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“TALKING TO NORTH KOREA”

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PROCEEDINGS

MR. ARNOLD: Hello, and welcome to a 38 North press call, “Talking With North Korea.” This is Justin Arnold, communications specialist here at 38 North. I want to thank you for taking the time to be with us today.

As we all know by now, North Korea has made some diplomatic overtures, and what should we make of these? We have today with us Joel Wit, a founder of 38 North and a Senior Fellow here at the US-Korea Institute. He will be making some opening remarks and then we’ll open this up to questions and answers.

Joel, would you like to start?

MR. WIT: Thanks, Justin. So, I’m just going to talk, maybe, for five or 10 minutes and then maybe we can have a discussion, and I’m happy to answer questions.

I know there’s been a lot of coverage about what’s going on in the past day or two, so I apologize if some of what I say overlaps with that. But let me address four different issues.

I guess the first issue is “Is this a legitimate offer, and what do I make of it?” And I think the short answer is yes, and I and others have been saying since January that there’s a lot of steam behind the North Korean effort to reach out to South Korea and now the United States, and I think that’s very clear, made very clear, by the fact that Kim Jong Un has now made that offer.

So, there’s a lot of steam behind it and I think it’s more than just propaganda. You know, of course there’s an element of “driving a wedge” here, but there’s something serious going on here. And whether

it's been the result of sanctions or some sort of internal decision made in North Korea, that it's built enough nuclear weapons and missiles, or some other decision, we really don't know.

So, I would say it's a legitimate offer. Of course, it depends on what we mean by "legitimate." And that's, of course – that leads to the second point, which is "How do we figure that out?"

The way to figure it out is not by reading KCNA, not by having the South Koreans or others pass messages to Washington, but by the United States taking advantage of this and moving quickly to sit down with the North Koreans. How we do that, of course, is unclear, in terms of who should sit down with the North Koreans. You could imagine, maybe, someone at a senior level would sit down with the North Koreans, not necessarily Mike Pence but maybe the Secretary of State.

Or we might have someone else sit down with them, a special envoy. I think, as you all know, Joe Yun has left that post, so it's vacant. And so we need to move very quickly to put someone in that job who meets a number of criteria.

Yesterday, Gary Samore and I – Gary and I used to work on North Korea policy at the State Department and he later on worked for President Obama – we wrote a piece on the NPR blog, looking at what the requirements are for a special envoy. And right now there's no one in the US government or in that job who fits those requirements.

Some of them were, you know, it has to be someone fairly senior, who at least has access to the principal decision-makers in the United States. It would be nice if that someone had experience dealing with the North Koreans, but there aren't many people around like that anymore, so at least they should have experienced people working with them, people who have met face to face with the North Koreans, not people who sit at desks and analyze intelligence reports.

Another criteria would be, ideally, someone who has experience dealing with very difficult diplomatic situations. Past special envoys have had that experience.

So, we need to get someone in place very quickly, who can fill that role. And, of course, then we need to know, "Well, what are we going to say to the North Koreans?" And I don't think it's "rocket science." There are probably file cabinets filled with position papers for what positions we should take with the North Koreans. But we really do need to work very quickly to figure out our negotiating strategy.

The last point I wanted to make was that we really do need to lower our expectations. And I don't mean that in terms of the whole denuclearization issue; I just mean in terms of, you know, this would be a first meeting between the United States and North Korea in years, and the relationship has gotten very bad. That's very obvious to everyone. So, we shouldn't expect miracles coming out of an initial meeting. It may take a number of meetings, stretching out over some time, to work out some of the issues we'd like to start working out.

So, you know, I would expect, if there is an initial meeting, it may end up not resolving some of the really difficult issues, but at least some sort of statement of general principles will come out of that meeting which are fairly positive, that point the way forward to subsequent meetings.

And the most important thing is that we keep meeting and we keep trying to figure out whether

there's a path forward. We can't figure that out in one meeting, and so, hopefully, one of the principles that would come out of the initial meeting would be that, yes, we are going to meet more, and work on this seriously.

So, why don't I stop there, and I guess, Justin, you'll take questions?

MR. ARNOLD: We will go ahead and move into the question and answer mode of this session. If you want to have a phone question, press star-five, or you can type a question into "chat."

I have a question for you, Joel. What initial steps could the United States take, to say that they're serious about talking with the North Koreans?

MR. WIT: Well, I don't think it takes a lot. I think what we need to do is just arrange a meeting and sit down and talk. I mean, that's not hard to do; it can be done very quickly. So, I'm not sure if there's much more that we need to do, beyond that. So, I think that's very straightforward.

MR. ARNOLD: If you want to ask a question, you can also press the little hand underneath the black box, the "ask a question" button.

(Pause.)

MR. ARNOLD: Okay. Our first question, I will go ahead and give it to – and I apologize for this – Krishnadev Calamur. Go ahead. Ask your question.

(Pause.)

Q There's been criticism that the US doesn't have the institutional knowledge to deal with North Korea. Is that a fair criticism?

MR. WIT: I'm sorry, could you speak up a little? I couldn't hear you.

Q Sorry. There's been criticism that the US doesn't have the institutional knowledge to deal with North Korea. Is that a fair criticism?

MR. WIT: Well, I think it is a fair criticism, and the problem is that over the past decade or so our ability to deal with the North Koreans has declined, particularly in our experience of having face-to-face meetings with them. You know, look, anyone can sit at a desk and read KCNA and analyze what's said there, or if you're sitting in certain places you can read intelligence reports about North Korea, and you can learn about it that way.

But the fact is we have almost no experience anymore of face-to-face meetings with the North Koreans, and that's going to be absolutely essential in conducting any negotiation. So, as I said earlier, whoever the guy is who conducts the negotiation, it's probably asking too much that they will have face-to-face experience. But they certainly need to draw in people who do have face-to-face experience.

And there are a number of them outside of government, and I'm not just talking about former government officials like myself or Gary Samore, who wrote this piece with me, or Bob Gallucci or Bob

Einhorn. You know, there are a lot of people in the nongovernmental organization community who do humanitarian work, who have a lot of face-to-face experience as well. So, that's going to be absolutely critical.

MR. ARNOLD: So, Paul Sonne has a question. "What, in your mind, are the benefits to having a US special envoy conduct talks, versus a higher-up US official, such as Tillerson? Which would you recommend, and why?"

MR. WIT: Well, you know, in an ideal situation, I think Tillerson can certainly get involved. He can meet with the North Korean Foreign Minister, he can "get the ball rolling." So that's very useful.

And then, you know, as negotiations – if they proceed – it's also very useful to have, occasionally, the participation of foreign ministers and Secretary Tillerson. So there would be a place for that level of meeting.

But, you know, in the day-to-day work of negotiating, in any case, it's probably best to have at least someone at a lower level who can "push the ball forward," and then call in the higher-level officials when necessary. And, of course, Secretary Tillerson has other work to do as well, so...

I think that would be the ideal setup.

MR. ARNOLD: And remember, you can press star-five if you have a question request. Or you can "raise your hand," or type in the chat.

Joel, you said that the US would just need to sit down and talk, to show that they're serious. Do you think that the North Koreans would demand a suspension of "Bold Eagle" military exercises, as a prerequisite?

MR. WIT: You now, that's not my impression at this point. It doesn't seem like they're going to demand that. And, quite frankly, I never thought the North Koreans were serious about expecting a suspension of exercises. I think that was just their opening position. And, you know, I think they would certainly settle for toning down of the exercises, whether it's in terms of the number of troops involved or the different missions exercised.

And my impression is, from talking to military people, is that that's entirely possible, that we can reconfigure our exercises to make them less threatening, but to continue to do what we need to do to protect ourselves and our allies.

MR. ARNOLD: So, here's a question, and I'm just going to rephrase it a little bit, from Ely Brown. Those things that we have put out, on satellite imagery, are a little different than what they're saying publicly. Do you think that these are mutually exclusive? Such as Yongbyon still operating.

MR. WIT: I'm not sure what that means. I mean, I think we need to be very precise about understanding what the North Koreans are saying. When the North Koreans say they're going to suspend nuclear tests and missile tests, that does not include the production of fissile material made to build nuclear weapons. That's another issue that's going to have to be addressed.

So, I assume you are referring to recent pieces we've run about activity at the Yongbyon nuclear facility. That's not part of what they're talking about.

Moreover, I would never expect it to be part of an initial offer. And if it was, I'd really be flabbergasted, because that's just not the way things are going to proceed. These programs are going to continue, but if we have a suspension of nuclear tests and missile tests, that's a good first step here. It's better than not having one.

MR. ARNOLD: Again, you can press star-five for a question.

From Yuji Niwa: "The Director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats, said he's very skeptical of North Korea's intention for denuclearization. What's a credible sign for the US to believe North Korea is serious for direct talks?"

MR. WIT: You know, denuclearization means many things to many different people. So, for example, if he's talking about he's skeptical that they're going to do that overnight, yeah, I agree! If he's talking about he's skeptical that they'll "ever" do it, well, I don't have that kind of certainty about North Korea. Maybe the US intelligence community does.

So that's the point. When people talk about denuclearization, you have to be very careful about what that term means. If you're talking to a North Korean – and they've had public statements about this – for example, go to July, 2016. There's a statement there about denuclearization. And they've had other statements as well, that are at high levels of their government. And so, what a North Korean will tell you is denuclearization, or a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, is their objective.

But it's not going to happen in the near term; it's a longterm objective. And that's why we need to lower our sights and ask ourselves the question whether it's worthwhile to stop this program from advancing in the near term and then move, try to move, down that road to denuclearization, or whether we should insist on denuclearization right away, and as a result of that, lose the opportunity to stop the program and the problem is going to get worse.

And that, in turn, leads us to a place where I think most of us have forgotten, but a few months ago, or even a month ago, the whole idea of military options.

MR. ARNOLD: So, Tomoko Beck is asking, "Do you think the whole negotiation will be done by the White House and not the State Department? Because, if you look at Trump's tweets, he seems to create policy that the State Department then attempts to follow."

MR. WIT: I honestly don't know. I mean, the standard practice is someone from the State Department will conduct the negotiation. But I don't know who in the White House is going to conduct the negotiation? So, I don't know, I don't know the answer to that. (Laughs.) I mean, it would just be total speculation. But, of course, "at the end of the day" – (laughs) – the President is the one who has to approve things.

MR. ARNOLD: So, I have a question, just to see if we have any more also. What do you think of Trump's toned down rhetoric? Do you think that's helpful in maybe moving towards talks about talks?

MR. WIT: Oh, well of course it's helpful. And I think the North Koreans have toned down their rhetoric. So that's been one of the conditions we've been talking about for months that would be necessary to start on a glide path to talks. So, yes, that box seems to have been checked.

MR. ARNOLD: Okay. Again, you can press star-five for a phone question, or you can type in your question.

(Pause.)

MR. ARNOLD: Okay. If we have no more questions, Joel, do you have any closing thoughts?

MR. WIT: Yeah, I just have one closing thought. I've seen a number of articles written about the history of US-North Korean negotiations, and I would urge all of you to really do some homework there, because the idea that these negotiations have been a total failure every time they're tried, I think, is just absolutely incorrect.

Of course, where we are now is a sign that our policy, overall, has failed. But there have been periods when they've succeeded too. And I always use the example of North Korea could have had a hundred nuclear weapons by the year 2000 if we hadn't had the 1994 Agreed Framework. So, they could have had a hundred nuclear weapons 15 years ago, without those negotiations.

And, in my mind, that was a success. Now, we can talk about what came afterwards, and that's obviously not been very successful.

But one other point I'll make, too. There was a North Korean missile test moratorium from 1998 to 2006, which is eight years. Eight years they didn't test longrange missiles, so they couldn't develop an ICBM. And I would suggest that if they had been testing it back then, not only would we have been facing the danger of a hundred nuclear weapons but we would be facing the danger of an ICBM much earlier than we are today.

So, you really need to look at the history here, and it's very important, because it colors how people view the possibility of dialogue with North Korea.

MR. ARNOLD: All right! Thank you so much, everybody, for joining us. We will have a transcript and audio out a little later today. If you have any other questions, please don't hesitate to email me, Justin.Arnold@jhu.edu. I appreciate you all joining us. Have a great day.

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