Northeast Asia faces a number of critical strategic issues: North Korea's nuclear weapons program, Japan's increasingly assertive foreign policy, and the rise of China. YJIA Managing Editor Jonathan Czin recently spoke with Dr. Michael Green, who was director of Asian affairs at the National Security Council (NSC) from 2004 through 2005, about these challenges and U.S. foreign policy toward the region. Dr. Green currently holds the Japan Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and is an Associate Professor of international relations at Georgetown University.

The first question I would like to ask you is about U.S.-Japanese relations during the Bush administration. It has been said that they’ve been on something of a honeymoon. Why have U.S.-Japanese relations been so good while at the same time U.S. relations with its other allies have been very much strained?

The United States-Japan alliance has been building to its strongest point in the postwar period. It didn’t begin entirely with President Bush though; it actually began in the mid-1990s with what was referred to as the "Nye initiative," led by Harvard professor Joseph Nye, who was then assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs. In the first few years of the Clinton administration, it was very heavily focused on trade and technology; we had set up a very adversarial relationship with Japan. It led to a real sense of drift and concern at the Pentagon in particular given China’s rise, which was just beginning. Also, North Korea’s nuclear program and all the problems we have today was something that we were beginning to see ten years ago. So Nye reaffirmed and revised the U.S.-Japanese alliance, and in 1996 President Clinton and then-prime minister [Ryutaro] Hashimoto had a joint declaration on the alliance for the twenty-first century, which introduced missile defense cooperation, and also revised Japan’s defense guidelines so that they could play more of a role in regional crises. To an extent, present U.S.-Japanese relations are a continuation of this mid-90s initiative of the Clinton administration—something that I worked on at the Pentagon. And Rich Armitage, who is famous for being the don of the Japan policy in the Bush administration, was very supportive from the outside, and even served as a Republican member
of the Defense Science Board at the time.

One element of the current strengthening of the United States-Japan alliance is bipartisanship. It’s not complete, but it’s pretty strong. On the Japanese side as well in the mid-90s, the LDP and the so-called “1955 system” collapsed. The LDP was briefly out of power before returning to office, where they remain to this day. The party that did not survive was the Socialist party. On the Japanese side there are now have two major parties, and both support the alliance despite fighting over other issues, and there is bipartisan support for the alliance over there.

I think the second factor that has led to significant strengthening has been the personal relationship between President George Bush and former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi, which I saw firsthand, and which was truly unique not only for U.S. and Japanese leaders but also when compared with most of the other leaders in the world who dealt with President Bush. President Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi felt very comfortable with each other, trusted each other enormously, and consulted with each other before making decisions. It was the kind of relationship you would expect with a British prime minister, but would not expect for the Japanese prime minister. It was very important. Abe Shinzo, the current Prime Minister of Japan, intends—and has been very clear about this—to continue that same kind of relationship, and so does President Bush. That aspect could change; that element of the strengthening of the alliance could change with different presidents and prime ministers. I do think that in Japan now a strong relationship with the U.S. is becoming one of those credentials you have to have to be a successful prime minister. So I think that the second factor is likely to continue in importance, but we don’t know what will happen here in 2008.

The third factor in the strengthening of the alliance, I think, is more of a structural factor, reflecting power balances in the international system. Particularly important are the rise of Chinese power and the increasing asymmetrical threat from terrorism and, from Japan’s perspective, especially from North Korea. The U.S.-Japan alliance is held together by common threats, and we clearly have them.

The final thing I would say is that the alliance is stronger now, and I think it will be strong in the future because alliances are also held together by common values. And I believe that there has been a convergence of Japanese and U.S.
national identity. Ten years ago, after the Asian financial crisis, the Japanese press and academic journals were full of articles about Asian exceptionalism, stating that Japan understands Asian values, and that the United States was pressing for global values and global economic rules. Even though we were allies, Japan, as part of its national identity featured very heavily this idea of Asianism, separateness and separate norms. If you look at Koizumi or Abe or all of the leaders of Japan today, they all talk about democracy and rule of law. I think there are a lot of reasons for this, but I don’t think it’s just rhetoric; there is more of a normative convergence between the United States and Japan. It partly reflects the structural changes and the dangerous world out there, but it also reflects changes in Japan’s domestic political economy. The Japanese don’t need to make excuses about Asian separate values anymore because their economy has undergone some pretty important reforms. Basically, I think those four things make the alliance pretty strong, and if there’s a big variable in all of it, it’s probably our presidential election, and what the next administration will do with the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

How do you think these factors played into the Japanese decision to send Japanese forces to Iraq? You alluded to the changing balance of power in Asia, but it doesn’t appear as though international terrorism is a major threat to Japan. Why would they participate in endeavors in Iraq and the Middle East?

At that time, Abe was the deputy chief cabinet secretary, and he went on Japanese TV, espousing common values, and he advocated in favor of fighting terrorism. But the argument he made that resonated most was that Japan is going to have to be there for the Americans so that they are here for us when North Korea acts up. You don’t have to have identical threat perceptions: the fact that both the United States and Japan see threats in the world and see that we can help each other in ways that address our respective threats counts for a lot. So I think that was a big part of it—getting the U.S. on board for dealing with threats in the region. Ironically, the South Koreans sent their detachment of 3,700 troops for the same reason, but unlike the Japanese, who sent troops to Iraq to be confident that we would be tougher with North Korea if they got out of line, the South Koreans, according to what South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun told his national assembly, sent troops to Iraq so that they could influence us and we wouldn’t be too tough toward North Korea. Allies do these things.

The other thing with Japan is that this is part of a trend that some people call “security normalization,” which Koizumi and Abe and other conservatives have wanted for decades—to be a more normal nation that takes on more normal security responsibilities. Iraq was a chance to break one more barrier.
It was one more step in that direction.

■ **So do you think that Japan will rearm, or at the very least, abolish Article IX of its constitution?**

It’s a curious question, and I get it a lot. Japan has already rearmed. Japan has the largest navy in the Pacific after the United States. Japan’s defense budget, depending on how you count it, is among the top three to five in the world. Japan has an extremely capable air force. And although they’re limited in operations outside of Japan, they have a capable ground force. They have rearmed.

The question is will they remilitarize; will they build up the way the Chinese are? The Chinese are spending ten to fifteen percent more each year on defense. So far the answer has been no. The Japanese have not spent more than one percent of GDP for decades. They briefly broke that barrier symbolically in the mid-80s to show that they could do it. But they have not spent more than one percent. And even after this North Korean nuclear threat, the indications are that because of budgetary pressures, they are not going to break that one percent limit even. I think the Japanese military program is moderate and reasonable and is the least we should want them to do.

With respect to Article IX, it is seen as the cap in the bottle of Japanese militarism. And in ideational terms it does represent an important totem of Japan’s postwar pacifism. But the younger generation of Japanese politicians, by pretty large margins, wants to change that. But that does not mean that they want to go back to the 1930s and invade China, or create a different kind of military role than the one they’re now slowly, incrementally building toward for themselves. In fact, the Liberal Democratic Party—the conservative party that is Koizumi’s and Abe’s party and dominates the coalition—did a draft amendment of Article IX. And there are two clauses in Article IX: the first one renounces the right of war, and they kept that; in the second clause, they said they have the right to have militaries, and also to engage in collective defense and to help their allies, the Americans, if attacked. In other words, they’re not so pacifistic that, if their friends are attacked, they are powerless to react. It’s a totem, it’s an icon of the Japanese pacifist culture after the war, but it’s not a black and white thing. Now the Japanese want to change it, and a majority of the politicians want to change it because they want a more normal military. And the reason is because the Americans wrote that constitution; if you read it in Japanese, it sounds very odd. It’s like reading German political theory in English: you can understand it, but it’s really weird, and you know it’s not written by an American. The Japanese know this constitution was written.
by an occupying power. So I’m not worried about a constitutional change. Although, politically, even though a majority of politicians want to do it, it’s not that easy. The LDP’s coalition majority depends on the clean-government party, and they’re pacifists; they don’t want to change it. So it’s not that easy to change, and even if they do, it does not portend some dramatic reversal in Japan’s role. I think it’s a healthy step, but not one that the U.S. should be pushing or resisting.

That leads to my next question. What is the view in Washington? Is there a consensus that this is something Japan ought to do, or that this is something that we should be concerned about?

During the Cold War there was a minority, in the Pentagon for example, that felt it would be a good thing for Japan to change the constitution, or to recognize their right of collective self-defense, which is the right to fight with the Americans side-by-side outside of Japan. But I think the mainstream view in academia or in the State Department was that changing the constitution was not a good thing, that it somehow didn’t seem like a good thing.

The administration today does not have an official policy on Article IX, other than to say that it’s Japan’s decision to change it. But I would guess from working in the administration on Japan that the view is not “this is good” or “this is bad,” but that this is going to happen, and it’s a natural evolution in Japan’s playing a larger role in the world, and it’s not a threat in any way to the United States. But nobody’s pushing them. And there is a misperception that the administration is pushing Japan to change Article IX; you read it and hear it frequently. Never in my time in the administration did anyone ever at any level ask Japan to change the constitution or say that it was necessary or say that the U.S. wanted it. There’s a clear recognition that these are decisions that Japan has to make. The only unhealthy thing would be for the United States to tell them what to do.

You don’t think it will adversely affect U.S.-Japanese relations, but what do you think the impact would be on Sino-Japanese relations?

Japan-China relations are fraught with difficulty. They are both powerful now at the same time for the first time in history, essentially. As Japan was ascending and China was declining, they briefly met in the middle and fought the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, and it went badly for the Chinese. But except...
for that brief moment, as unpleasant as it was for the Chinese, basically Japan and China have not had comparable power levels in the history of Asia as a system, or in the international system. So that creates inevitable friction or power rivalries that are clearly there.

Neither was well-prepared to deal with this. I think the Japanese leadership, including the conservatives, felt remorse and regret in the postwar period for having attacked China—I really do. They felt that attacking the U.S. was stupid, but I don’t think there was a great sense of remorse—just a self-pity and loathing for trying to take on Uncle Sam. But with respect to China I think there is a sense of remorse. And Yoshida Shigeru, the first Japanese postwar leader, who really built postwar Japan’s foreign policy, his view, which prevailed for many decades, was that Japan would grow economically again, and that that economic growth would lure Japan and China together. So Japan would never want to join completely the U.S. policy of containing China—this is before normalization, of course—and that over time, the Chinese, being natural merchants, would be weaned from Communism, and would converge with Japan, leading to very good economic relations. And he was right. The Chinese, being good merchants, have sort of changed in a lot of ways. But one of the assumptions behind this world view was that Japan, being the leading flying goose in economic development, would have the leverage to shape China’s strategic choices. But they don’t. They learned that in the mid-to-late 1990s when Japan tried to use foreign aid and other economic tools to stop the Chinese from testing nuclear weapons and from firing missiles around Taiwan. Japan realized this economic interdependence is great, but you can’t use it.

The Chinese in turn entered the postwar period, and in particular the normalization with Japan in 1972 and then their Peace and Friendship Treaty in 1978 with the assumption that the history issue—Japan’s postwar construct of Article IX, the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, and all the rest—would mean that as China gathered its eggs and reestablished itself in the international system, Japan and China would have good relations because China would have the leverage to shape Japan’s strategic choices by using the history card—which worked for many decades.

**But not anymore?**

It doesn’t work anymore. There’s a new generation of Japanese who are saying, “Why are we letting the Chinese, who killed 70 million under Mao, tell us how to say ‘sorry’?” And the Chinese are saying, “How dare the Japanese say, when China is rising and trying to rise peacefully, go back to their old ways.” So there’s a complete disconnect. Neither side’s mythology about the other is
working; neither side’s policy levers are working. And the generational change in both countries has left them bereft of good connections.

I think the U.S. Congress, administration, and academic elite understand Japan much better than the Chinese elite. The Chinese elite just don’t have that connectivity. So there are going to be problems no matter what happens with the Yasukuni shrine, or other things. From the Chinese perspective it’s compounded by these Yasukuni visits. From the Japanese perspective it’s compounded by the fact that the Chinese are expanding diplomatically and militarily at Japan’s expense. It is zero-sum from the Japanese perspective because the Chinese are sending submarines into Japanese waters, the Chinese have successfully blocked Japan’s bid for the Security Council. So what’s the chicken and what’s the egg? Is it the history issue and Yasukuni, is that the symptom? It’s sort of all of the above.

I think over the next six months to a year, Abe, who is a conservative and an ideologically conservative guy, will do a Nixon-goes-to-China. And I think the Chinese are eager to have some stability in this relationship. So I think they will stabilize the relationship for a while, but I don’t think there’s going to be fundamental change until there’s a change in the nature of, frankly, the Chinese system.

**You mentioned the history issue; Abe is the grandson of someone who had been involved in the militarist regime and then became prime minister. What is China’s predisposition toward Abe?**

It’s interesting. Koizumi didn’t go to the shrine before he became prime minister; so they didn’t know what to expect from him. And they thought, I think, that perhaps they could manipulate him. They didn’t understand him; they thought he was weird. The whole Elvis Presley thing and all of that—they didn’t get it. I think they understand Abe better than Koizumi. And in Abe they see a politician who understands power, and who, despite his ideology, is strategic and pragmatic. And I think they respect Abe for his ability to wield Japan’s national power. Abe’s a very strategic thinker and I think the Chinese see that. So I think they’ve made a calculation that Abe won’t promise not to go to the shrine, but he’s pragmatic enough that he will over time come to a position that China can accept. That’s their gamble.

The Chinese, in turn, and Hu Jintao in particular, cannot abide anti-Japanese demonstrations for too long because they become anti-Hu Jintao and antigovernment demonstrations. The Chinese government also has an incentive to get this on the backburner. And Abe’s calculation is that the Chinese want some
stability in the relationship for their own domestic reasons. Both of them see in the other side domestic political reasons why the other side would want stability. They’re each backing off a little—Abe’s not going to the shrine any time soon, and China’s not making him promise he won’t go. So they’re each calculating that by giving the other a little space, they’ll be able to box the other side in to do what they want. I think Abe still would probably like to go to the shrine, but he’s pragmatic enough to see how it goes. The Chinese clearly don’t want him to, but they’re willing to take a risk in the hope that by establishing a more stable relationship, Abe will calculate that it’s not worth it—which is smart. Both sides are being smart.

All of this sturm und drang, this sort of hair-pulling in Washington and in New Haven about whether the U.S. should do something for God’s sake—“should we intervene to stop conflict?”—was totally misplaced. These are serious strategic countries with an intertwined history that has extended longer than American history. They don’t need us to tell them what to do.

There are second-track academic exchanges that I’ve been involved with since leaving the White House; we facilitate dialogue between Japan and China. But for the U.S. government to try to broker between an ally and a country that is both an economic partner but something of a strategic rival, would have been counterproductive. When I was in the government, a lot of people were urging me—and the Bush administration after I left government—to intervene, broker or moderate the relationship between Japan and China, which I think would have been a disaster. First of all, you can’t solve it; and second of all, to the extent that you can stabilize the situation, they’re already doing it themselves.

How have they been relating to each other, and how has Japan been relating to the U.S. during the Six-Party Talks?

The Six-Party Talks are very curious things. I’ve been in several of the talks directly, and I coordinated the U.S. position in Washington for some of them when I was on the NSC. In a very ironic way, the most cordial relations are between the Americans and the North Koreans, at least on a personal level. The U.S.-Japan coordination is very good. We’re very tight. We have more differences within our governments than between our governments. So there’s a lot of overlap.

South Korea makes a lot of noise outside the talks about the need for the United States to be more flexible and so forth, but inside the talks they’re pretty tough on the North Koreans, and they’re usually in the right place. The Russians
are totally unpredictable: sometimes the Russians are extremely helpful, other times they’re not. The Clinton administration and the Bush administration both wanted to try to engage Russia as an Asian power to work on Asian problems, but the Russians just don’t have a consistent and coherent strategic view of Asia. It always seems to be a derivative of other things—energy, or something ideological. They’re very different each round. The talking points don’t change much, but the tone and the energy levels change.

The Chinese migrated, or changed quite a bit in the Six-Party Talks. Initially they didn’t want to do them at all, but [former secretary of state Colin] Powell prevailed upon them because they were worried that if they didn’t agree to host the talks, the United States would start looking at non-diplomatic tools. Therefore, they agreed to host the talks. The first round they did was with the United States, China, and the DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea), and they really tried to act as a broker between the United States and the DPRK. President Bush told his counterparts that we weren’t interested in that, that that was fine (circa 2003), but what we needed was for Japan and Korea to be in the room, and eventually Russia. The Chinese reluctantly agreed to host the Six-Party Talks, and the number of participating states increased from three to six. In each round, the North Koreans make the Chinese madder and madder and madder, and the worst relationship in the Six-Party Talks is between China and North Korea.

■ You mentioned that the U.S. has tried to incorporate Russia in East Asian diplomacy. What would be the strategic rationale for involving Russia somewhere on its periphery, as you suggested?

There are a couple of reasons for both Clinton and Bush. One is that with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet empire, there was a legitimate concern that the Russians would become inward looking, nationalistic, and difficult, and they still had a lot of influence. So Asia seemed like an area where we had never worked with the Soviets very much, where perhaps because of Russia’s energy resources and geographic position they could be a helpful partner in things like APEC or the Six-Party Talks. It was thought Russia’s involvement could help leaven a little bit the influence of the Chinese and give the Russians a good basis for cooperating with the Americans, which was harder to do in Europe. But it has never quite worked out in practice as conceived in theory because the Russians seem to see Asia as an arena to exploit for other reasons—either through energy sales, or through cooperating very
closely with the Chinese to counter the president’s freedom agenda. They’re comparing notes, and working in places like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to help authoritarian regimes resist the democracy agenda. I don’t think it will last. But it’s that kind of episodic thing; now they happen to be tight with the Chinese on this issue. They were wooing the Japanese. There are two major gas projects in Sakhalin. The Russians declared they would not give environmental approval for the second Japanese project for the very simple reason that they want to get more money out of the Japanese. And so in a strategic way, dealing with Japan, with this enormous rising China as their neighbor, it’s a really stupid thing to do. But if you’re not thinking about Asia, if you’re thinking rather about politics in Moscow or how to deal with Europeans and the Americans and you’re more European-focused, it’s the kind of thing that might happen.

■ What role do you think the SCO will play in the long term in Asian politics?

Not much; I don’t think it’s the most important forum. It allows the Chinese and Russians to try to have some arena where they try to limit U.S. and European and Japanese influence in Central Asia. They do that by trying to establish accepted norms, like there should be no foreign bases, or terrorism should be crushed without respect to human and civil rights—those kinds of things that are convenient for China or Russia, but don’t work for us or Europe or Japan. But I think that’s mostly at the margins. I don’t think these Central Asian republics have any interest in becoming Finlandized by China and Russia, and indeed they want better relations with Japan. They’re all different; each Central Asian republic is different. The “Stans” are all competing with each other, too. They want the big powers in their own way. I don’t think they’re going to be under the hegemonic control of China and Russia in the SCO. The SCO is interesting more for what it tells us about China and Russia than what it actually does to us.

■ Going back to the North Korea crisis, I was wondering if, as somebody who was in the administration, you could speak to what was behind the change in tack—or the change in strategy I should really say—going from the very hard line, not speaking to the North Koreans, then moving to the Six-Party Talks? What was the change in strategic thinking?

You know, I think there was more perception of a change than change actually transpiring. Or put another way, there were many tacks. The first tack was in June 2001, after reviewing North Korea policy, the president put out a statement saying we’re going to negotiate with North Korea bilaterally, and that
we’re going to the Agreed Framework as it stood with the Clinton administration, but we’re not going to ignore human rights, missiles, and conventional weapons where North Korea has a huge army. We’re going to put those on the table, too, but we’re ready to talk to North Korea. The North Koreans said no, we’re not going to talk to you because you’re hostile. Then the president gave the famous “Axis of Evil” speech, and he said we’re not going to talk to you because you’re hostile. I went up to New York and met with the North Korean ambassador to the UN, and I essentially said, “Look, we’re not going to apologize for the Axis of Evil speech; the president calls it as he sees it. But he has also said he’s ready to negotiate with North Korea to see if we can start a new beginning. So you know what you get with him, and he’s sincere about the negotiation, and he’s equally sincere about what he said in the State of the Union, so deal with it.”

The North Koreans waited a while, and then they came back and said, “Well, we’re interested.” But then there was an incident between North Korean and South Korean ships, and they put it off; and then it was on-again, off-again for a while. I mention this because people said the Axis of Evil speech ruined the diplomacy. In fact, the Axis of Evil speech spurred the diplomacy. Because when I talked to the North Koreans in New York and explained all this, they were actually ready to initiate discussions. But then the incident between the North and South put the talks on hold.

Eventually, we did go in October 2002, and I was on the delegation with Jim Kelly, our assistant secretary of state for Asia. And in the interim we had learned through a variety of intelligence sources about this clandestine program to develop nuclear weapons using uranium enrichment. We confronted them with it, and they denied it for about a day and a half. The last day, the vice minister of foreign affairs came out, hit the table and basically acknowledged the claim, and said, “What are you going to give us?” before giving a long list of demands. There was a period in there after that, November and December, where there was a definite tack. But the tack was, what do we do? The North Koreans aren’t backing down. We said we would do this bilateral negotiation, but we’re not going to follow through with them if they’re cheating, and they’re not going to back down, so what do we do? Dr. Rice talked to the president and said, “We’re going to have to come up with a different formula,” and that’s where the Six-Party Talks came from. In February there was an effort to convince the Chinese, and eventually they agreed. This was February 2003, during the Iraq War buildup. In 2003, the U.S. had huge “mojo” in Asia because we were kind of scary. In retrospect it looks quite messy. But at the time, if you’re China, the ability of the United States to muster this kind of military power and diplomatic power is pretty impressive, and intimidating. So they
were quite willing, after initially resisting, to set up the Six-Party Talks. And the Chinese generally did a good job. So there’s a tack there.

There was another tack in 2004, when there was a big debate within the administration—we had to give North Korea inducements, we had to give them security assurances, energy assistance, but nobody trusted them—about how much to give them as an incentive. I guess another big tack was in June 2004 when we put down, for the first time, a proposal in detail that stated how we would work the talks. So there’s been various tacks over the years.

■ You mentioned that the buildup to the Iraq War in fact improved the U.S. situation in Asia because we seemed so powerful at the time. With the Iraq War either having gone badly, or having been perceived to have gone badly—

The war went well. It was the postwar thing that went badly.

■ The postwar situation having deteriorated—or the perception that it has deteriorated—how has that changed East Asia? What effect has the Iraq War had on our position in East Asia?

The 2003 period made North Korea, and to some extent China, more pliable because they were impressed and intimidated by American military and diplomatic power. I think the reverse is true today, that North Korea and China feel somewhat less intimidated because they know the United States has so much work to do in Iraq. It’s not to say that they think the United States has lost its superpower status, but it has taken some wind out of the sails of American insolence in dealing with North Korea—no doubt about it in my mind. It’s hard to quantify, but I certainly felt it. The other thing is, ironically, Iraq has consumed Congress and the press so much that it has made the Asia policy much easier to make. In 1988, at the height of the U.S.-Japanese trade friction, the Soviet Union, the big external threat, was on its way out. From 1988 to 1992 Japan was very much the target in presidential and congressional elections.

■ Right; I remember that quote, “The Cold War is over, and Japan won.”

Right; so Japan got beaten to a pulp, even though we were allies, in part because the external threat was gone, and suddenly this economic threat seemed much more important. Well China is every bit as much of an economic shock to our system as Japan was, but the fact that Iraq is so all-consuming has kind of taken China off the headlines a little bit, which has had the ironic effect of making it easier for people like me in the administration to manage China relations based on sort of calm national interest, rather than constantly reacting
to trade friction and press stories. So, on the North Korea account, I think the problems we have with North Korea are not because of Iraq, but I do think that the difficulties in Iraq have compounded the diplomacy, and made it a little more difficult. It’s like having to run with leg weights—it’s more difficult, but not the root cause of the difficulty. The root cause is North Korea’s determination to have nuclear weapons. Ironically, the other factor is that China policy has been quite stable and sane because the other actors—Congress, media, so forth—haven’t been attacking as much. So Iraq affects everything, and not always for the bad.

What about materially, because I’ve heard some concern since many of the troops being deployed in Iraq are coming from PACOM (Pacific Command). Do you think it has hurt us?

One brigade came out of Korea—the Second Brigade of the Second Division—two years ago to rotate to Iraq. The South Koreans were a little unhappy at first, but dealt with it. And they’re now quite comfortable that they do have the military ground forces that they need to handle North Korea if we provide the air power. The air power is still there; we’re not sending a lot of F-16s and F-117s over to Iraq. It’s all ground forces we’re rotating to Iraq. So I think our deterrence in East Asia is every bit as robust as it has always been. The difficulty that Iraq presents is more one of national will, or diplomatic strategy. It’s not that we don’t have military assets, because I think the North Koreans worry about the U.S. Air Force. So deterrence I think is strong—that’s not a problem.

What do you see as a viable endgame for the North Korea crisis?

North Korea has been pursuing nuclear weapons for decades. I think Kim Il Sung saw how nuclear weapons transformed Mao’s China, and wanted them. If this were a question of North Korea’s insecurity about the United States it would be easier to solve because we could use security assurances, and we can wean them from their weapons based on confidence building measures and steps we take. We tried. The Bush administration has tried that. The North Koreans aren’t biting. I think that part of it is because they’re not just afraid of the United States. They’re afraid of China, maybe even more than they are of the United States. They’re afraid of South Korea, not an invasion, but the success of South Korea. And they’re afraid of their own people. If they wanted to build up their economy, they could. They’re surrounded by rich neighbors. But if they open up and their people see and there’s no reason behind the regime, then they’re in trouble. They don’t want to depend too much on China because they don’t trust the Chinese. And the fact that South Korea is so successful is
huge damaging to the propaganda of Kim Jong Il. It is no coincidence that they announced that they were going to conduct their nuclear test a few hours after the South Korean Foreign Minister Ban-ki Moon got through a straw vote in the Security Council.

They need their nuclear weapons because they’re afraid of the United States, but they’re also afraid of China, of South Korea’s success, and they’re afraid of their own people, which makes it a much harder problem to solve and one that I think is going to require very resolute pressure to cut off their ability to sell drugs and do other things they use for cash for their programs. But it also has to involve some sort of diplomatic process where they see incentives and inducements for behaving. The challenge is that if you put the inducements up front, they’ll gladly take them, and they would probably even be willing either to postpone the test or to freeze briefly their program. But there’s zero evidence indicating they’re willing to give it up. That’s the real dilemma. The U.S. doesn’t have a regime change policy right now with North Korea because you couldn’t do it without China and South Korea. At the end of the day, the most likely resolution will occur when Kim Jong Il is no longer on the scene. It’s very hard to make that happen, but it’s actually easier to see that, as opposed to how North Korea would be confident enough, not just about the U.S., but the regime would be confident about its own people, China, South Korea to give up nuclear weapons—which is the only success story Kim Jong Il can point to. This is not impossible. This administration and the next administration will not give up on diplomacy. If North Korea tests, they’ll tighten the net, or the noose, so to speak. But I don’t think they’ll give up on diplomacy—they’ll keep trying. And it might work, but as this goes forward it’s just as likely, maybe even more likely, that the regime will end up changing first. That could happen with a coup, which could happen in any number of ways. It’s very hard to say.

It sounds very much like George Kennan’s analysis of the Soviet Union.

Now that you mention it, that’s exactly what it is like. We need to be set up for a long, and possibly difficult, struggle. The United States cannot tolerate North Korean nuclear weapons. People hear that, and they say, “Does that mean we’re going to attack?” No, what it means is just as we wouldn’t kill our wife when we say won’t tolerate infidelity, it means we’re going to cut them off. We’re going to have to isolate them even more, which for an isolated regime has a little bit of a throw-me-in-that-briar-patch connotation to it. Nevertheless, the North Koreans are heavily reliant now on exports of drugs and counterfeit money and so forth, so it can get cash to keep Kim Jong Il’s elite fat, dumb, and happy. So there are vulnerabilities we can squeeze on to try to keep pressure
on them to bring them back to the table. But the diplomatic piece will not go away, and I think the military option is neither pragmatic nor practical, nor is it actively being considered at this point.