Madam President, we

can’t afford to put either Iraq or North

Korea on the back burner. Both need

our immediate and sustained attention.

But the crisis on the Korean peninsula,

and it is a crisis—is our most

urgent priority.

The situation in North Korea has

gone from bad to worse. They’ve

thrown out the international inspectors.

They’ve turned off cameras that

tracked thousands of canisters of weapons

grade plutonium. They’ve withdrawn

from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation

Treaty.

The irony here is that the very rationale

some in the administration cite

for regime change in Iraq is an emerging

reality in North Korea: A rogue regime

and one of the world’s worst

proliferators is on the verge of becoming

a plutonium factory. It will sell

anything it develops to the highest bidder.

We know it doesn’t take much plutonium

to make a nuclear threat real.

You only need something the size of

the bottom of a water glass, about an

eighth of an inch thick, two pieces.

With a crude operation to ram it together

at high speed, you have a 1 kiloton

bomb in a homemade nuclear device.

My colleagues from New York will

remember this: our national laboratories

produced what could be a homemade

nuclear weapon. They made it off

the shelf with easily obtainable materials.

Everything except the plutonium.

I asked Senators CLINTON and

SCHUMER to bring that homemade

weapon up to S. 407 and they walked it

right in.

The threat of proliferation exists in

North Korea as we speak, right now,

not tomorrow or next week or next

month or next year, but right now.

And by the way, if President Clinton

had not completed the Agreed Framework,

North Korea would already have

material for dozens of nuclear weapons.

If North Korea continues down this

path, we also risk an arms race in Asia.

Think about it. North Korea, South

Korea, Japan. And if that happens,

China will build up its nuclear weapons

arsenal, India will get nervous and do

the same, and Pakistan will follow

suit. Everything we’ve been working to

present for decades—a nuclear arms

race in Asia and beyond—will become a

reality. And that could have a terrible

impact on economic stability, too.

The regime in Pyongyang is first and

foremost to blame for this crisis. But

frankly, two years of policy incoherence

on our part has not helped matters.

We have see-sawed back and forth

between engagement and name-calling.

And the last two weeks of taking options

off the table—especially talking—

has made matters worse. It tied

our own hands and added tension to our

already strained relationship with a

key ally, South Korea. We need a

clear—and clear eyed—strategy for

dealing with this danger.

I’m pleased the administration now

seems to be on the right track. As several

of us have argued for weeks, direct

talks are the best way out of this impasse.

Some claim that talking is appeasement.

Well, we know that not talking

could result in North Korea having the

material to build up to a half dozen nuclear

weapons in six months—and dozens

more in the months and years to

follow.

We know that taking out North Korea’s

plutonium program must be a

course of very last resort. Pyongyang

has more than 10,000 heavily protected

artillery pieces just miles from Seoul—

it could devastate the city, its inhabitants

and many of our troops before

we could respond.

We know that for additional sanctions

to bite, we would need the participation

of South Korea and China,

neither of whom so far, wants to pursue

that path.

And we know that talking is not appeasement.

It is the most effective way

to tell North Korea what it must do if

it wants more normal relations with

us. In fact, in dealing with an isolated

regime and a closed-off leader, talking

clearly and directly is critical if we

want to avoid miscommunication and

miscalculation.

We cannot and should not buy the

same carpet twice. We won’t if we insist

on getting more from North Korea

than we got last time. This should include

giving up the plutonium and

spent fuel it already has produced and

forsaking the production of plutonium

and uranium in the future—all of this

verified by international inspectors

and monitoring.

In turn, we should hold out the prospect

of a more normal relationship, including

energy assistance, food aid and

a ‘‘no hostility pledge.’’