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VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT OF
A 38 NORTH PRESS CALL
“NORTH KOREA’S FIRST ICBM TEST: AN INTIAL TECHNICAL ASSESMENT AND NEXT
STEPS FOR THE US AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY”

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On July 4, North Korea conducted an ostensibly successful demonstration of a missile with intercontinental range. Following opening remarks by John Schilling on what the test says about North Korea's advancing ballistic missile capabilities and Joel Wit on responses and next steps for the international community, there is a Q&A session.

MR. WIT: I'm glad everyone could join us. Obviously, things have taken a turn for the worse on the Peninsula, and I thought it'd be a good idea today to have myself and John sort of review the bidding. And so, John will talk a little bit about the article [we published yesterday on 38 North](#), which was on the recent test, and then I will talk a little bit about what are our options now, going forward, particularly the United States.

So John, why don't you start off, by talking for 10 minutes, say? Just hit the highlights. Hit the most important things that you think everyone needs to understand.

MR. SCHILLING: Will do. This is John Schilling here, and I'd just like to make a disclaimer up front, that I'm speaking as a consultant to 38 North and not for the United States Government or any of its contractors.

But fortunately, since this happened on a national holiday, I did have time to do a completely independent assessment of the recent test.

And the most important thing is that this was, in fact, a test of an intercontinental ballistic missile. It was fired on a lofted trajectory so that it only covered a short distance over the Earth, but it demonstrated performance that would have reached a distance of probably 7,000 to 8,000 kilometers, if it had been fired in an easterly direction.

This surprised us. Not so much that North Korea would attempt an ICBM test; we expected that sometime this year or, at latest, next year, from their commentary and the pace of their program. What's surprising is that it was as successful as it was. North Korean missile tests, particularly for complex, longrange, missiles, almost never work right their first time.

We think a great deal of that success is attributable to the recent testing they've done on a missile they call the Huasong-12, that use the same or very similar engines, a lot of other technology that went into this missile. That missile did fail on its first few tests, which were conducted in a very low profile manner. So, we think they were using that as a way of doing technology development and buying down the risk, so that their first test of a high profile, intercontinental ballistic missile would go off without a hitch. So that happened.

The missile, in its current form, can probably reach Alaska and Hawaii, probably not the continental United States, but we expect they'll be working to improve the range. We think it has the potential, over the next year or two, for some technology development, design stretches, to increase the range, to cover the US West Coast.

There's almost no possibility of this missile reaching the US East Coast. For that, they would need to have a third stage, which would be a more complex design, more likely to fail. We think they have three-stage ICBM designs in the works, but it's understandable that they wouldn't roll them out for their first test.

Another interesting feature of this design is that, where they have traditionally used exposed and what we call "triconic reentry vehicles" on their missile, this time they used a separate payload faring, to enclose the payload section, so we can't see what the reentry vehicle looks like. There are a number of

reasons to do that. It's not just a question of being sneaky. But it does mean that we have to do a little bit of speculation as to what's inside.

Based on some previous parade models of what we call the KN-14 ICBM, which I think they have called the Hwasong-14, there's probably a blunt body reentry vehicle in the first version. That's a very low-risk design that minimizes the need for extensive development testing. But the payload faring system also allows them to progressively upgrade to more sophisticated reentry vehicles and possibly to decoy systems and other penetration aids, without having to change the design of the faring. That's probably a much longer-term prospect. I think, in the near term, we're talking about a single, relatively inaccurate, warhead with no penetration aid.

We're also, in the very near term, talking about an unreliable system. It's worked well in tests but tests are doing this "with training wheels." You have days or weeks of preparation time. You can double and triple check everything. And if things don't look well, you can reschedule the test for another day, without too much loss of face.

If North Korea were to try and launch this missile under combat conditions tomorrow, with 15 minutes of warning and maybe American or South Korean missiles already en route, they probably would not succeed. But...given a few more tests, another year or so to train their launch crews, the system is going to become substantially more reliable.

But, even now, an unreliable system, capable of limited operations against targets in the United States, that changes the diplomatic aspect of the North Korean and South Korean political affairs substantially. It does give them a direct deterrent against United States attack. It gives them the ability to counter-attack against US mainland targets.

From a strictly deterrence standpoint, it doesn't have to be certain to work; just the possibility that it works is going to change the US political calculus. And I think those are the key factors that we have to consider here.

MODERATOR: Right. Thanks very much for that, John. This is Campbell. I have one quick clarification question. When you talk about range –

MR. SCHILLING: Okay.

MODERATOR: -- could you distinguish between the contiguous or the lower 48 states, versus Alaska and Hawaii?

MR. SCHILLING: Yes. Right now, Alaska and Hawaii are probably the only US targets in range. It might be able to reach the extreme northwest corner of Washington State, but it's probably not capable of reaching the lower 48 states, in its current form.

MODERATOR: Okay, great, thanks very much for that. Joel, did you want to spend a few minutes or just even give a couple of sentences about the situation for the US and for the international community?

MR. WIT: Sure. So, I think everyone's been thinking, and reading, and seeing all the different possible options that are now available for dealing with what's becoming a growing threat, so I thought

what I'd do is just review the bidding a little bit, and think about what next steps might be.

I think the window is certainly narrowing, in terms of options available to the United States for moving forward. But I still think we do have some flexibility and there are a number of different options available.

You know, what's going on – and I think we're all familiar with all the different options – is we're seeing the sort of dredging up of the old options, which is more sanctions, the possibility of military action, steps like that, neither of which are going to be effective at all, by themselves. And, on top of all this, I think you all need to understand that we do have upcoming US-South Korean joint military exercises, in August, which, piled on top of the North Korean test, the public threats made in terms of what to do about it, their public threats, a deterioration in US-Chinese cooperation, the mix of all of that is creating, I think, an increasingly tense situation.

So, you know, I think the administration needs to start looking at this in a more creative way. I'm not saying that there shouldn't be sanctions at the UN or shouldn't be US sanctions. There won't be many at the UN, because the Chinese and Russians aren't going to allow it. And we may pile some more sanctions on Chinese companies, which are only going to make US-Chinese cooperation even more difficult.

So, we're heading in the wrong direction. And I think what we need to do is stop, take a deep breath, and think about how to prevent the situation from deteriorating any further, and just to get some breathing room here, to figure out where to go next.

And this will bring me to, of course, the point most of you are anticipating I will make, which is that, you know, I still think there is an opportunity for some diplomacy here. And, indeed, it's very interesting to me that I'm seeing a number of pundits and former Obama administration officials and others, who a few months ago didn't even – they weren't even interested in diplomacy, are not saying “diplomacy, diplomacy, diplomacy.”

So, having said that, let me make a couple of points and then I'll stop. The first point is – and I think it's become more visible in the press in the past few weeks – there have, in fact, been quiet contacts between the Trump administration and the North Koreans, North Korean officials, direct face to face contacts, that led to the release of Otto Warmbier, and presumably the administration wants to get the other three American detainees out of North Korea.

Secondly, I think those channels are remaining open, and at least give the opportunity to go beyond getting the release of the detainees, to exploring a way to stop the situation, the overall situation, from deteriorating any further.

And third, in that context, there is a step available to the United States that I think would stop the situation from deteriorating further, would not have an adverse impact on the security – our security or our allies' security – and would likely results in some sort of important North Korean response. And by that I mean suspending US and South Korean joint military exercises, in return for North Korea suspending its missile tests, or declaring a moratorium on its missile tests and its nuclear tests.

The point here is yes, it sounds like that's going to adversely affect our security and South Korea's security, because exercises are important. They're important to maintain readiness and our ability to

respond if the North Koreans attack South Korea.

But the point here is the current exercise program is not “written in stone.” You know? It’s not a “We have to have the current exercise program or our defense will suffer.” That’s not the point. You can play with the exercise program. You can alter the program in such a way to make it less threatening to the North Koreans and at the same time do everything we need to do with South Korea, to protect the alliance and to protect our allies.

So today I and a former PACCOM military planner are coming out with an article -- it should be out in The National Interest this afternoon – outlining what that kind of exercise program would be. And I think we’re at the point now where people have to make a choice.

They have to determine what’s important to us. Is it important to us to stop the North Korean testing program, the missile and nuclear testing program? And how important is it to us? And, if we can do it in a relatively cost-free way, even if it’s only temporary, to give diplomacy a chance, should we do it? That’s the question facing us, because these other options that people are sort of talking about are only going to lead us to a dead end, and that dead end will be either accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, with a growing missile arsenal and a growing nuclear arsenal, or taking military measures, which will be ineffective and catastrophic. So that’s going to be the choice, if we keep heading down this road.

And I’ll stop there.

MODERATOR: Okay. Thanks very much for that, Joel. This is Campbell speaking. I’m going to switch it over to Q&A mode right now.

QUESTION: “How long will it take until North Korea puts a nuclear warhead on an ICBM? Does North Korea have enough of a capability to do so at this time?” – Yuji Niwa, Kyodo News

MR. SCHILLING: John Schilling here. I’ll address this one.

I think North Korea could probably fit a nuclear warhead in a blunt-bodied reentry vehicle, in this missile, pretty much immediately. They’ll probably be waiting to decipher all the results of this test before they commit to arming the missile, but that won’t take them more than a few weeks or months.

As I said, the payload faring, the payload shroud, that they have over the warhead section, makes it very difficult for us to see what they’re actually equipping this missile with. But the state of their nuclear program, after almost a decade and six tests, is such that they can almost certainly build warheads for this missile at this time.

MR. WIT: Let me chime in here, because I think all this is very important, and we have probably been as guilty as some other people who try to make predictions. We’ve been as guilty in the past. That what we’re seeing are different aspects of this program which indicate that the ICBM, even a crude ICBM, after this test, could be deployed sooner than people expect. So, when John talks about the blunt-body reentry vehicle, which is something we’ve noted before, that, first, makes the need for reentry vehicle testing – it sort of lessens the need, although they still need to do it. And that’s been one of the hurdles that a lot of experts have said, you know, they need to test reentry vehicles before they can

deploy something. Well, this configuration makes it less of a rigorous requirement.

And secondly, what John's saying which is important is a lot of people are saying, "Well, they can't put a nuclear warhead on top of these missiles." Well, in fact, with this configuration of the reentry vehicle, it makes it less challenging to do that.

And the last point, which I think John sort of pointed out, but it's worth remembering, and it was certainly in his article, you know, if it was a major western power developing an ICBM, we'd probably conduct, like, 20 or 30 tests, in order to make it highly reliable. But for countries like North Korea and others, who have built missiles, like Israel, Pakistan, India, others, they're not going to conduct 20 or 30 tests. They're going to conduct, maybe, a few tests, say "That's good enough for now," roll it out, and get the deterrent value out of it.

So, for example, I think – I seem to recall – Israel's first ballistic missile, the Jericho-1, that was armed with a nuclear warhead, they didn't test it at all! They just sort of rolled it out and everyone saw it was there, all the Arab countries saw it was there, and of course it made them think twice about how to deal with Israel. So, it's possible the North Koreans could do something like that and test it along the way, keep testing it as it's out there and operational.

QUESTION: "If the US negotiates, what are the channels for this and where do they stand now? How hard is it to get these going and how confident can the US be in negotiating with Kim Jong Un? Do we have an idea of what he wants to achieve?" –Paul Handley, AFP

MR. WIT: I think I got all that. But first, the channels for communicating and negotiating. That's not that complicated. You know? I mean, if you wanted to have a negotiation or quiet talks with North Koreans, you could do it in a number of ways. The first way, which is not so quiet anymore, there was that kind of discussion on the margins of a track 1.5 meeting in Oslo, where a US government official met North Korean officials who were participating in talks with private American experts. So that's one way of doing it, although I suspect, if the situation is more urgent, we probably can't proceed at that kind of leisurely pace.

Secondly, you could certainly become much more active in communicating with the North Koreans, through the so-called "New York channel," which is at the UN, where American diplomats, sometimes from Washington, meet with North Korean diplomats. They are the only ones in the United States. And, in the past, not recently but in the somewhat distant past, you had fairly senior American officials going to New York to meet with North Koreans there. You had people at the assistant secretary level going up there, or special ambassadors going up there. So, you could do that also.

Or third, you might even just set up some sort of quiet special meetings between US and North Korean officials, in third countries. And that's what was done in the case of the Iran agreement where, for months beforehand, there were quiet meetings between US officials and Iranian officials, in third countries, I guess, in that case, in the Gulf. So, there are lots of different opportunities you can create. If the will is there, you can certainly make it happen.

I'm sorry, I didn't catch the second half of the question.

MODERATOR: Oh, okay. So, he asked about US negotiations. The second part was "How hard

is it to get these going and how confident can the US be, in negotiating with Kim Jong Un?” Do we have an idea of what he wants to achieve?”

MR. WIT: I think that – you know, I can’t – I’m not going to pretend to put myself inside Kim Jong Un’s mind, but I think there is certainly enough information, both in public and in private contacts, to suggest that what the North Koreans are looking for is what they say publicly, which is an end to the threats that they see, whether or not we believe we are a threat, an end to the threats, and indeed, in Kim Jong Un’s statement after the ICBM launch, he made a much more explicit statement of the negotiating side of things than I’ve ever seen before and other North Koreans [observers of North Korea] have seen before.

And what he said was he wasn’t going to put the nuclear missile programs on the table until the US stops its hostile policy. That, to someone who’s used to reading North Korean statements, means that those things could be on the table, under the right circumstances. And that reflects what has been heard in private meetings with North Koreans since November of last year. And I know there has been something written recently, in the Washington Post, by two conservatives who went to a meeting in Stockholm, a multilateral meeting, and heard something very different.

And let me tell you, as someone who has 20 years of experience talking to North Koreans, I could have told you before they even went that that meeting was not going to be useful or productive, because, first of all, it was multilateral, and the North Koreans are never going to sit there and really “bare their souls” in front of others [other] than the United States representatives. And secondly, the North Koreans, at that meeting were – you know, just because a North Korean shows up at a meeting doesn’t mean that they’re authoritative. You have to have the right North Koreans, who you’re talking to, and at least in the track 1.5s I have participated in, and in some of the other more recent ones, they have been the right North Koreans. But not that one.

So, there are a lot of flashing green lights here that we need to explore.

QUESTION: “Do you think President Moon will encourage the US toward the diplomatic steps you advocate for?” –Renata Janney, TV Asahi

MR. WIT: I, of course, have no way of knowing, but I suspect he will. And you’re talking, I guess, about in the upcoming G20 summit. And they probably already had a preliminary discussion about all this, and mapping out a strategy, at the summit. And I think that’s, to some degree, reflected in what was said publicly.

But, you know, now that the situation is getting more tense and is deteriorating, and on top of that everyone knows these exercises are coming up in August and that’s only going to make it even more tense, I think they will have a very serious conversation, trying to map out a gameplan, not just sort of general concepts, but a gameplan of what steps to take next, on both sides.

And, on top of that, given all the speculation about the possibility of military action against North Korea, I would suspect, although once again I have no way of knowing, that a South Korean president wouldn’t be doing his job if he didn’t engage President Trump in a serious conversation about what options are available, and the consequences of military action, because South Korea and Japan will bear the brunt of those consequences.

QUESTION: “Hi, and thanks for the conference. I read an article by Jeffrey Lewis in The Daily Beast, claiming that the ICBM tested could potentially reach much further into the US than the 7,000 kilometers that was a ‘minimum’ estimate. While accuracy may be an issue beyond that, how far would the so-called ‘maximum range’ of the missile be if fired...” –Tom O’Connor, Newsweek

MR. SCHILLING: Yes. We don’t think that this test necessarily demonstrated the ultimate performance of the missile. The particular trajectory that they flew, if they had simply changed the elevation and gone for distance rather than altitude, they would have reached, probably, beyond 7,000 kilometers, not beyond 8,000 kilometers.

But that’s not necessarily the best this missile is capable of. There are performance upgrades, technology stretches, and I’m not going to go into details, in case I mention something that the North Koreans haven’t thought of already. But there are certainly things they can do to push that range up a little bit, and they have probably already started working on that.

So, as I say, a range of maybe 9,000 – 9,500 – kilometers, to cover most of the US West Coast is something that they can reasonably aspire to, with this design. They just can’t do that by firing an exact copy of the missile they fired on the fourth.

MR. WIT: Right. So, I think that’s an important point. Right? This provides a foundation for further improvements, which they may or may not already have, or that they’re working on, that could allow them to increase the range.

But this missile, itself, that’s the issue, John. Could this missile, itself, go up to those ranges?

MR. SCHILLING: No, and I think I mentioned this earlier. The very best this missile could do would be about 8,000 kilometers, and touch the very tip of Washington State. For anything beyond that, they’re going to have to get some sort of a performance upgrade, and I’m not going to speculate on the technical details of how they’d do that.

QUESTION: “Good morning and thanks for the opportunity. Is this diplomatic option just mentioned wishful thinking, or is it something that the administration is considering?” - Giuseppe Sarcina, Corriere della Sera

MR. WIT: You know honestly, I don’t know what the administration is considering, but I have to believe, right now, they’re probably frantically considering a lot of different options. And, as I said earlier, none of the other ones have a chance of success. This has a “chance.” And I’m not saying it has a big chance, I’m not saying it’s going to work, but I can tell you that military options, stepping up sanctions on North Korea, trying to sanction China and force it to do what we want it to do, none of those are going to work. So, they have no chance, and this may have “some” chance.

QUESTION: “1. Could you please advise on your analysis about a reentry vehicle? Do you think North Korea has the technology for an ICBM, or not? 2. I would like to ask about the payload of the Huasong-14. Please tell us your analysis. 3. You wrote that the Huasong-14 could not carry multiple warheads. Please advise on your reason why.” –Haruyuki Aikawa, The Mainichi Newspaper

MR. SCHILLING: Okay. Yeah, and I heard all of those and they all factor together. North Korea

has demonstrated reentry vehicles for short to medium-range missiles and possibly for what we call an “intermediate range missile.” An ICBM reentry vehicle is more technically challenging but not orders of magnitude more challenging, and we saw, in a previous parade version of what we call the KN-14 or maybe the Huasong-14 is the same name, that they have addressed that issue by using a much blunter configuration on the reentry vehicle. This reduces the effect of aerodynamic heating. It costs them a bit in terms of accuracy, but it means that everything that they’ve learned building successful reentry vehicles, or medium-range missiles, can be fairly easily applied to building a successful reentry vehicle for this missile. And they may, in fact, have tested such a reentry vehicle in the recent exercise; we have no way of knowing.

But that’s not far in the future, at any rate. That may be there right now. Certainly coming within a year.

The payload capacity – when I do a trajectory reconstruction, I get approximately 500 kilograms as the most likely payload that the missile carried on its recent test. That’s enough for the sort of first-generation nuclear warhead that North Korea has certainly displayed in mock-ups and that we think that they have been testing. We’re talking about a relatively low yield fission weapon, something roughly equivalent to the Hiroshima or Nagasaki bombs, not the megaton yield thermonuclear weapons that the United States has, but still a fairly destructive capability.

However, you’re not going to fit two or three of those warheads into a 500-kilogram payload space. Putting multiple warheads into a 500-kilogram payload requires very sophisticated design of both the warhead and the reentry vehicle, and we think that’s going to be beyond North Korea’s capability for some time to come.

So, for the near term, for the next five to 10 years at least, we’re expecting a single warhead, probably progressive improvements in the reentry vehicle design and maybe, towards the end of that period, the addition of effective decoys.

MR. WIT: Can I add just one point? We’ve been talking a lot about the missile side of things and not a lot about the nuclear side of things. And I think John is right, that the current yield is in the range he’s talking about, but we do know that North Korea is working on, certainly, boosting the yields and maybe, even beyond that, in building simple hydrogen bombs. So, it’s worth keeping that in mind, and I’m pretty certain, at least on the hydrogen bomb side of things, they’ll need a number of additional nuclear tests.

But the other point to mention here, and that is that previously – I think it was Jeffrey Lewis who thought that the North Koreans could only test up to 50 kilotons, at the Punggye-ri test site. And, in fact – I guess it was a month or so ago – one of our analysts, Frank Pabian [did a detailed analysis](#) that shows that they could test at much higher yields at Punggye-ri. I think it was going up to 285 kilotons, which would enable them to develop simple hydrogen devices.

So, that’s something that I think it’s worth keeping in mind. I’m not saying the North Koreans are definitely going to build hydrogen bombs. But I think they are certainly exploring that possibility.

MR. SCHILLING: Yes. John Schilling here again. I will add to that that there are fairly straightforward technical paths that North Korea can take, from their existing designs, to weapons with a yield of 50 or maybe a hundred kilotons. Anything beyond 50 to a hundred kilotons is going to require a

fundamentally new design, probably a thermonuclear design, that would require a very extensive program rather than just one or two new tests.

QUESTION: “Speaking in Washington last week, South Korean President Moon said, ‘I believe that we cannot reward bad behavior. That is why I believe that we have long maintained the position, both Korea and the US, that we cannot stop or cease combined military exercises as a concession or condition to stopping North Korea’s nuclear missile tests. And that position remains unchanged. Why is he wrong?’” –Nico Pandi, Jiji Press

MR. WIT: He’s not wrong; we’re not going to – you know, we’re now parsing words, I think. We’re not going to stop exercises; we’re going to scale ‘em back. So there will be exercises, there will continue to be exercises. They’ll fulfill what we need them to do; they’ll just be – the size will be changed. Maybe some of the missions that we exercise will be changed. But there will continue to be exercises.

Secondly, you know, I mean, I – the problem – one of the problems is, when we make blunt statements about how we can’t reward bad behavior, we’re not rewarding bad behavior, first of all; we’re stopping the bad behavior. And if that bad behavior – if it continues and adversely affects our national security, then “at the end of the day” we can say, “Well, we didn’t reward bad behavior but, by the way, North Korea can now attack the United States with ICBMs.”

So, I think we really need to make a decision here about what our national security interests are, how do we secure them, and how do we do it in a way that doesn’t hurt our ability to defend ourselves.

So, the last point I’ll make, and I suspect that President Moon, and certainly President Trump, say a lot of things in public, to project an image of toughness. But, “at the end of the day,” you have to balance that with pragmatic solutions to the challenges facing you.

QUESTION: “How effective would US missile defense capabilities be against this ICBM, and how might it affect the timing of a real threat to Alaska or Hawaii, and eventually the US mainland?” – Kim Gamel, Stars and Stripes

MR. WIT: Oh, John can answer that. Go ahead, John.

MR. SCHILLING: (Laughs.) Okay. Yeah. The American missile defense system has fairly consistently been about 50 percent effective, in tests, and those tests are conducted under peacetime conditions, so they may be a bit optimistic, even there.

Now, the North Korean missile, in its current state, like I say, it probably does not yet have decoys yet, so it’s sort of an ideal test case, for US missile defenses. But US missile defenses, under ideal circumstances, work about 50 percent of the time.

And, from a deterrence standpoint, I don’t think that changes anything. With or without missile defenses, any US defense planner, any war planner, is now faced with the situation where he doesn’t know whether Anchorage and Honolulu are going to be destroyed, in a war with North Korea. Not knowing is most of what deterrence is about.

Beyond that, you’d have to get the US military to comment.

MR. WIT: Yeah. (Laughs.) Okay.

MODERATOR: All right, thank you very much.

MR. WIT: I don't want to add anything, Campbell.

QUESTION: "Hi, and thanks for doing this. How does a blunt-body RV differ from a regular one?" –Bill Broad, The New York Times

MR. SCHILLING: Okay, yes. The blunt body RV, well, as the name implies, it's blunt rather than sharp and pointy. Sharp and pointy means that you have a very concentrated heat load at the front tip, which is likely to destroy the reentry vehicle or at least cause it to burn away in an asymmetric fashion and go far off course, unless you have a very sophisticated capability to build and test that heat shield.

With a blunt body, the heat load is uniformly distributed across the vehicle. It's much more forgiving, much less likely to fail, even if you're just designing it from a textbook and a few crude ground tests. But... the missile slows down faster, at a higher altitude. It's potentially more vulnerable to defenses, if there are short-range, surface-to-air, missiles in the target area itself. And it's less accurate. As it slows down, it becomes vulnerable to things like high altitude winds, that can throw it substantially off course.

So that's the tradeoff that North Korea has to make. If they want to deploy an RV this week, it's pretty much going to have to be a blunt body, with those tradeoffs. If we give them a few years development time, they may be able to improve on that.

MR. WIT: John, just to give a little context here, weren't the blunt body reentry vehicles – they were initially used by the Soviet Union and the United States, way back in...

MR. SCHILLING: Yes. Yes. In the late 50s, early 60s, the first ICBMs in both the United States and the Soviet Union used blunt-body reentry vehicles, and they would hit within a few miles of their target, at best, and in a few years we learned to do better. But, for rolling out the capability in a hurry, that's an effective tradeoff.

QUESTION: "What kind of impact can we expect from last month's Section 311 action against the Bank of Dandong?" -Elliot Waldman, Tokyo Broadcasting System

MR. WIT: Oh boy! Okay. (Laughs.) You know, I'm not a sanctions expert, honestly. So, you know, there's probably other people we can refer you to, who could give you more detailed answers. So, all I can do is – and Campbell will give you the name of a couple of sanctions experts, who have government experience.

So, all I can say is that, as a general principle, the idea that sanctioning China is going to make them alter their policy towards North Korea and somehow enlist them in our cause, is just wrong. And, in fact, it's just as likely to create tensions between the US and China, and maybe even trigger Chinese retaliation against the United States.

So, Campbell, why don't you give – I forgot, Michael is it? –

MODERATOR: Elliot.

MR. WIT: Give him the – you know, Joe DeThomas or someone like that –

MODERATOR: Sure.

MR. WIT: -- can give him a lot of detail.

QUESTION: “Mr. Wit mentioned North Korea prefers bilateral talks with the US. Is this possible? Do the others of the Six Party Talks need to be involved? And also, next week in Singapore the NEACD meets, but North Korea won’t participate. Doe that signal anything?” –Paul Handley, AFP

MR. WIT: On the first count, bilateral talks, are they possible? I would say they are possible and, indeed, the quiet discussions that have been in the media that revolved around the Oslo track 1.5 meetings were bilateral. So, I think that it’s entirely possible to continue along those lines.

Secondly, of course, you’re right, how does that affect the other interested parties? Because, as in the Six Party Talks, everyone was sort of sitting around the table and was there. And so it will mean structuring a different process, where you might be able to have some multilateral meetings, where people can speak their piece, but the real work would be done in bilateral meetings, and everyone would keep each other informed, and particularly the United States, and South Korea, and Japan, would keep each other very well informed.

So I think you can structure a process like that, that will emphasize substance over process, but still keep everyone in the loop.

Lastly, on the cancelation, or the North Koreans not participating in the multilateral track two, I guess the NEACD track two in Singapore, I wouldn’t read anything into that. You know, as a potential forum excuse for bilateral US-North Korean meetings, I think multilateral meetings are not really – they’re not ideal, they’re not even good.

So, in that context, I wouldn’t read anything into that at all. And, beyond that, I don’t know. In the past, I think the North Korean participation, in that particular set of track twos, has been very spotty. Very episodic. So, I don’t think you can read much into it.

MODERATOR: Okay, thank you very much for your answer, Joel. If anyone else has any questions, it looks like we’ve got a few minutes left here. Go ahead and ask those. Otherwise, we could also, probably, wrap things up. So, I’ll just give you a few moments here.

(Pause.)

MODERATOR: Okay, I think that’s probably the end of our questions, so thank you so much, to John Schilling and Joel Wit for joining today, and thank you to everyone who participated. If you have any follow-up feedback or questions, you are welcome to send them to me.

MR. WIT: Thank you.

38 North Press Briefing: July 6, 2017

MR. SCHILLING: Thank you.

MODERATOR: Okay. Thanks, everyone.

END

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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.

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