

38 North Press Briefing: August 10, 2017

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THE U.S.-KOREA INSTITUTE  
38 NORTH PRESS BRIEFING

VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT OF  
A 38 NORTH PRESS CALL  
“RECENT DEVELOPMENTS ON NORTH KOREA: PARSING RECENT DPRK AND US  
STATEMENTS AND ASSESSING THE NORTH’S WMD PROGRAM”

GUESTS:  
JOSEPH S. BERMUDEZ, JR.  
38 NORTH ANALYST, CEO AND FOUNDER KPA ASSOCIATES LLC

ROBERT CARLIN  
VISITING SCHOLAR AT CISAC, FORMER CHIEF FO THE NORTHEAST ASIA DIVISION IN THE  
BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH, US DEPARTMENT OF STATE

JOEL S. WIT  
SENIOR FELLOW AT THE US-KOREA INSTITUTE AT JOHNS HOPKINS SAIS, CO-FOUNDER OF 38  
NORTH

FACILITATOR:  
FACILITATOR HJ MOON  
COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST FOR 38 NORTH (USKI)

TRANSCRIPTIONIST:  
RICHARD BOYD

AUGUST 10, 2017  
WASHINGTON, DC

Recent statements by leaders and top officials in the DPRK and US and a report on North Korea's nuclear capabilities have escalated tensions. Robert Carlin and Joel Wit will parse what's been said and offer US policy recommendations, and Joseph Bermudez will assess North Korea's technical capabilities. A Q&A session will follow.

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FACILITATOR (Campbell HJ Moon): Good morning, everyone, and thanks for joining us. We're going to go ahead and get the briefing started now. Today we have three speakers, two speakers with experience at the Department of State, Robert Carlin and Joel Wit. Bob Carlin is also a Visiting Scholar at CISAC in Stanford, and Joel Wit is, of course, the co-founder of 38 North and Senior Fellow at the U.S.-Korea Institute, here at Johns Hopkins SAIS.

And Joe Bermudez is a 38 North analyst and CEO And founder of KPA Associates.

So, Bob, would you like to get things started, with a few opening remarks about the recent developments on North Korea?

MR. CARLIN: All right. I would be glad to. I assume everybody has read the statement that the North Koreans released yesterday, so I won't go through it in detail. I'm sure questions will come up through the morning.

I would note a couple of things about it and then about the broader situation. Quickly, notice this is – make sure you understand that this is not the final decision; this is a statement about a plan supposedly in process. There are firebreaks built into it. That is to say, the plan is under consideration, then it's supposed to be handed to Kim Jong Un, then he's supposed to make a decision. So, the North Koreans have given themselves several places in which they can stop or even back off, if they want to.

But, by constructing this whole scenario in the way they have, they have opted to go for maximum drama. In other words, as this drags out day by day, there will be more dramatic developments and statements and events, and I think that probably suits them fine. They'd like as much drama surrounding this as they can.

The population in North Korea is not, as far as I can tell, seriously mobilized about this. Almost surprisingly, if you look at the radio and television daily news, it's pretty normal, and they're still mostly concentrating on economic themes. Not much in terms of mobilizing themselves, in preparation for a crisis with the Americans.

Oh, one last thing. The question is probably going to come up, "How unusual is it for the North Koreans to issue a statement which is so specific in terms of target?"

It is unusual but it's certainly not unprecedented. They have talked about what they call "aimed fire" or "aiming fire," in the past, of South Korean targets, South Korean facilities, South Korean Army Headquarters, things so small as propaganda loudspeakers. So, we've seen them talk in specific terms before, just not something as sensitive, let's say, as an American military base.

Okay, I'll leave it there.

MR. WIT: Bob, can you go over again your analysis of the government's statement and what Ri Yong-ho said in Manila?

MR. CARLIN: Yes. The government's statement, which is still the highest-level statement the North Koreans have issued in the middle of this situation, repeated a theme, a very important theme, that signals that they're prepared to put their missile and nuclear programs on the table. Ri Yong-ho, in Manila, repeated that, in his remarks to the ASEAN. It got mistranslated or mispublished in the English language North Korean version of what he said, which caused a lot of reporters to say he had said North Korea would never negotiate.

In fact, all he did was repeat a theme that Kim Jong Un had broached in July, which in my view is quite important, because it publicly put them on record at the highest level as signaling that, under some circumstances – and we don't know for sure what they are – but under some circumstances these programs were, in fact, on the negotiating table.

MR. WIT: And the other – sorry, do you have more on that?

MR. CARLIN: No. No.

MR. WIT: The other question that I think is interesting is that, for some time, the North Koreans did not really say much about President Trump. And, as we know, they can be quite vicious in their comments about foreign leaders they don't like. Has that shifted?

MR. CARLIN: There was an episode, I can't remember, about two months ago, where they seemed to be comparing him to Hitler. Then they backed off again and stopped attacking him personally.

Now, in this latest statement, they've sort of edged up to the line again. I think, in the Korean language, they suggest that he's senile. The English language version of it doesn't quite use that language. So I think they're still holding back a little bit. They're not saying anything worse about him than American newspapers are, and they have extended to the level they sometimes use. They used to call Lee Myun-bak a rat. I won't repeat on the phone what they called Park Geun-hye.

So, they have an arsenal of really, really nasty they can deploy, and they haven't done that yet, against the President.

MR. WIT: And the last question is “What would we expect to see in North Korea, what developments would we expect to see, if there was a really serious escalation of tensions?”

MR. CARLIN: Well, they have something called a “state of semi-war,” that they have used – they used to use it frequently – they haven't used it in a long time – but that puts the population on alert, it pulls people out of factories and away from productive activities, it puts the army on alert. They haven't done that. They could do it – look, let me rephrase that.

Kim Jong Un, in 2015, showed that he knows how to be really nuanced in terms of mobilization. They could do something like that again, because he doesn't want to interrupt economic activities in the country. If they do that, if they really mobilize the population fully, it seems to me that's a pretty serious sign that they're very concerned that something is about to happen, not necessarily that they are going to do it, but that they may be the target.

MR. WIT: And, I'm sorry, a last question, and it's a real softball, but people are concerned that

North Korea is going to launch a nuclear weapon against Guam or the United States. I mean, what's your view on that?

MR. CARLIN: Well, certainly that this statement doesn't suggest anything like that; it suggests that this is a demonstration – I think at some point they're going to say "Look, this is not anything different than your flying B-1 bombers over Korea. We're going to put our missiles 25 or 30 kilometers offshore. Your bombers come within tens of kilometers of the Demilitarized Zone. If you can 'reach out and touch' us, we can 'reach out and touch' you. We've made this very public. We've even suggested that there's going to be a public demonstration."

So this isn't the point at which they're going to do anything, and I don't really think they are, honestly. Unless they're put into a corner.

MR. WIT: Okay, great. Over to you, Campbell.

FACILITATOR: Okay. Thanks very much for that, Bob, and thanks for your questions, Joel.

I know a lot of this started with a report that was leaked from the DIA, and it dealt with their assertion that North Korea has a miniaturized nuclear warhead design that they could deploy, today. So, Joe, would you like to give us some of your comments on that?

MR. BERMUDEZ: Certainly. Thank you very much.

The press reporting of the DIA analysis and assessment has been taken as something revolutionary in the situation regarding North Korea's ballistic missile capabilities. It, however, should not be seen in that light; it should be seen as an evolutionary step, an evolutionary analysis, of the current situation with North Korea's ballistic missile capabilities.

Now, if we look at the physical size of North Korea's ballistic missiles, we can see that, since the early 2000s, it appears that North Korea has been designing a nuclear warhead that will fit, first, into its Nodong, and subsequently in its larger-class missiles since then. This is approximately .65 meters, maybe a little more than that, maybe a little less. They haven't physically changed the size, as best we can tell, of the shroud that is carrying the warhead. So, we've know for some time that North Korea has been working towards this. In fact, they probably started a bomb design – and it takes years to actually come up with a workable bomb design – even years before that. So, this should not be taken as a surprise to anyone.

The number of nuclear warheads that DIA has reportedly made public, it's not unreasonable if the North Koreans have gone all-out to produce fissile material. I personally think that the number of warheads they've mentioned is a little too high at present, but certainly attainable, given their current capabilities. Whether they use those capabilities to the maximum or not, that's another question, which we can't answer at this time.

With regards to the recent statement by the head of the strategic force, General Kim Rak Gyom, as Bob had said – and I agree with everything that Bob had just said – there are a lot of conditionals in it. You know, the KPA strategic force is "seriously examining..." "...the strategic is also considering..." You know? They're going to complete their plan and present it to Kim Jong Un, who will make a decision. There are a lot of conditionals, as Bob has pointed out quite clearly.

We should also understand that if they're talking about the Hwasong-12 intermediate-range ballistic missile, this system, as far as we can tell, has only been tested four times, and out of those four attempts only one was successful. This is not a good ratio or percentage of success to base a significant military operation upon. We have to view this statement in the context of the political situation which Bob has outlined.

The other thing to consider, that Bob has mentioned also, is mobilization. I don't see any signs of significant mobilization of the populace in North Korea. We've looked at satellite imagery. When we looked outside the areas that we normally tend to look at, which are very, very small, we see civilian life continuing as it normally does, in North Korea. There doesn't appear to be that mobilization which would detract from normal everyday things. We don't see anything that is affecting the economy, which is very critical to North Korea at this time.

We're now entering the season, in North Korea, where we're going to begin to see the starting of harvesting of crops. If they were to mobilize at this point in time, it would have a serious impact upon food collection, harvesting, and then subsequently, food distribution, and then, after that, food availability during the coming winter.

Kim Jong Un is not a stupid person. He is a very intelligent person, he's nuanced. He might be inexperienced at the international level, but I'll let Bob address that presently. So, it is unlikely that he would mobilize the nation at this point in time.

And I will also close with one simple statement. What we're talking about are contingency plans. At least that's the way it's presented by General Kim. Nations always prepare contingency plans and have them available for their leaders. It's no different in North Korea. The fact that they're being revised here is actually normal. You know, the US revises its plans on a regular basis, around the world, depending upon political conditions and military conditions and economic conditions. This is a normal part of life.

That said, the message, in the way it was carefully worded, was intended to incite or elicit a very strong response from the international community. I'll pass it on to Joel now.

FACILITATOR: Okay, thanks very much for that, Joe.

FACILITATOR: Sorry, I just have one quick followup question. I think one thing that's causing concern is the assertion that, just to kind of get a bottom line here, that North Korea has a nuclear-tipped missile that they could deploy, that would reach the US, today. So just as a kind of bottom line, do you agree with that assessment? And, if not, why or why not? And also, what would be your estimate of a timeline of when that would be a credible threat?

MR. BERMUDEZ: Wow, that's a loaded question. I'm not sure I have all the information to answer it. (Laughs.)

FACILITATOR: Sure.

MR. BERMUDEZ: I will say this. A nuclear-tipped ICBM, a North Korean nuclear-tipped ICBM, is within the industrial capability of North Korea. They have probably assembled a nuclear warhead, designed – they have, obviously, a missile that in theory could reach the United States. Putting these things all together and making them work is extremely challenging, and they haven't yet demonstrated a

capability to produce a reliable reentry vehicle, which is what houses the actual nuclear device.

So, we have some things that need to be proven by the North Koreans, but they're on the road to do this. The assertion that it could happen in the next several years is a little more quick than I had initially anticipated, but is not necessarily unreasonable.

The question that we all have is the reliability of such a system. You know, we have questions about the ability to successfully launch the system, then have the system successfully fly the actual distance it needs to fly, and then actually come close to where the North Koreans intended it to. These are all things of concern, and each one can add a diminishing probability of success.

Remember, they've only tested these systems very few times! It will take time. However, they're on the track to do so. And I'll leave it at that.

FACILITATOR: Okay. Thanks very much for that, Joe. Joel, do you have any comments that you'd like to give, before we start our Q&A session?

MR. WIT: Yeah. Yeah. Let me make a few points.

The first point is yes, I agree with Joe, if you're an engineer, developing a system that you want to be sure is going to work, then certainly I don't think they're there yet. But there are two parts to this equation. There is that, and there's also the other, the deterrence value of everything that's going on now, and the sort of fear and panic that they've made it already, that they've done it. And that has a lot of value for them, in terms of deterring the United States, because anyone in Washington is going to "think twice," because North Korea may have a nuclear-tipped weapon that "could" reach the United States. So there's a lot of value in just this public discussion of it, for the North Koreans.

Secondly, on the leaked intelligence estimate – and Bob could probably talk about this better than I can, but let me introduce this idea – that as most of us know, the Defense Intelligence Agency is just one agency out of many, in the intelligence community, and typically, at least my experience has been, the Defense Intelligence Agency is more alarmist than other agencies. And so, as everyone knows, periodically they all come together and reach what's called "national intelligence estimates."

So, I don't know what other agencies are saying about the same subject that the Defense Intelligence Agency report talked about, the one that was leaked. That would be interesting, to me. But, of course, I'm not going to be able to find out.

Secondly, my own experience with the Defense Intelligence Agency may be a little extreme, but when I was in the State Department getting ready to go off to North Korea to look for what the Defense Intelligence Agency said was a "hidden nuclear site with a nuclear reactor that they weren't supposed to have," I remember getting a briefing from them and they brought in this wonderful scale model of the mountain where this hidden site was located, and they pulled the top off and you could see this big reactor inside the mountain. So, it was very impressive.

The problem was, when we got to the mountain and looked inside, it was nothing like that. So, mistakes can be made, and they're honest mistakes, but some agencies are more alarmist than others, and I think we need to take that into account. Although I agree that this is the road the North Koreans are on, and they may get there tomorrow, they may get there next year, but they're on this road, and it seems to me

that knowing that, the sort of lack of urgency and the – what I find the – disorganization of the Trump administration is extremely disturbing.

A last point, on the number of warheads, once again, it may be more than other agencies are talking about, and actually, as some of you recall, we did a study in 2015, the “North Korea Nuclear Future” study. And that number sort of falls within our worst-case range, which was a hundred nuclear weapons by 2020. If they have the 60 by now, then they’re certainly going to make that hundred by 2020, and that’s worth thinking about, in terms of “Okay, where should our policy go from here?”

I’m not going to bore everyone with the standard recitation of policy options and what we should do, but I can answer questions on that, and I’m sure Bob would as well. So, I’m going to stop my remarks there and throw it back to Campbell.

FACILITATOR: Okay. Thanks very much for that, Joel. You know, I actually am going to ask you one question about policy. I think one concern that I’ve seen a lot is that war is sort of around the corner. So, how worried should we be about stumbling into an accidental war? And, to that point, what are the US options to avoid war?

MR. WIT: Well, you know, I’m sure there’s a lot of talk it he press about “war is just around the corner,” and there’s a lot of playing up of what the North Koreans are saying, and certainly having an American President who seems to have North Koreans writing his tweets and his speeches, that’s disturbing and it certainly creates more tension.

But the reason why I was asking Bob those questions is precisely to that point, that yes, there are a lot of statements going back and forth that are escalating tensions, but in the real world, “on the ground,” particularly in North Korea but I suspect also in South Korea, life goes on.

And there was a very good CNN article from the other day about “What would we expect to see, if indeed we were on a path to some sort of conflict?” And we would expect to see a lot of things. We would expect to see people heading for the airports, foreigners gradually heading to the airports. We might even expect to see, in the worst case, some sort of evacuation of foreigners. We’d see, I think, more military efforts to prepare for it, in South Korea and with US troops there. We’d see a lot of things, that I don’t think are quite evident yet.

As for miscalculation, well I don’t know. You know, it’s always possible, and I guess in times of tension more possible, more careful. I can’t predict that. I don’t even want to go there.

And, in terms of policy options, once again, I’m not going to get into that. People have questions about policy options. They know what my spiel is, or I’m happy to give it again. But let’s just move on to questions for now.

FACILITATOR: Okay. I’m going to take just a quick second to switch us over to Q&A mode.

Okay, so just to get started, it looks like we have a question from a phone number ending in 0363. Go ahead.

Q Hi. Can you hear me?

FACILITATOR: Yes.

MR. WIT: Yes.

Q Okay, thank you, sorry. This is Justin, with the Yomiuri Shimbun. I have a quick question on the statement yesterday. Does the statement give any indication that they might be trying to bait the US into a preemptive attack? And I ask that because I think one of the speakers talked about how specific it was. And I haven't seen a statement that was that specific before, from KCNA. It's kind of unusual. They're practically saying "This is where it's going to be, and this is what we're going to do." So, again, like I said, are they trying to bait this or is just more, "This is what we can do?" Thank you.

FACILITATOR: Thanks for your question. Maybe Bob, or Joel, would you like to answer that?

MR. WIT: Bob, why don't you answer it, please?

MR. CARLIN: Okay. I've got a few observations on that. First, you're right, it's incredibly precise. They give you the amount of time the missile is going to be in the air, essentially its route. Mischievously, they note the three provinces in Japan that it's going to pass over, which they know is going to stir up things in Tokyo.

In effect, they're telling us in advance how to calibrate our radars and our anti-missile defenses. The only thing we don't know is the day. So the question is, "Why are they doing this? Why did they say that they..." they said something about making this almost a public event. I don't know what that means. They're going to invite observers, sell tickets, or exactly what that means. Anyway, there's a lot of theater attached to this whole thing.

And I don't think they're baiting. (Laughs.) The last thing in the world they want is a preemptive strike on North Korea. So, it's an interesting thought; I don't think that's what it is.

I don't think it's quite played itself out yet. We need to see the next few turns of the wheel.

I think the North Koreans have this choreographed. I think they figured out ahead of time what the moves are going to be and how it's going to develop, and so that's why I'd rather wait a little bit and watch to see how it proceeds, so we'll get a sense of where we think they think that this thing is headed.

MR. WIT: So Bob, what do you think it might be? I mean, if not a preemptive attack; what might it be?

MR. CARLIN: Well, we saw Kim Jong Un do something like this in 2015, raise the level of tension significantly, you rattle your sabers very loudly, and that actually opens the opportunity for a resolution of some sort, so people can stand down, and then you can claim victory. They you have a meeting and you say "We made the other side back off, and that's because we're so strong, and because we have nuclear weapons they were afraid of us."

This is where the problem of miscalculation comes in. If they have a script that they think is going to work, because they think it's going to end up in a diminution of tensions, and the United States doesn't play along, because we have a leadership that doesn't play that way, then people are really on the edge, and they're going to have to make a decision to back off.



They did that in 2010, after they shelled Yeongpyeong-Do. They shelled it, they threatened that if the South Koreans did something they were going to increase their own shelling, again. And then, when the South Koreans followed through, the North Koreans did nothing, and they came up with a statement -- and essentially they said, "Well, we don't have to respond to every single one of your provocations." So, they know how to back off.

I'll be more than surprised -- obviously, I'd be horrified -- if they really intended to go through with this.

MR. WIT: Joe, did you have anything to add to that?

MR. BERMUDEZ: Very briefly, that if they do go down the road and they do conduct the test, and it doesn't actually succeed, saying the missiles launched either don't reach the general area or they're far off in their aim point or their target, it could actually be an embarrassment to North Korea. Let's hope we don't go down that road.

MR. WIT: Okay. Campbell, please go on.

FACILITATOR: Okay. Thanks very much for that. This, from Renata Janney from TV Asahi. She asks, "Has there been any update on whether the US-ROK military exercises that were scheduled for this month will still happen? What impact will having them, or not having them, have on US-North Korea tension?" Maybe, Joel, do you want to give some comments on that?

MR. WIT: You know, I haven't looked this week at -- I don't read the press every day. But, I'm assuming they are going to go forward, they're not going to be sort of miraculously turned off, and I would also assume, although I have no information, that people are considering ways of beefing them up, in order to reassure the South Koreans and show the North Koreans that we're being tough. So, that will not be a good situation; that could only make the tensions worse.

But I don't know, Bob or Joe, have you seen any recent reports on the exercises?

MR. BERMUDEZ: This is Joe. No, I haven't, but I'm of the same opinion that you expressed. I believe that the current situation actually means that they're more important that they are conducted, in a manner which is consistent with previous exercises, just to reassure our allies in the region.

MR. WIT: Bob, have you seen any reporting recently, and have the North Koreans -- I guess they haven't started -- or have they started -- commenting on the possibility?

MR. CARLIN: This is Bob. No, they haven't. If you look at the timing, Kim Jong Un is going to be handed this plan just on the edge, or as the exercise starts, and the North Koreans know that. So, it's going to be one thing piled on another. And we're not going to be able to distinguish which is their plan and which is their reaction to the exercise.

I would note that the Chinese comment over the last several days has been very harshly pointed at the United States for increasing the tensions, rather than -- which is what they used to do -- which is say both sides need to calm down, or even criticize the North Koreans. Curiously, they're not doing that. Curiously, they're aiming their fire at the Americans.

MR. WIT: Okay. Campbell?

FACILITATOR: Okay. Thanks very much for that. We have a question called in from Mat Pennington, from the Associated Press. Go ahead, Mat.

Q Great, thanks Campbell. Thanks for doing the call, everyone.

I've got a question for Joe. Do you think North Korea is capable of executing the detailed missile test plan towards Guam that it's talking about? And what sort of military preparedness would you expect the US to carry out, if it thought this test was going to happen? I mean, what military options does the US have?

MR. BERMUDEZ: Excellent questions. Yes, this is within the military capabilities of North Korea to actually conduct such a test. But, as I said before, whether it would be successful or not is a separate question, but it certainly falls within the capability of the strategic force. They have the missiles apparently. They also have the crews that are trained to operate the system. They have the launchers. This is all within their capability.

They know where the target is. It's a static target. So that makes it easier for them to conduct the targeting, of the missiles themselves.

Wow, what can the US do? (Laughs.) Well, the US has an incredible list of options. Some are more kinetic, in other words offensive. And some are far more defensive. It really depends upon the environment in which everything takes place.

Now, we have to understand that military operations, whether they be offensive or defensive, occur within a broader political and economic and social infrastructure, and many of these determine what actually happens with a military operation offense, or the defense. It is clear that the US is taking defensive preparations. It is conducting efforts to gather intelligence. It's doing all these things that it normally does. It's probably doing them at a higher level than in the recent past, but they are taking defensive measures.

You know, specifically, they haven't made many things public, and I'm not sure if I want to speculate on things that they would do.

FACILITATOR: Okay. Thank you very much for that, Joe. We do have another question, from a phone number ending in 7587. Would you like to introduce yourself and ask your question?

Q Hi. This is Tom O'Connor from Newsweek. Thanks again for having this, as always.

I guess my question is, I was interested before, and actually it was Joe Bermudez that mention Kim Jong Un is an intelligence actor, is a rational actor. I think that gets lost a lot in the media. And perhaps with Trump too, it's kind of a similar situation, where people are picturing these two not-rational heads of state, kind of going at each other, with possible nuclear consequences. So, I think if someone there could maybe just kind of go into this more, and kind of break this down at a more strategic level, maybe from both sides, what exactly they, both sides, look to get out of this and how they're conducting themselves. Thank you very much.

MR. WIT: Bob, why don't you talk about the leadership? Talk about Kim Jong Un and maybe try to place him a little bit in the context of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung, and are all these guys crazy and erratic, or is he different? You know, we've had to go through this discussion over and over again, but I think it's worth repeating.

MR. CARLIN: Yes, it is. I would note that one of the things you really have to do is put – actually, as Joe said – you've got to put Kim Jong Un in the larger context, of his leadership style and the decisions that he has made. Don't forget, he's been in power now for going on – what? – six years? That's a long time. He's not “wet behind the ears” anymore.

One thing you want to look at very carefully is his economic policies, and the fact that he seems to have a very rational, systematic, approach to the economy. Not a hair-brained, erratic, approach. Policies are not, kind of, wavering or moving around or on one day and off the next day; it's a careful attempt to find things that work, and he apparently is opening himself up to a broad range of advice from academics and social scientists and others in the system who themselves are being given license to think and study beyond the bounds of what used to be the policy.

So, if this is his leadership style on the economy, we have to take that into consideration when we're thinking about other areas, as well. Now, he's put a lot of emphasis on missiles and nuclear, but he's also, apparently, sort of created an environment for his missile development people so that they don't – they're not scared to death if they have a failure. In fact, what he says to them apparently is, “Well, make it work next time. Let's figure out what went wrong and fix it.”

This doesn't help us, because it leads them to more successes. But the fact is it's not – in my mind it's not – the hallmark of an erratic, inexperienced, person on the other end of the line.

And one last thing. The crisis of 2015, which I thought he handled with considerable skill, suggests to me that he knows how to “dance on the edge of the cliff,” or has some experience, has experienced people around him who can give him advice on when to move and when not.

The problem is the dynamic between the Americans and the North Koreans. It's not singularly with the North Koreans. It's the chemistry, the misunderstandings, misperceptions, that is so dangerous. And I think that applies in the current situation.

MR. WIT: Joe, do you want to add anything?

MR. BERMUDEZ: Yes, very briefly. The question of the sanity, intelligence, of any North Korean leader – (light laugh) – is often brought up in the public media.

I would say that what we have to take into consideration, above what Bob has said and what I said previously, is that he is the leader of the nation, a militarily powerful nation, and that he operates under a different set of requirements than do other nations and their leaders. He is operating on what he believes, and what his advisers believe, is the best for their country.

Now, we might not see that as being rational or not, but we have to understand that he has his own priorities and that's what he will operate to. Understanding those priorities is critical for us in dealing with him. And a lot of times we just dismiss them as being irrational or something of that nature. We need,

however, to not do that and to look at it from – and try to understand his underlying concerns.

Obviously, they don't match ours, but what did Sun Tsu say many hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago? "Know yourself and know your enemy and a hundred battles can you not lose." Thank you.

MR. WIT: Okay. Campbell?

FACILITATOR: Okay, thanks everyone for your answers. We have a question from Heejung Yang with Radio Free Asia. She said, "It might be a redundant question, but what would North Korea's purpose be of threatening an attack on Guam by mid-August, with such specific details, if it not yet ready to do so? What is North Korea seeking from the US or South Korea and other members of the international community? North Korea has succeeded only once, in its ballistic missile tests, in its IRBM tests. Is there a chance that it could fail, causing some casualties, and the US would be obligated to..." I believe it says, "...respond militarily?"

MR. WIT: Ah, yeah. I thought we addressed a lot of these questions but maybe someone could just quickly summarize. I don't know, Joe, do you want to quickly summarize?

MR. BERMUDEZ: Well, from the military standpoint of view, once again, North Korea, just like any other military, and as best as we can tell from discussions with them and with defectors, they conduct military contingency plans all the time. They update them frequently, as situations require.

While we don't have any specific information that I'm aware of, if we just look at their statements over the past 10-15 years, we'll see that they have stated that they will strike at US military facilities in the region. If we take them at face value – and there is no reason not to in this case – they have a contingency plan to attack at US bases in Guam, possibly Saipan, further south into the southern part of the region, certainly in Japan. They've publicly stated they would attack US military bases in Japan. This would be, typically, normal for a military to plan.

Now, in the current situation, with the suggested strike against Guam, the odds are that they're going to miss Guam – (laughs) – if they were to conduct a test. If it does hit Guam, "by mistake," yes, that would likely elicit a reaction, a very strong reaction, probably, or maybe possibly, military, from the United States. It's hard to say.

But I'll pass this on to Joel and Bob to continue.

MR. WIT: Look, I think we've gone over this ground a lot, so just very briefly, you know, I sort of view this as standard behavior for them. They're facing a difficult situation. They have a US President who makes pretty extreme threats. And if I'm a North Korean I'm going to threaten back. And, if I add more detail and try to make it more dramatic, that's fine. That's what I'm doing.

So, beyond that, whether they'll actually do it or not, I'm willing to bet they won't. But I don't know for sure. So, I think it's very straightforward. Campbell?

MR. CARLIN: Campbell, can I add to that?

FACILITATOR: For sure. Yeah, go ahead.

MR. CARLIN: This is Bob. Can I just add one thing? In fact, it says in the statement – and this is important – there’s actually an internal consideration, or a domestic consideration to this whole thing. And they specifically say this step is “to give stronger confidence and courage to the Korean people and help them witness the plight of the US imperialists.”

In other words, by shaking their fist, by rising up on their hind legs, part of this is a demonstration for internal purposes that even after – I would say – even after the United Nations sanctions, that they’re not beaten down and that they’re still capable of exerting their will, and that they shouldn’t be discouraged. This is pretty important to the North Koreans, both to the leadership and to the population as a whole.

MR. WIT: Great. Thanks, Bob. Campbell?

FACILITATOR: Okay. Thank you. It looks like we have another question, from a phone number ending in 6000. Go ahead.

Q Hello. This is Alex Lockie from Business Insider. Thanks for holding the call.

My question is, if Kim Jong Un, or North Korea, in this statement, has kind of bought themselves some space. Whether they do, or don’t, go through with the launch, they have already, here, mentioned overflying Japan and firing a missile on not a lofted trajectory – which, on the last call, Mike Elleman said that at one point they would have to do. So, even if they don’t go through with this, has it kind of bought them a little breathing room for future tests that may have to overfly Japan?

MR. WIT: All right. Yeah, you know, I’m not quite sure, Alex. I don’t know how to answer that question, honestly. I think when they need to do a test they’ll do a test. So I don’t know if they need to buy themselves breathing room. But I don’t know, Bob or Joe, do you have anything to add to that?

MR. BERMUDEZ: Yes. So, to their earlier – you know, very early – tests, like in the late nineties, early 2000s, they flew over Japan, into the Pacific. I’m not sure that they wouldn’t do it again. (Laughs.) And, let’s face it, some of their recent tests have certainly landed within their EEZ and have come close to, or are getting closer to, their territorial waters, where they impact. I’m not sure that’s something that they’re overly concerned about at this point.

MR. CARLIN: Yeah, I agree. Campbell?

FACILITATOR: Okay, thanks very much for those answers. We have another question, from Tom Rowley from The Economist. It’s a bit of a broader international question. He asks, “How much sway does South Korea have on any American reaction to future North Korean provocations, and how different are American and South Korean approaches towards the North, now?”

MR. WIT: That’s a very difficult question to answer. You know, I would say, in general, we really have to consult South Korea closely on whether we take any military actions. We have to consult with them closely if we take steps to build up our forces in South Korea in preparation for North Korean military action or our own. So, in theory, South Korea should have a big role to play here, but it probably varies with whoever the US President is.

So I don’t know, quite frankly, how the Trump administration views the requirement to consult closely with the South Koreans, and I think, for me, that’s a question mark.

On their side of the ledger, on the South Korean side of the ledger, I think you've seen recent press reports about President Moon, after he got back from his vacation and spoke to President Trump, he's probably sent him a number of messages including "We don't want a war on the Peninsula and you have to stay in close touch with us."

And, as you know, President Moon, he's walking a delicate tightrope, trying to support pressure but also trying to find a way forward that's peaceful. So, I guess the danger of risks between the United States and South Korea is there, but at the moment I don't see many.

I don't know, maybe – Bob, do you have a different perspective on that?

MR. CARLIN: No, I find it a little bit curious that the new Moon government has been so low profile on this. It's hard to believe that they're going to stay that way. They may be waiting for the right moment, to step more into the limelight. But the way this thing is moving, they'd better decide to – you'd think they'd better decide to do it quickly or they're going to lose an opportunity.

The North Koreans, in the meantime, are giving the South Koreans the back of their hand.

MR. WIT: But Bob, what do you mean by "staying out of the limelight?"

MR. CARLIN: The South Korean government has not asserted itself to say that "Look, these are our people, this is our fate, this is our country. To think that North Korea and the US should, over our heads, be moving the situation towards a catastrophe."

MR. WIT: Yeah. You know, I wonder what President Moon talked about with President Trump, in their phone call. I wonder if he sort of tried to start making that message in the phone call or not. But publicly he's trying to stay as close to the United States as possible. I mean, I don't know. To me, that would be the smart thing to do, at least initially, unless things started to get, appear to get, really out of control.

MR. CARLIN: Yeah.

MR. WIT: Campbell?

FACILITATOR: Okay. Thank you for those answers. This question is a kind of clarification question, probably for Joe, on North Korea's capabilities. Yuji Niwa of Kyodo said "Thank you for having this. How much can North Korea miniaturize the nuclear warhead at this time? My understanding is North Korean ICBMs may reach the US homeland, but it depends on the payload of the warhead. So, could you talk about how small the nuclear warhead of North Korea is?"

So, Joe, do you think you could shed some light on that, just to clarify?

MR. WIT: Yeah, Joe, can you give us your intelligence estimate?

MR. BERMUDEZ: (Laughs.) I'll just reiterate what I said previously. If we look at the physical size of the warhead section of North Korea's ballistic missiles, especially the longrange ones, the warhead section would house a device that is approximately, you know, .65 to .8 meters in diameter. This is what

we call a “miniaturized warhead.”

Whether they have an operational one is another question. But one would think that after so many years of working towards it, and with so much knowledge about it working, the workings of such a device, available in the public domain, that they do have a workable design. The question is reliability.

The same with their ICBM. In theory, the two tests we’ve just seen this year, the Hwasong-14, would indicate to us that they are very close to having such a capability. But, once again, we’re concerned about reliability.

MR. WIT: Joe, you know, most people, including me, I have no idea what .65 to .8 means. So, I mean, is that big, is that small, how does it compare to other warheads that other countries have? I mean, I don’t know what the answer to that is. So, is there any more information you can provide on that?

MR. BERMUDEZ: Yeah. It would be comparable to a second or third generation US nuclear weapon.

MR. WIT: But what does that mean? Like, 1980s, 1970s, 1960s?

MR. BERMUDEZ: It means that it is a small weapon. It is a small nuclear weapon. Okay? And it is the size that you would need to put on an ICBM of the class that North Korea is development, size and weight wise. Does that answer your question, Joel?

MR. WIT: I still don’t know what “third generation” means. Is that old or new?

MR. BERMUDEZ: That’s old. That’s old.

MR. WIT: Old.

MR. BERMUDEZ: Yeah.

MR. WIT: Like 1970s technology?

MR. BERMUDEZ: So, if you think about the type of weapons that the United States – I’m sorry, go ahead. (Pause.) Joel?

MR. WIT: Okay, well, you know, I’m just trying to – since everyone on this call doesn’t know a lot about nuclear warheads, I mean, we’ve got to reduce it to that sort of level. So, when you say “old technology,” what do you mean by that, 1960s, seventies?

MR. BERMUDEZ: Oh, no, no. We’re talking 1970s, at least.

It’s just a type of – this is the size of a weapon that the United States, Russia, would have produced for their ICBMs in the 80s. For sure.

MR. WIT: Okay. Thank you. Campbell?

FACILITATOR: Okay. Thanks for that. One other thing that’s come up in the news but hasn’t

really received as much attention was the release of Canadian pastor Hyeon Soo Lim. So, is there anything else that you would like to add on that, either Joel or Bob?

MR. WIT: Yeah. Bob, maybe a quick answer, because we're almost out of time.

MR. CARLIN: Okay, quickly. All along, the North Koreans have been giving the Canadians better treatment than the Americans have gotten. The Canadian prisoner was allowed to meet with Swedish diplomats, when ours wasn't. The Canadians have sent people, a couple of times, government people, to talk to the North Koreans. We haven't.

And so, as far as the North Koreans are concerned, the Canadians are playing ball. They don't want to hold this person any longer than they need to. They don't like holding foreign prisoners. And so this gave them the opportunity to let him go. It also is a demonstration to the Americans that by being tough and uncommunicative – in their view – it doesn't benefit our own prisoners.

FACILITATOR: Okay.

MR. WIT: Thanks, Bob.

FACILITATOR: Thanks, Bob. If we have time, just for a very quick answer on this question – this is from Josh Rogin from the Washington Post – I think it would be good to provide some clarity here. He said, "My question is there are many reports that the China-North Korea relationship is bad. Typically we think about this as harming the Chinese ability to convince the DPRK to do good things. What about thinking it the other way? Could we exploit this to work with North Korea, against China, or offer the DPRK an arrangement to pull them away from Beijing and into our orbit? Is that crazy?"

So, I think it would be good to get one final response here.

MR. WIT: Bob, why don't you deal with that?

MR. CARLIN: It's not crazy. Actually, it's something that the Chinese worry about. It's something that the North Koreans have laid in front of us many times. It's extremely difficult, however, for us to fashion a policy that would actually achieve that. Because we do have such important equities with the Chinese.

So, it's an area in which we might, I would think, be able to do more thinking, and maybe a little bit more maneuvering, but whether or not we'd actually ever be able to get to the point of pulling the North Koreans away completely, that's a little bit harder to see.

FACILITATOR: Okay. Thanks very much for that. Do we want to take one final quick question and then we'll end things there?

(Pause.)

FACILITATOR: Okay. Go ahead with your question. I saw that someone called in.

Q Yes, thank you. My name is Jonathan. I'm calling from Fuji TV. And my question is "What is North Korea's purpose in naming a specific Japanese province this time? Are they looking for



Japan to push the US in one direction or the other? And how should Japan react?”

MR. WIT: Bob? Go.

MR. CARLIN: I assume – real quick – I assume that that’s actually the vector that the missile is going to have to take, although I will leave it to Joe to be specific on it. I just think it’s being mischievous. It helps to stir the pot. It excites the Japanese. But it also feeds into the North Korean argument that they’re being completely open about this, [that] nobody should be surprised when it happens, they let us know in advance, and they’re being “on the up and up.” And so, their argument is going to be “Why are you so upset, they’re being transparent?”

MR. BERMUDEZ: I would agree with that. You know, if you look at a potential flight path for a launch into the area of Guam, it will pass over those provinces. But I’m surprised they didn’t mention Hiroshima, because it would pass just to the west of Hiroshima. They did it deliberately, to raise concerns in Japan.

FACILITATOR: Okay. Thank you very much. I want to say thank you to Joel, Bob and Joe, our speakers, and thank you to the reporters for joining today. I will be emailing you a transcript of the event later, and I hope that you’ll check out some of the recent analysis articles we’ve had on 38 North.

END

Transcript by: Rich 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)

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