

THE STIMSON CENTER
38 NORTH

PRESS CALL

VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT

The Repercussions of the Cancelled Singapore Summit

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The world was stunned when President Donald Trump decided to cancel the US-DPRK summit, coming almost 24 hours after South Korean President Moon Jae-in returned from Washington. What are the next steps? Can any summit between the two leaders be salvaged? And what must Washington do to ensure the next time will be successful? Join Joel Wit and Jenny Town on this 38 North press call to discuss next steps after the cancellation of the Singapore Summit.

PROCEEDINGS

MR. ARNOLD: First off, I wanted to thank you all for your support and your messages of well-wishes while 38 North made the transition from USKI to our new home at the Stimson Center. We're looking forward to working with them and I'm certainly looking forward to continuing to work with you, as you all inform your readers.

As we all know, yesterday President Trump decided to unilaterally cancel the planned June 12th summit, the Singapore summit, with Kim Jong Un. We wanted to take the opportunity to discuss next steps and how we can salvage the summit and make the next opportunity a success.

Joining us today are Joel Wit, a Senior Fellow at the Stimson Center and founder of 38 North, and Jenny Town, Research Analyst at the Stimson Center and Managing Editor of 38 North. Joel, would you like to make some opening remarks?

MR. WIT: Sure. Thanks. Thanks, Justin. Let me – I'll keep it brief.

I think the first thing that's very obvious to everyone is this is an important missed opportunity and, quite frankly, I seriously doubt whether we're going to get back here anywhere in the near future and maybe not even in this term of this President.

There are bigger issues here, that go beyond the Trump administration and, although I think we've seen them recently, it's very obvious. It has to do with any US administration and how it's been able to deal with North Korea. And I think the biggest issue here is an inability to understand the problem we're dealing

with and the country we're dealing with. That has been manifested through successive US administrations starting with the Bush administration, the Obama administration, and now the Trump administration. We just don't understand the North Korean perspective, and we aren't really trying to understand their perspective. And you can't form an effective policy without understanding the problem you're dealing with.

Secondly, there's a big problem in that context and that's an unwillingness to learn about the past. I mean, this is something that's been going on for the past 20 years, our efforts to deal with the North Koreans. And every administration acts like those years didn't exist, that they come into office and they have a cartoon vision of the past and they act on that. And that just doesn't serve us well.

And the third issue here, domestic politics, is something that certainly was a problem for the Obama administration. I don't think it's as much a problem for the Trump administration, although, quite frankly, you know, a lot of attacks on the Trump administration, from Democrats, from the media, from others, I'm sure have contributed to the current atmosphere.

So, I'm very skeptical that we're going to get our act together. I agree with people like Richard Haass, who I saw this morning, who says "Well gee, maybe this is an opportunity for us to pull ourselves together and do a better job. But if history is any guide, we're not going to pull ourselves together.

A last point, on the North Koreans. I think they're in a very good spot here. They have a plan B and it's in place, a plan B for the summit failing or even President Trump acting in a willful way and then withdrawing from the summit. They're in a good spot with the Chinese, with the Russians, with the South Koreans, and I think the administration really doesn't understand the situation if it thinks it can reinstate a maximum pressure campaign.

So I'll end my remarks there and turn it over to Jenny.

MS. TOWNS: Thanks, Joel and thanks, Justin, for pulling this together. I'll just add a couple of points. I think when people talk about what is the prospect for resuming – (light laugh) – the summit, if we can revive it, if Trump can change his mind – and I personally am pretty skeptical that we can get to that point – and I think part of that is now there's a huge credibility gap. Even if the President decides that this is something he wants to re-pursue. A credibility gap for the administration to be able to offer, again, this summit process, and the North Koreans to have confidence that this isn't going to happen again before whatever delayed or rescheduled summit would occur.

But I think the bigger problem is the way that this was done, it really undermines the credibility of Secretary Pompeo. So, the North Koreans have been negotiating directly with Pompeo. When Pompeo came in, the belief was, and the hope was, that he did have the ear of the President, did have the confidence of the President, which would make him the right negotiator.

But now it's clear that in this tug of war between Pompeo and National Security Advisor Bolton, that Bolton won over, and that the President backed Bolton's position and the Vice President backed Bolton's position, against what Pompeo was trying to do. And I think this really hurts the credibility, now, of Pompeo to even be able to continue negotiations, and if he does, it will make it very difficult for him to have any credibility with the North Koreans and for them to have confidence in what he's saying.

I think this also really calls into question Moon Jae-in's role in all of this. He brokered the meetings. He put so much personal stake and personal capital in this all happening. He had sort of over-romanticized the inter-Korean summit results and over-romanticized and really raised expectations of what

could be accomplished in the US-DPRK summit. But I think part of his credibility with the North Koreans was his ability to bring the US on board and the ability to broker this meeting. And so now not only was the meeting canceled; it was canceled unilaterally, without consultation with Moon Jae-in, especially on the heels of his visit to Washington. And I think that really hurts Moon's credibility with the North Koreans, going forward, as well. And it's going to put him in a very awkward position now.

So, if US-DPRK relations turn worse again and turn back towards more of a confrontational stance, but North Korea-China relations have been repaired and China is willing to continue to be supportive of the North Koreans, I think it does pose sort of a strategic dilemma for Moon as to who is a better partner in this process, especially if he does want to continue with inter-Korean talks and inter-Korean rapprochement.

I think in the next few days and week or so you might see both South Korea and China try and get both sides back to the table, but I'm very pessimistic, I think, that it's going to amount to much. And I think, at most, maybe we can get to the actual working level negotiations now instead of all of the spectacle of this made-for-TV summit process.

But again, who is going to be the negotiator and will the North Koreans have any confidence in Pompeo, going forward?

MR. ARNOLD: All right. We will move on to the question and answers section of this. To put yourself in the question queue you can "raise your hand" under the black box. Or, if you're on the phone, you can press star-five. Or you can ask a question in the "chat" and we will answer it for you.

While we're waiting for the questions to queue up, I did have one for both of you. What do you make of the North Korean attempts at flattery? Yesterday they put out what was perceived as a pretty warm statement towards President Trump, and today he reciprocated on twitter. Do you think the North Koreans are scared that he canceled first and he might be going back to his, quote-unquote, "unpredictable ways?"

MR. WIT: You know, what we're into now is a political game. It's the game to win the hearts and minds of every country, to convince them that "No, we're not at fault; it's the other guy who's at fault." And so that's what the North Koreans are doing, and I don't know what President Trump is doing. He may be doing that too.

But the point is I don't think they're "scared." I don't think that's the issue here. It's politics. It's regional, international, politics. And the North Koreans are going to want to try to keep the Chinese as close as they can, and certainly wean the South Koreans even further away from the United States.

MR. ARNOLD: Jenny, do you have anything to add to that?

MS. TOWN: Yeah, I think the relatively mild language of the North Koreans at this point in time, it really also makes them look more reasonable and sort of outshines the Trump administration and sort of offsets the erratic and kind of – Trump's letter – (laughs) – his sort of stream of consciousness letter to cancel the meeting too, I mean, it makes him look very thin-skinned. It sort of read like his feelings got hurt in that process and that he wasn't able to shoulder that.

So, it makes them look like a more reliable world actor and, like Joel said, I think it keeps the Chinese happy, it keeps, sort of, pressure on the US, and it really emphasizes the missteps that the US took, especially the way that they canceled the summit.

MR. ARNOLD: Following on that question, Jesse Johnson, a followup on this, "Do you think that

this still means there's a chance of a summit? The pool reports are saying they're still in talks with the North Koreans and could even still hold talks on the 12th."

MR. WIT: You know, I guess anything's possible, but the point is that if there is a summit – let's say, for the sake of speculation, that there is a summit – I don't think they're going to be able to deal with any of the big issues that are facing both countries, particularly the denuclearization issue. And so everyone has to lower their expectations for a summit. And, as a number of us have been saying all along, the most you can hope for out of any meeting is a statement of general principles that will guide future negotiations.

And that's it. And it's always been the case. So, if we can lower expectations, if the administration can get its act together and come up with its ideas about denuclearization that aren't extreme, then it's quite possible. But I'm skeptical that'll happen.

MS. TOWN: And I think, if it does happen, again, the North Koreans are going to come back with a tougher negotiating position because the US credibility has really been damaged by this letter and by the method in which the meeting was canceled to begin with.

MR. ARNOLD: Okay, we'll go to the phones. Alicia Rose, make sure you're unmuted, press star-one, and go ahead.

(Pause.)

MR. ARNOLD: Alicia, can you hear us? Make sure to press star-one.

(Pause.)

MR. ARNOLD: Okay, we'll go on to the next question. You can raise your hand again and we can try that again.

Thomas Watkins would like to know, "Could you please elaborate more on Kim's plan B, after the summit failure?"

MR. WIT: Well, Kim's plan B has been pretty obvious in the run-up to the summit. Plan B has been "I'm finally going to go to China and meet Xi Jinping, not once but twice," and plan B has been "Okay, we'll have a summit with the South Koreans, we'll raise their expectations for the future," and I'm sure there's been a lot of outreach to the Russians as well.

So, Kim has created sort of a cushion for failure, that if the US backs away, the Chinese and Russians will be behind him. They're not going to back new sanctions unless Kim does something really extreme. And the South Koreans are going to be moving closer to the North Koreans in trying to salvage the process.

So, he's created a good political context. And I think Jenny is right. You know, if the United States tries to come back to the table he may toughen up his negotiating position, feeling that his political position has been strengthened.

MR. ARNOLD: Do you have anything to add to that, Jenny?

MS. TOWN: No, I would agree with Joel.

MR. ARNOLD: Remember, you can press star-five to get in the question queue or ask a question in the chat.

I know this has been one question that's been on a lot of reporters' minds. I've seen it in articles and twitter, that what do you think is the chance that they re-start their missile tests after this summit, quote-unquote, "failure?"

MS. TOWN: I think the chances of them doing that is really low because, again, their plan B is to improve relations with China, improve relations with Russia, improve relations with South Korea, as much as they can. And they know that if they start resuming testing all of that goodwill, all of that change in Kim's reputation, all of that will go out the window very quickly.

So I think they've cleared gamed this out. They have the backup plan. They've repaired the relations they need to repair. We've already seen movement in China. For instance, to ease up on, especially, the unilateral sanctions and to start to, kind of, maneuver around the sanctions that are there, in very Chinese ways.

But there is a lot of eagerness, I think, in China and in South Korea, to resume business – and in Russia – to resume business ties. And, regardless of what the US does, I think there's going to be a lot of opposition to any sort of US antagonism on this process, as long as North Korea refrains from provocative behavior. I think it's against their own strategic interest to do it, and it would take a lot for them to make that decision.

MR. WIT: And let me add a point here. I agree with everything Jenny said. But everyone is focused on the bright, shiny, object of missile testing and nuclear testing. But you have to remember that even if there is no testing at all, the North Koreans are, even as we speak, producing more nuclear weapons. You don't have to test, to produce nuclear weapons. You have to produce the fissile material, and they're doing that I'm sure, and they're putting together more bombs, and they are probably, also, producing missiles. I don't know which ones but they may even be producing ICBMs.

So, all of that is moving forward, whether they test or not.

MR. ARNOLD: So, Tomoko has a question. So, with the implication that the June 12th summit can be on, what do you think about – what is your thought that he cancels it one day, he says it might be on the other day? What might the North Koreans be thinking of the whiplash that they are seeing from the White House?

MR. WIT: You know, I don't know what they're thinking. Are they surprised by this kind of behavior? I would say no. You know? From the moment Trump was elected, or even before, they had been compiling briefing books, biographies, sketches of Donald Trump and what he was all about. So, I don't think any of this surprises them.

I don't know what behavior, in the future, might surprise them, but I don't think this is really going to change their plan.

MS. TOWN: But again, I do think it will – it gives them leverage in that process, because the US credibility has been very much damaged, and so the price of anything goes up, and the will of North Korea in that process, they know they can be stronger now and they can come down harder in those negotiations because they know they can't trust the administration. (Laughs.)

MR. ARNOLD: Okay. Let's see if we have any more questions. If you want to press star-five to get in the phone queue, or you can ask it in chat, we'll just give it a couple more seconds to make sure everybody who has asked a question can.

So, Thomas Watkins is asking "Does Kim pay any kind of political price at home for a potential loss of face, of Trump walking away?"

MR. WIT: You know, I've seen people talking on TV, and some people quoted in the media, that "Oh, Kim is facing his own internal opposition to what he's doing." And I saw Gordon Chang, for example, on CNN, saying, talking about, the internal politics of North Korea. Well, I'm sorry, that's not my understanding of the internal politics of North Korea.

My understanding of the internal politics of North Korea is that if you openly express opposition to what the leader wants, you could end up either being executed or in a very bad place in terms of exile. So, I don't see any internal opposition and I don't think this is going to be a problem for him internally, at all.

MS. TOWN: Well, and I think that in this process, even if there were advisors that maybe wanted Kim to be a bit more forward leaning, Trump has given the perfect narrative for failure, for basically it's not North Korea's fault, it's Trump's fault, it's the US' fault, the US is unreliable, the US made these unilateral actions.

And the comments that came out of North Korea were not unprovoked. When you have Bolton and President Trump and Vice President Pence all basically threatening North Korea of, like, "Oh, if you don't do this deal, you're going to end up like Libya, and Libya, Libya, Libya..." you know, the responses from the North Koreans were predictable. What do you expect them to say? They're not going to negotiate with a gun to their head, and they're not going to be happy about it, in that process.

So, if we're going to be hardline towards them, they're going to be hardline towards us as well.

So I think the way that this was done it's very easy to make the case of, like, "Look, I tried." And again, the narrative of the retort was very, kind of, mild and conciliatory, of like, "Look, we tried. If you want to resume, great." Both of them kind of batted it to the other, to say "Oh, well if you want to resume, you've got to let us know," and "Well, if you want to resume, you've got to let us know, when you figure out what it is you want."

And so I think now we're at the stage where, again, Kim comes out on top. He made all the right moves. He hasn't overreacted. He had a plan B. The plan B seems to be they're going to try and work on the US but it makes the US look really flaky.

MR. ARNOLD: Okay. Alicia Rose asks, "If the June 12th summit does not happen, what do you see as the best scenario, going forward? How do you view the timing of the letter, while journalists were in North Korea to witness the dismantlement of Punggye-ri?"

MS. TOWN: Well, the timing of the letter was sort of the worst possible way to do something. You know, not only – yeah – had Moon just left, thinking that everything was okay, and North Korea had just done this diplomatic gesture of blowing up the Punggye-ri nuclear test site, while it doesn't change North Korea's core nuclear capabilities, it certainly is a unilateral diplomatic gesture that was done before an agreement is even in place. They didn't have to do it.

But yeah, it was not a smart move to do it while there are foreign journalists in there. And it shows

sort of, again, the impulsivity of the decision and not thinking through that there are real-world consequences to his actions. And I think we have seen this many times before, when Trump thinks about Trump, and when he wants to make a point, wants to make a point, and everyone tries to help him in that process, but it could have gone very bad. It was a very risky way to do it, and it could have cost – it could have had a lot of human cost, in that calculation.

MR. WIT: You know, when we're talking about possible scenarios going forward, this whole situation reminds me of something that happened in the past, and that's when the Bush administration essentially backed away from the Agreed Framework, in 2002. But it really didn't have a plan for what to do next.

And what it found was it thought that that would put enormous pressure on the North Koreans to do what it wanted to do and, in fact, it didn't. And the administration had to back off its threats and go back to talks with the North Koreans.

So, it may be, in this situation, something similar is going to happen, that the administration has canceled the summit, it thinks it's going to reinstitute maximum pressure, it finds out that it's not going to be able to institute maximum press, and then it's going to be "caught between a rock and a hard place," and it may say "Okay, let's talk seriously now." Even at a lower level it may start negotiations.

MR. ARNOLD: So, this might be a question for you, Jenny. But, what's your latest – Eli Brown is asking – "What's your latest assessment of the destruction of Punggye-ri? Do we have one yet?"

MS. TOWN: Well, we've been looking through the photographs. Only a few of the photos have come out. Only a little bit of video footage has come out. We haven't been able to get satellite imagery yet. So, it's hard to have anything definitive. We are hoping to have something soon.

But clearly, obviously, the tunnels, at least the entrances, have been sealed. There were a lot of explosions. I think there is a lot that the reporters learned that now we're trying to get them to talk to the experts – (laughs) – to actually kind of assess what it is that the North Koreans actually told them about, kind of, the history, and the layout, and the composition of Punggye-ri and, sort of, the plans that they might have had.

And I think we have seen now the tunnel configurations and, sort of, the timelines that they gave, and we're still poring through data, so we don't know anything for sure. And there's no way for us to corroborate, for instance, whether the North Koreans collapsed the tunnels as a whole or just the entrances and that we would never – I don't think we'd ever know unless we actually were able to have inspectors "on the ground."

MR. ARNOLD: So, Grace Lee is wondering if the rumor regarding Kim Jong Un's fear of flying is true. It has been talked about as the reason that the North Koreans didn't turn up for the planning meetings. But is there any idea of why they may not have turned up for those planning meetings?

MR. WIT: I'm sorry, was Kim Jong Un supposed to go to the planning meeting? I mean, really, come on! We've met with North Koreans in Singapore, we've met them in Kuala Lumpur, we've met them in Europe. The people who were going to show up for the meeting were not afraid of flying anywhere.

So, you know, I don't think that's an issue here at all.

MS. TOWN: In terms of, like, why didn't they show up to the meetings, I mean, there was a lot of

political back and forth going on where, again, this is sort of typical North Korean responses to if you're going to threaten them – (light laugh) – they're going to react badly to it, and there are consequences to words when you're dealing with foreign policy and not just a commentator on TV.

MR. WIT: You know, there's another point here which I think is very important. People talk about "Well, the North Koreans stopped answering the telephone."

Well, this goes to the point of not having a good channel of communication with the North Koreans. If you've got to depend on phone calls, then that's not a very good channel. And actually, someone who was in the Obama administration told me a story, that they decided not to make phone calls to the North Koreans because sometimes they'd pick up and sometimes they wouldn't. So they'd send them faxes, and they found that the North Koreans, by getting the faxes, had to respond.

This is, of course, very silly, and so what we need to also be thinking about is "How do we establish a reliable and continuous channel of communication with the North Koreans, both for future negotiations but also if we want to rearrange a summit?"

MR. ARNOLD: Okay. Let's see if there are any more questions. We'll just wait a couple seconds for that. Remember, star-five if you'd like to do a phone question, or you can ask in the chat.

(Pause.)

MR. ARNOLD: Thomas Watkins has a question. Audel, would you like to take that over?

AUDEL: Yeah, yeah. His question was "What kind of political price does Kim pay at home for a potential loss of face of Trump walking away?"

MS. TOWN: I thought we already answered that one.

MR. WIT: I think we just answered that, didn't we?

MR. ARNOLD: I believe we did, earlier.

MR. WIT: Well, just to repeat, I think we need to think about the North Korean political system as being different from a western democracy, and he's not going to pay any political price. That's the bottom line.

MS. TOWN: Realistically too, they don't have the public expectation. The narrative to the public has been very controlled, very disciplined. They will tell the public what they want the public to know.

And, if you look at domestic North Korean publications as of this morning, it's talking about Kim Jong Un just did a site visit to – where did he go? – to some economic area, opening some new something or the other, I forget what it is. But it has nothing to do with the politics of this, because they are not doing this in, sort of, a made-for-TV way; they are doing this as diplomacy and the diplomacy, once they reach a decision, I'm sure, would be communicated to the people in a specific way.

But even when they offered to destroy the Punggye-ri nuclear test site, again, the way they frame it domestically is "We're doing this because we don't have to anymore. We don't have to test anymore, because our state nuclear force is already complete."

So, they know how to control the narrative and they make sure that the people know what they need to know, when they need to know it. So this isn't a matter of you're going to get, like, massive, like, disappointment among the people that this didn't happen because, I'm sure, there was limited knowledge of what was supposed to happen to begin with. And again, it's very easy to frame it as "We tried and the US flaked."

MR. ARNOLD: Okay. Tomoko Beck has another question. "Do you think North Korea is not desperate to have the summit, now that he canceled it? Did you sense that from the statement yesterday?"

MS. TOWN: I didn't sense they were desperate. Again, I think they were mild and I think they sort of pointed out that the US made the wrong decision, and a decision that the international community was not happy with, our allies didn't know about, and again, at the end, they sort of lofted it back and mirrored the language to say "Sure, if you want to talk sometime, once you figure out what it is that is realistic to do, we're here," and throwing it back to the US to be the ones to say "If you want to, kind of, grovel and come back, you can."

So I don't think they're desperate – they don't have to have this summit now, because their plan B is working. They do have good relations. They've repaired a lot of relations with China. They have – they're building better relations with Russia.

You know, the South Koreans – I saw the news this morning – I think the South Koreans are saying, too, they want to keep moving forward on the Panmunjom Declaration, and trying to fulfill those commitments, as well. So, the "odd man out" now is the US.

MR. ARNOLD: So, Sarah Park has a question that touches on a couple answers you probably put on there. But, "Is there a possibility of a coup in North Korea if Kim leaves the country, and is that why he preferred to have it at 'the Peace House' instead of in Singapore?" There were some rumors flying around that he would have preferred doing it at Panmunjom rather than outside the country.

MS. TOWN: (Laughs.)

MR. WIT: You know, I think the possibility of a coup is probably equal to the possibility that North Korea is going to collapse tomorrow. Anything's possible but very unlikely. And, after all, Kim Jong Un went to China twice, recently, and I wouldn't be surprised if, at some point, he goes to Russia. You know, his father did the same thing. Things aren't so bad in North Korea; they're actually pretty good. And the system is under control.

So, I think that's just really total speculation.

MS. TOWN: And it's a popular rumor to spread of, like, "Oh, he must be paranoid of a coup and he must be paranoid of these things," because I think it's more our projection of what we think he would do, rather than actual reality "on the ground."

MR. ARNOLD: Okay. If there are no more questions, we'll go ahead and end this. I want to thank you all for attending our press briefing today. We will have a transcript and audio out a little bit later today, probably in the next couple of hours. And as such, because you all joined, you all get first dibs on that.

Thank you very much. This is Justin Arnold. And, as always, if you have a question, please email me and I will get back to you. Thanks so much, everyone.

END