

## 38 North Press Briefing: December 14, 2016

SAIS  
THE U.S.-KOREA INSTITUTE

VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT OF  
A 38 NORTH PRESS BRIEFING

“Sanctions, a Surgical Strike or Coercive Diplomacy:  
Recommendations for US Policy toward North Korea”

WITH  
JOEL WIT

*Senior Fellow at the US-Korea Institute at SAIS, Co-Founder of 38 North*

14 DECEMBER 2016  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

MR. WIT: Why don't we begin? A few minutes ago I had the feeling like I was one of these congressmen you see on TV speaking to the House of Representatives, and then when they pan the chamber there's no one there. But, this is a little better than that.

So, today what I wanted to briefly talk about is a policy review that I just completed, although I was helped by a number of people, some of whom are named in the paper. A number of others who aren't named were very helpful in putting this together. And we started this process in September, before the election, and of course the election turned out in a way that most of us weren't expecting. But, nevertheless, I think the policy recommendations still hold, no matter who was elected president, and still hold in the case of a President Trump.

I think most of you follow North Korea fairly closely, so I'm not going to go through the obligatory statements about it's a dangerous situation, which it is, and it's now critical, which it is, and that we need a change in our policy, which we do.

In this paper we examine a number of different options, and I'll tell you what the recommendations are. But a point I really want to make up front is that this is a very pressing situation and I think we are going to have very limited time in which to start moving forward with a new approach to North Korea, and I would say maybe within the first hundred days of a new administration, if we are going to have any chance of dealing with this issue.

And, to do that we can't just sort of round up “the usual suspects.” We can't go through months-long policy review, we can't wait for every mid-level official in the State Department and Department of Defense to be appointed and confirmed. We need to do this quickly and it needs to be a top-down process, driven by the White House, with strong presidential leadership.

Whether that's going to happen or not is a separate issue, but I'm willing to predict that unless we start moving forward quickly, what could happen is that the situation will start to deteriorate, after a few months of the new administration, and a Trump administration is essentially going to find itself in the same spot that the Obama administration found itself within the first few months, where things happen,

## 38 North Press Briefing: December 14, 2016

not good things, that narrow its options and push it into a corner it doesn't want to be pushed into, which essentially the Obama administration never got out of, for eight years.

So, what are the options? You know, everyone knows what the options are. I'm not going to go into great detail about them. There is, of course, the option of an Iran-style approach, where the United States seeks crippling sanctions against North Korea, in order to propel it back to talks on denuclearization, quick denuclearization.

There's the option we hear more and more about, in which I and my colleague, Richard Sokolsky [wrote an article on](#), I guess it's two days ago now, in Defense One. It's the preemptive attack option. And you hear more and more about that one because people think any other type of approach won't work. That's wrong, but the preemptive attack option obviously has a number of serious drawbacks, not the least of which is that it could trigger a second Korean war and, in this case, a second Korean war may involved the use of nuclear weapons by North Korea.

And then the third option is what I call – it's not a new term – a strategy of “coercive diplomacy” that doesn't start with the notion of seeking crippling sanctions but starts with the notion of serious diplomacy and serious outreach to North Korea, that would be backed up, of course, by the threat of escalating sanctions and military steps, but not a preemptive strike.

So, in my mind, if you have to choose between these three options, obviously a preemptive strike is high risk and I think it's low payoff. So I wouldn't – I don't even consider that one seriously.

The first option, of an Iran-style campaign, sounds very nice. “It worked with Iran. It'll work with North Korea.” The problem is that we're – one size doesn't fit all.

In the case of Iran, of course, crippling sanctions were part of a strategy that was fully supported by the European Union, which was key, and then supported by Russia and China. Iran has a very – as everyone knows – is a very different country from North Korea. It's more connected to the international economy. It has a different internal situation. The Iranian government had just gone through an election and there was a change in leadership that was more open to diplomacy.

But the big problem with North Korea is not all of those – of course, North Korea is not connected to the international economy; it doesn't have elections and changes in government. It is what it is.

The big problem is China. And, as far as I'm concerned, you're never going to get China to agree to the kinds of crippling sanctions that would force North Korea to “cry uncle.” And, even if you did, knowing the North Koreans, I doubt if they would “cry uncle.” They wouldn't capitulate. They would find ways of retaliating against everyone.

So, that leaves us with the policy of coercive diplomacy, which I have described to you. I think that offers the best chances for success. And, if it doesn't succeed, if the initial effort doesn't succeed, the diplomatic effort – we still have time to escalate pressure. And now we have a good hook to get really serious, and that is the impending testing and deployment of a North Korean ICBM, which is a significant escalation in the threat that North Korea poses to the United States.

Let me go through the different aspects of what I see as a strategy of coercive diplomacy. I guess

## 38 North Press Briefing: December 14, 2016

there are 14 different things that are part of it, and I'm not going to go through each one in great detail. I'm just going to mention some of them and try to give you a fuller picture of what I'm describing.

So, the first guideline is that the United States, not China, is the indispensable nation in dealing with North Korea. Every one of the countries involved or interested in this problem looks to the United States for leadership. We don't all look to China for leadership. The United States can be the glue that holds together a common approach to North Korea. And even the North Koreans look to the United States, for obvious reasons, because, at least from their perspective, the problem here is the United States. It's not China. It's not any other countries. The United States is the central player, the biggest threat to North Korea's existence.

Second, when I say we shouldn't rely on China to solve this problem, I don't mean we should ignore them. There will be chances to build some cooperation with China, in the context of an overall approach. But we have to do what we have to do. So, for example, on the issue of THAAD, of course the Chinese are vehemently opposed to that. Well, that's something that's a step that we really have to take, given the mounting North Korean threat, and they're going to have to accept that.

Now, it came up in a meeting I was in yesterday, "Well, shouldn't we cancel THAAD? And that'll get the Chinese on board whatever policy we adopt."

And my answer is no. You know, if the United States, tomorrow, launched a serious diplomatic initiative towards North Korea, regardless of THAAD, the Chinese would be supportive. So, we need to take whatever steps we need to take, to protect ourselves against the North Koreans, and the Chinese "are big boys;" they understand that.

Third, of course, we need to work closely with our allies, South Korea and Japan, but – and I think this is a very important point – we shouldn't give our allies veto power over our policies. I think some US administrations have tended to do that, and others haven't. Others have worked out a division of labor with our allies, where the United States takes the lead on some issues; the United States works closely with South Korea, for example, on other issues. And on still other issues our allies should take the lead. In the example of South Korea, obviously, North-South talks is where South Korea should take the lead. So, we need to work out that kind of division of labor.

Fourth, as I said earlier, we need to get inside the decision loop quickly. We can't sit around for months discussing what policy should be, waiting for officials to come on board, because the real world moves on. Everything isn't frozen because the United States has a new administration.

There are things we should do right away, I think, to communicate to the North Koreans that this is a new administration; it has a different approach, and that we are seriously considering other options in our policy.

Fifth, as part of that process, if we signal – send the right signals – we, of course, should be jump starting a dialogue, and that's something that people have discussed a lot. It's talks about talks. Now, what I want to emphasize is that talks about talks are to figure out whether, indeed, you can resume formal negotiations. There is no reason whatsoever to insist, even before talks about talks happen, that they have to be about denuclearization.

## 38 North Press Briefing: December 14, 2016

Talks about talks are basically talks about issues of mutual concern, and it's very obvious what the first words are going to be out of whoever the American is, in this meeting. The first word is going to be denuclearization, and the North Koreans fully understand that. They're not going to run from the room screaming.

But we need to keep enough flexibility in these talks about talks to get this process off the ground. Right now, I don't think we have that flexibility.

Sixth, we need to be ready to meet North Korea halfway. Well, in that, I mean talks about talks are going to have to address the possibility of confidence-building measures both sides will take, to create a better atmosphere for formal negotiations. And, in that context, there's the issue of US-ROK joint exercises, what to do about those, because that's one of North Korea's big concerns. And, of course, we have our own big concerns: North Korea's nuclear tests and its longrange rocket tests.

And we need to be able to meet each other halfway, in that discussion, in order to get to the formal negotiations where we will address the big issues.

Whatever steps we take as confidence-building measures, whether it's canceling exercises – although I don't expect that to happen and I don't think the North Koreans expect that to happen – modifying them, scaling them back, whatever step is taken there, and certainly moratoria on nuclear testing and missile testing – these are steps that can be easily reversed by both sides. So, it's not as if you're doing something that's written in stone and can never be changed.

If we feel getting to the big negotiation is important enough and is in our interests, then I don't think these are big steps to take.

Seven, focus on phased denuclearization and a move away from hostility. There's no doubt that the objective of denuclearization and of what the North Koreans want, which is a peace agreement, these are longterm objectives. We have to be willing to accept that.

It's funny, because a lot of people, when they hear “denuclearization,” and when North Koreans hear “denuclearization,” they think that means tomorrow, they have to, kind of, put all their weapons in a big pile somewhere and someone's going to come and take them away in one day.

When I hear “denuclearization,” I think of a process. Maybe that's because of the community I come from, the arms control and nonproliferation community. I think of a process that takes place over time, a phased process.

And that's what this would be. It would be a phased process, over time, with the longterm objective of denuclearization, and also the longterm objective of a peace agreement on the Korean Peninsula. Those are the two strings we need to pull, and along with those two strings come a lot of other stuff. There comes the issue of sanctions, what to do about that. There comes the issue of normalization of relations, whether we can move down the road and normalize the relations between the United States and North Korea. There comes other issues which are more loosely connected, like North-South talks, like human rights issues, that the United States is concerned about. All of these issues would be wrapped up in this phased process.

## 38 North Press Briefing: December 14, 2016

Well, it's going to be very complicated, obviously, very difficult, there's no doubt about it. And we may never even get to that point; it may not work. But I think it's really worth trying.

Eighth, of course, don't forget ballistic missiles. That has to be part of the mix, particularly with North Korea's ICBM just over the horizon. That's not going to be easy either, because the world today is very different from the world of, say, 1999 and 2000, when we could have solved that problem, because back then the North Koreans were willing to consider launching satellites from other countries' space launch vehicles.

Today, I'm not so sure they would be willing to do that, and it makes the issue very difficult to deal with. There may be some technical ways of doing that, but it's going to be very difficult to tell the North Koreans, "You can't have a peaceful space program," because they have a series program there. That's not going to be easy.

Nine, deal with conventional forces. Well, that has to be part of this mix, as we go down the road to establishing a peace agreement. The North Koreans at least seem open to the idea of first starting out with some confidence-building measures, and their main focus has been the West Sea. That makes a lot of sense, because the West Sea is the place where local confrontations can get out of hand and escalate to fullscale war. We've seen that over and over again. There have been clashes there for many years.

So, the West Sea will probably have to be a key part of that process, but beyond that this issue of conventional arms control and reducing conventional forces on both sides have to be addressed, and it should be addressed in the context of moving down the road to a peace agreement.

I suspect that, under the right circumstances, the North Koreans would be willing to have those kinds of discussions. There has been this debate in North Korea, probably since around 2005, about how much its enormous military spending contributes to the development, the economic development, of their country. There are obviously some people who say this isn't contributing at all! And there are, of course, others who say it does contribute.

But I think the point is, given half a chance, the North Koreans might seriously consider cutting military spending, cutting back their conventional forces, and that's where the link to conventional arms control might come in.

Ten, pursue a change agenda but recognize its limits. Well, this is something, of course, we hear a lot of today. We hear a lot about human rights issues. We hear almost as much, even more, about how getting information into North Korea is going to miraculously change the country.

You know, I'm not dismissing this, but I think a lot of what I see really overestimates our ability to change the internal situation in North Korea, and particularly our ability to change it rapidly. Even under the best circumstances, encouraging change in North Korea, which is already – it's already been underway for quite a while now, but further encouraging that change, it may happen over years, or maybe even over generations. That doesn't mean I'm dismissing it; I think we should do that. But we should stop thinking that this somehow may solve our problem in dealing with a hostile regime.

Eleven, reinforce US alliances, enhance extended deterrence. I think that's a process that's been underway and is still underway. There are a lot of different military programs that can be taken to bolster

## 38 North Press Briefing: December 14, 2016

deterrence, to enhance conventional strike, to build up ground-based interceptors in the United States, in case North Korea does build an ICBM. And a number of other measures there.

I think an important point here and, quite frankly, I would be willing to seriously consider this, is that if we can't get a handle on this threat, then the United States should seriously consider stepping up its nuclear presence in the region. I don't mean deploying, redeploying, tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea. I would see that as a very last resort. But there are other steps that can be taken, such as periodically sending US bombers, not to overfly the Peninsula, but to be based in South Korea. That's a possibility, just to demonstrate our commitment to the alliance and, quite frankly, to demonstrate to the North Koreans that their threat is unacceptable.

Twelve, strengthen barriers to transfer of nuclear technology. This is very important, and it often escapes notice. But, as this, North Korea's stockpile, grows, I think the chances of them transferring technology is going to grow too. The North Koreans say, "Oh no, we'd never do that." I'm not sure how many people believe them really, and I don't believe them either. I think they are capable of doing it, and they have done it in the past. So I think a new administration really needs to be crystal clear with the North that any transfer of nuclear weapons technology, equipment, or materiel to another government or entity would draw a prompt, potentially devastating, response.

I think we should do that in private, but nevertheless it should be part, a clear part, of our policy, and we should also have plans about how to respond to different levels of transfer.

Conversely, if we do have a diplomatic process, then we should make this one of the priorities of that process, to make the North Korean pledge more and more tangible, and one possible step is to negotiate a separate agreement with them, that builds on a previous pledge, agreement that they made with the United States, in 2000, about not supporting terrorism, to build on that and say they're not going to transfer nuclear weapons or technology abroad, particularly to terrorists but maybe others as well. And there are other concrete steps that could be taken, in the context of a serious negotiation.

Thirteen, pursue a deliberate, measured, escalation of sanctions. Yes, you know, we should be seeking sanctions at the UN, in response to North Korean activities that they take, such as nuclear or missile tests. We should be imposing our own sanctions as well. But we have to realize, as I said up front, that China isn't going to solve this problem for us, and sanctions aren't going to solve the problem either. Nevertheless, we should be stepping up the pressure.

And one of the things we really do need to do – and we can do this in the near term – is pay a lot more attention to enforcing sanctions that are on the books. I'm not going to go into great detail. I think if you read different UN reports, you'll see that existing sanctions aren't really that enforced that well.

I think part of the problem in the US government is that we have so many sanctions against so many countries that the US government has trouble dealing with all of them. There's not enough resources to deal with all of them.

And the last point I want to make is we need to organize for success. You know, history has shown that we are most successful in dealing with North Korea when we have a full-time, senior-level, coordinator, with direct access to the Secretary of State and the President. And this person would essentially be all powerful, in the administration, and in dealing with other countries, with Congress,

## 38 North Press Briefing: December 14, 2016

wherever work needs to be done.

But that's not enough. A lot of people have said that. That's not enough. Another problem we face, quite frankly, is that the level of expertise in the US government, on North Korea, has dramatically declined, over the past eight years. There are almost no people left – there may be one person left – which is almost no people left – who have ever even talked to a North Korean or have any experience, of course, working with them. That just doesn't exist.

And I know, from my experience, that it's one thing to read intelligence reports, to read newspaper, to read the North Korean media. That can give you some clues. But it's very incomplete unless you interact with North Koreans and have experience, "on the ground experience," with North Koreans. So there's a real disconnect here between what people say, which is "This is one of the biggest threats facing the United States," and our ability to deal with it, because there are so few people left who have any experience dealing with North Korea, or expertise on North Korea, that it's hard to imagine, "How do you formulate and implement an effective policy in those circumstances?"

You can't fix that overnight, of course. One thing that might be done is a new administration would seek to draw on whoever is left. And I don't mean me; there are other people around. Whoever is left who does have experience dealing with North Koreans. And I'm not just talking about government officials; I'm talking about people in the non-governmental organization community, maybe not even Americans, just people who have some feel for the country and what's going on there and what they're up to. So, you can begin to at least deal with that problem, but it'll be a difficult process of educating people.

So that's sort of the wish list for the strategy that I've laid out. I think if it's successful – I'm going to end on this – but I think if it's successful we could see a number of developments by the end of 2017. For example, we wouldn't be seeing North Korea nuclear or missile tests, or longrange space launch vehicle tests. They wouldn't be happening.

We wouldn't see any more tests of a submarine-launched ballistic missile. We'd see a halt of production, of plutonium at least, and enriched uranium, at the Yongbyon nuclear facility. We'd see IAEA inspectors returning to that facility to monitor the halt. We'd, of course, see the beginning of formal negotiations between the United States and North Korea and others on various issues, particularly the nuclear issue, and a peace agreement.

I think you would see a decline in tensions on the Korean Peninsula, because of the new process that's taking hold. And you'd probably see the resumption of more North-South contacts, including on military-military discussions and the resumption of humanitarian assistance by South Korea.

You'd see the resumption of diplomatic contacts, formal diplomatic contacts, between the United States and North Korea. I didn't mention this earlier, but this has to come very early in a process of reengaging Pyongyang. Right now we don't have any contact. You know, if I just went out on the street and said to someone, "Do you know, we have no contact, government-to-government contact, with North Korea?" most people would kind of scratch their heads. But we have no contact now. You need that, of course, if you're going to go forward with this kind of process.

And you would also see a number of other things happening, like moves to strengthen the

## 38 North Press Briefing: December 14, 2016

enforcement of deterrence, moves on the military front to strengthen our alliances, and other things along those lines, and we'd be doing that because there's no guarantee of success here. And, if it fails, if this policy fails, we need to be ready to protect ourselves and have a much stronger containment of the North Korean threat.

So that's sort of the picture of what the world would look like if things get better, as a result of this process. Once again, I want to end saying no guarantee this will work, but I will guarantee that what we're doing now, obviously, has failed, after eight years. If we had had this conversation two years ago, a lot of people would say it hadn't failed. But now it's obviously failed.

Some of the other alternatives, obviously, won't work. The crippling sanctions alternative, preemptive attack alternative, they won't work. So, at least this is the one approach that has a chance of succeeding, and hopefully people will think seriously about it.

So, on that note, I'm going to stop talking and, of course, welcome questions, comments, discussion. Good. Usually I have to prompt people. So now we have two hands up right away. Please.

QUESTION: Hi. Alicia Sanders-Zakre, Arms Control Association. You mentioned that China won't solve this problem for us and neither will sanctions. And I wanted to ask you about the new United Nations Security Council sanctions package on North Korea. And specifically about Chinese compliance with those sanctions and if you see that – if you believe that Chinese will continue to comply with the sanctions or if there will be enforcement problems there, and what impact that might have on US policy towards North Korea.

MR. WIT: You know, my view of China, I think, is pretty clear. China, of course, is concerned about North Korea's nuclear program, has other, more important, priorities, and it's trying to sort of “walk this tightrope” between all of its different priorities. So, the new sanctions resolution, sure, it tightens up on some things, particularly coal exports from North Korea, a few other things. The Chinese seem to have taken some steps to demonstrate that they are serious about enforcing them. Whether that will last or not, I don't know. You know, it's anyone's guess.

But I think there are a couple of points here. First, how will the overall US-Chinese relationship affect their willingness to enforce these kinds of sanctions... the way we want them to enforce them? It's hard for me to imagine that the Chinese are going to bend over to accommodate us, given what's going on in the overall relationship. And even if they did – and this is the second point – you know, a friend of mine says it's like we are playing “Whack a Mole.” You know, every sanctions resolution, we have a different fixation. So this resolution, it's coal imports, or coal exports, from North Korea.

Other resolutions, there have been other fixations. And I think the bigger point here is that North Korea, its economy is not doing better just because of coal. There have to be other things going on here. And I'm not an economist, so I can't explain it, but I know economists can't explain it either. They can't figure out, “Why does North Korea seem so commercially vibrant, when you visit there? Why is there so much activity in Pyongyang?” And probably in other cities too; it's trickling down. What's going on?

And so I think the bottom line is, even with these resolutions, we're “playing catch-up ball.”

## 38 North Press Briefing: December 14, 2016

In my experience – I used to work on sanctions, in the Clinton administration – which is a long time ago, of course. But my experience is that, on the one hand, you have people imposing sanctions, enforcing them. On the other hand, you have people evading them. And it's kind of like regulators trying to crack down on Wall Street. Wall Street is always one step ahead of the regulators, and I think it's the same with the North Koreans; they're always one step ahead of us. So, sure, we may be making it harder for them to do business, the cost of doing business is going up, but they're still doing business.

And I seriously doubt whether we could ever get to the point where we would cripple their economy, and if we did, as I said earlier, they're not just going to “roll over and play dead.” That's not their mentality.

Yes?

QUESTION: Hee Jun Kim from YTN, a Korean news channel. Thank you for your briefing and such useful recommendations. But, before discussing your recommendations, I would like to ask about the dialogue you had with the North Korean officers, last month in Geneva. It is allegedly known that Che Sun He, the Director General from North Korea, expressed their will, that North Korea will refrain from provocations before the Trump administration's North Korean policy develops further. So, could you – I would like to check, is it true? Could you elaborate about the dialogue, if you could? Thank you.

MR. WIT: Geez, I'm really surprised someone asked about that. [Sarcastic.]

(Light laughter.)

MR. WIT: You know, just as you have to ask that question, I have to refuse to respond. So, that's my response.

QUESTION: Why?

MR. WIT: Why?

QUESTION: I think it is important that – we have to know the North Koreans' thinking now, what are they thinking? So it is the (inaudible) second point, so...

MR. WIT: You know, if there hadn't been a leak, in the media last week, I might have responded to you. But right now I have no response. Sorry.

Did you have another question, or that was basically it?

QUESTION: I am a little shocked at your response, so –

(Laughter.)

MR. WIT: Other questions, comments?

QUESTION: Thank you. Asuka Curameng, Nippon TV. What do you think of the next Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson? Supposedly he was against sanctions against Russia, and you had mentioned

## 38 North Press Briefing: December 14, 2016

that sanctions is not, itself, a solution. But, you have also said that escalation of sanctions is necessary. What do you think? What kind of a Secretary of State would he be, and how would that influence North Korea policy?

MR. WIT: You know, I think I, like everyone else, I'm trying to, sort of, figure that out. And, as far as I can tell, he really doesn't have much experience in Northeast Asia, except some dealing with China. So, I'm not aware whether he's familiar or not with the security issues in that part of the world.

I think the key thing to watch here is who is appointed Deputy Secretary of State. If, indeed, as people have speculated, it's John Bolton, it's very easy to imagine some sort of division of labor in the State Department, where the Secretary of State would focus on certain issues and John Bolton would focus on other issues, other issues such as North Korea. I think John Bolton's history on this issue is very clear. I think he is the main architect of the collapse of the Agreed Framework, and we all know what that has resulted in. It's resulted in, essentially, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs over the past 10 years, or more!

And so, you know, that would be a very disturbing development, if he's appointed to that position. In that case, I think you could probably expect a fairly – or very – hardline Trump administration policy towards North Korea.

Someone – I'm sorry, yeah.

QUESTION: Yonho Kim of the US-Korea Institute at SAIS. I'd like to ask you about your position on THAAD. I guess the Korean people who have some kind of progressive approach to solving the North Korean problem would support your idea, but pretty much are shocked by your position on THAAD, and they would intuitively, the pro-negotiation people, would be opposed to THAAD. If that's their question, how would you respond? Thank you.

MR. WIT: You know, I think that, in the context of the serious effort at diplomacy, it also makes it easier to deploy THAAD, actually. I think that the kinds of people you're describing, if the United States didn't have just a hardline position across the board, they might be more flexible.

Secondly, you know, I believe that deployment of THAAD would have no impact whatsoever on the possibility of diplomacy with North Korea. I don't think any of the involved players are going to say "Gee, we're not going to be talking, because you're deploying THAAD."

And I think that goes for the Chinese also. I think the Chinese would, of course, continue to oppose THAAD but would still, of course, very much support a serious diplomatic initiative. They wouldn't say "Get THAAD out of that country or we're not going to support diplomacy." So, given – that's what I believe the political landscape is.

I don't think there's a lot of down side to THAAD, and there's certainly up side, in terms of the defensive capabilities. Now, I understand there may be local problems in South Korea, with deploying THAAD "in people's backyards," and I get all that. And I can't really address that problem.

But, in considering the deployment, you first need to consider this political environment that I've described and, secondly, consider the – what THAAD gets you in terms of defending against what is

## 38 North Press Briefing: December 14, 2016

clearly a growing missile threat from North Korea. There's no doubt about that.

Did you have a question?

QUESTION: Thanks, Joel. I just wanted to see if you could expand a little bit on if John Bolton does become [Deputy] Secretary of State. How, do you think, North Korea would react to such a hardline approach?

MR. WIT: (Laughs.)

QUESTION: And then also, how do you think the political changes in South Korea are going to affect North Korea policy?

MR. WIT: You know, I hate making predictions about North Korea, but if John Bolton – I could see a confluence of events which would probably be taken very seriously in Pyongyang, and that is John Bolton is appointed Deputy Secretary, and the exercises in February go forward, and the messaging of the exercises is the way it has been in the recent past, which is these are exercises intended to decapitate the North Korean regime and to occupy Pyongyang. And then you could throw on top of that deployments of longrange bomber overflights.

I think, if I was a North Korean, “reading tea leaves,” and I saw all of these events coming, or happening, I would think that things are not headed in the right direction in the United States and then, of course, I would be thinking about “What should our – our, the North Koreans – what should our policy be?”

In terms of the developments in South Korea, there are probably here who know a lot more about that than I do, but there seems to be a distinct possibility that there will be a big rift, a big gap, between a Trump administration, if it indeed adopts this hardline approach, and whoever takes over in South Korea. You know, I'm not going to parse all the different things that have to happen. Everyone knows that there is a process that has to be gone through in South Korea. I don't know how long that will take. But it looks like, at least at the end of that process, there are a few possible candidates, and everyone knows who they are, whether it's the opposition candidates or Ban Ki-moon.

I think, in either case, there will be a gap between South Korea and the United States. In the case of opposition candidates, the gap might be bigger than if it's Ban Ki-moon. But there are going to be some serious differences, I think, in how to deal with North Korea, and also how to deal with China. You know, if the Trump administration has this sort of tough, hardline, approach towards China, certainly the opposition in South Korea isn't going to agree with that, and I'm not quite sure where Ban Ki-moon would stand on that. But, knowing what kind of person he is, he's not the kind of person who takes hardline approaches on policy, I don't think.

So, yeah, I think those – it is, potentially, a difficult situation.

Yes?

QUESTION: Hi. I'm Song Zhang from Shanghai, China. My question is about the economic sanctions against North Korea. Can you explain what is the difference between economic sanctions

## 38 North Press Briefing: December 14, 2016

against North Korea and Iran? Because there have been rumors that still there is a lot of room, if the international society would be willing. Thank you very much.

MR. WIT: Yeah, you know, look, I'm not a sanctions buff. So there are big differences, though. The Iranian sanctions were much more stringent, much more far-reaching in terms of financial sanctions. There was a sanction on oil imports from Iran. So there is room to move forward, I think, in terms of sanctions against North Korea. You could enact similar sanctions that would, essentially, be a trade embargo against North Korea. But that's not going to happen in the UN, so the US would have to take these measures unilaterally. They would affect China, and that would create even more serious problems.

So, you know, I mean, if you want, I can give you names of people who can go into all the excruciating details of the sanctions, if you want that.

Other questions? I think we've come to the end of the hour. No more questions, comments...

Okay. Thank you very much.

END

Transcript by Richard Boyd, [RichardLBoyd@gmail.com](mailto:RichardLBoyd@gmail.com)

*38 North* is a program of the US-Korea Institute at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies devoted to high-quality research, analysis, and commentary on a broad range of topics related to North Korea. It is managed by Joel S. Wit, USKI Senior Fellow and former US State Department official, and Jenny Town, USKI Assistant Director.

Inquiries may be directed to [thirtyeightnorth@gmail.com](mailto:thirtyeightnorth@gmail.com)

38NORTH.ORG