pacific”
- Panetta: “we will continue not only to maintain, but to strengthen our presence” in Asia (augment)

- But there is no pivot, no rebalancing since there will be no forces from Europe, IZ, or AF redeploying to Asia. Robbing Peter to not pay Paul

SecDef Panetta testified in February 2012 that the proposed budget for Asia only maintains the current bomber fleet, maintains the aircraft carrier fleet, maintains the amphibious fleet, and restores Army and Marine Corps force structure to pre-IZ and AF levels, i.e. no pivot

DoD Cuts – are we funding the strategy?

Whether the US is able to deliver on its promises of the Asia Pivot is uncertain.

- The adjustments to US defense spending will impact security in the Pacific
- Deterrence it is only plausible if sufficient resources are forthcoming to maintain our commitments in the face of growing challenges

Despite the perception of a bloated defense budget, the military has already been cut significantly.

As then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said, “When it comes to our military modernization accounts, the proverbial “low-hanging fruit” – those weapons and other programs considered most questionable – have not only been plucked, they have been stomped on and crushed. What remains are much needed capabilities.”

Although Pacific forces appear protected, there will be cuts in the existing overall force structure and cuts/deferments to construction and modernization.

Reducing overall US forces is important for the Pacific context since it degrades surge and redeployment capabilities.
The overall force structure is what Pacific forces would need to draw from in a crisis. And a crisis in the Middle East, Iran, etc. would require either a rapid buildup of US forces or pulling forces from the Pacific. This was done during IZ and AF. Even with the expansion of US ground forces by 100,000, forces were removed from Asia Pacific. Bde from 2nd ID and Apache helicopters which didn’t go back. Marines from Okinawa.

Politicians can talk about doing more with less…”smaller, more flexible, smarter force”….but a smaller military is…a smaller military.

In reviewing the forthcoming Marine realignment, there is concern that the already insufficient transport units will be even more strained as Marine units are moved eastward. The Marine Corps assessed it needed 38 transport ships, the Navy provided 33, now (even before sequestration) the actual number will be below 30. As a retired senior general commented, “we’re in danger of leaving the Marines stranded in the deserts of Darwin, unable to get to the fight.”

Moreover, the existing force needs modernization:

- Since 2001, USAF had added new missions while eliminating 500 aircraft
- The average age for fighters is 22 years, bombers 35 years, and tankers 47 years

An Uncertain Path Ahead

Engaging Pyongyang did not provide the expected panacea for resolving the North Korean nuclear problem. But simply ignoring North Korea -- as the Obama administration did for two years -- is also problematic. Doing so allows Pyongyang to expand and refine its nuclear and missile delivery capabilities, further undermining the security of the U.S. and its allies.
Perhaps even more troubling is that the Obama administration has no Plan B. There is no U.S. strategy now that the collapse of the Leap Day Agreement shows that dialogue will not prevent further provocations.

- Additional provocations, either a nuclear test or military clash, are expected in 2012. North Korea does not like to be ignored.
- South Korea will respond more strongly. This could lead to further escalation.

Conclusion

The Obama administration is now no closer to getting North Korea to abandoning its nuclear weapons, moderating its provocative behavior, obeying international law, or improving its abysmal human rights practices than the day it entered office.

- Instead, North Korea once again conducted nuclear and long-range missile tests, twice conducted deadly acts of war on South Korea, and flaunted its repeated violations of UN resolutions.

Despots around the globe rejected the extended open hand of dialogue and refused to change their behavior. President Obama found the international arena to be far more difficult to deal with than candidate Obama had promised. That should provide a valuable lesson for future aspirants to the Oval Office.

Let me conclude exactly as I did at last year’s NDUF talk. To again quote myself: “I think we’re stuck in neutral. And I’ll probably be here next May giving probably the same speech.”