

JHU/SAIS  
THE U.S.-KOREA INSTITUTE  
38 NORTH PRESS CALL

VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT

**“AFTER PANMUNJOM”**

Thursday, January 11, 2018

10:15-11:15 AM

Washington, D.C.

*Speakers:*

**Joel Wit**

Senior Fellow at the US-Korea Institute  
At Johns Hopkins SAIS,  
Co-Founder of 38 North  
&

**Robert Carlin**

Visiting Scholar at CISACE  
Former Chief of the Northeast Asia Division in the  
Bureau of intelligence and Research,  
The US Department of State

*Facilitator:*

Justin Arnold,

Communications Specialist at 38 North

**PROCEEDINGS**

MR. ARNOLD: Good morning and welcome to this first press briefing of 2018. My name is Justin Arnold and I'm the new communications person here at 38 North. I know I've talked with many of you via email but, if not, it's a pleasure to meet you and I look forward to working with you in the future.

Today we want to talk about the North-South meeting at Panmunjom, that took place on Tuesday. The meeting seems to have gone well, as the North will be sending a retinue to the Olympics and the two sides have agreed to military-to-military talks. We want to talk about what can be done to capitalize on this momentum.

We have with us today two people who need no introduction, but I'll go ahead and give them one anyway. We have on the line Joel Wit, Senior Fellow at the US-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins/SAIS, and founder of 38 North, and Bob Carlin, Visiting Scholar at Stanford's CISACE, former Chief of the Northeast Asia Division in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, US Department of State. Each will give some opening remarks and then we'll move on to the question and answer session.

You may also want to brush up on their piece in The Atlantic, which you can find in the chat. With that, go ahead and start, Bob.

MR. CARLIN: All right. There's a garbage truck outside. I hope you can't hear that.

Good morning, or afternoon, to you all. I know we want to look ahead; that will be of most interest to everybody. But, in order to do that, very, very quickly I want you to look backwards. I want you to understand the power of the momentum of what's going on, because when you do, and when you look at the probable decisions that were made over the past at least six or seven weeks if not longer, you'll have a better sense of where things might be going.

Real quickly, bear in mind, ever since Moon Jae-in took over, the North Koreans have not criticized him by name. Why is that important? It means that they were always holding the door open for themselves to engage with him. So this isn't a sudden switch. This is something that has been in the warming oven for a long time, for the North Koreans.

Then there was the question of "When did they actually want to make the move?" "What made them decide to do it?"

Well, it was probably at least in December, maybe a little bit before that, that the two sides finally opened the channel, and the first thing that got discussed was sports and the Olympics. There were some reports that the North and South Koreans met in Kunming, China, on the sidelines, to discuss the Olympics. Very soon the North Koreans made a decision, I think, that it was time, finally time, to move ahead.

What does that mean? It means that Kim Jong Un's New Year's speech, in which he made the offer, did not come out of the blue; it was part of a choreographed move, and he already knew what the answer was going to be.

The second thing that happened was the North Korean announcement that they were going to open the communication channel and, as some of you may have seen, Joel and I have detailed the enormous number of positive signals that were embedded in that announcement, very specifically pointing to the fact that Kim Jong Un, that he could be \_\_\_\_\_. (Audio dropout.) Big decision. The decision was not just to open the channel but to send that signal, that the door was wide open at that point.

The third thing was that the North Koreans accepted the South Korean date to have the meeting, without any counter offer. That's not unprecedented but it's unusual. Normally, they play a game, on net. Kim doesn't want to play a game, at this moment anyway; he wanted to – (audio dropout). Are you still there?

And finally, there's the meeting itself. And they leapfrogged what would normally have been four or five meetings, to reach agreement on a wide range of actions to take. The door opens. So, the door is open, very widely, very deliberately, to give them room to move ahead.

Now, are they going to be able to do it? The best thing to do is just watch it step by step. But it's important to understand that the decisions have probably been made already, to push this thing along very smartly [rapidly, efficiently] and very significantly, at the very least for several more months.

Okay?

MR. ARNOLD: Thanks, Bob. Joel?

MR. WIT: Okay. So, should I go, Justin?

MR. ARNOLD: Go ahead.

MR. WIT: Thanks, Justin. So, just to build on what Bob just said, yes, there is a window of opportunity here and, at least initially, there is some very strong momentum behind it, certainly on the North Korean side, but I suspect also on the South Korean side. But, of course, there is that wild card, and the wild card is the United States, because in order for any of these discussions, and particularly ones that transition to a serious discussion of security issues, to move forward, Washington has to be part of it. South Korea will not be able to seriously address issues of denuclearization or the ballistic missile program, because North Korea wants to talk about that with the United States.

So, the issue is “How does the United States reinforce this window of opportunity? What should the Trump administration do?” And we have already seen some initial steps, with President Trump basically saying that he’s willing to talk to Kim Jong Un. But I think we have to go much further than that, in order to hold this window open, because the US-North Korean relationship has become so bad that the North Koreans are going to need to see action, not just words.

So, looking forward into the future, if you’re trying to think about some steps the US might take to reinforce this process – and what I’m talking about is, essentially, steps we take on our own, in cooperation with the South Koreans, without demanding linkage. So, in essence, these would be unilateral steps, although we would express our hopefulness that the North Koreans would respond positively.

So, for example, one very important step is going to be what to do about the joint exercises. I know they have been delayed, but delaying it a month or two is not going to be enough; we’re going to have to address the issue of what to do about those, I think very soon.

And, of course, I would recommend that we delay it even further, that we think about altering our exercise program in a way where we can maintain the security that we need to maintain, while also not conducting exercises that the North Koreans find so threatening. And I think that’s entirely possible, given every military person I have talked to about it. That will be a very important decision, and that could come up on us very quickly.

The other steps that the US might take – and Bob and I talked about some of them in our Atlantic article – certainly President Trump, aside from expressing a willingness to meet with Kim Jong Un, should stop his personal insults of Kim Jong Un, and we should demand the same of the North Koreans; they should be told “in no uncertain terms” “You shouldn’t be hurling insults at President Trump, if he isn’t insulting you.” (Laughs.) In more diplomatic language, of course.

There are other concrete steps that Washington could take, which is action to make sure that humanitarian assistance is unencumbered by the fear of sanctions, humanitarian assistance allow in from private organizations. That’s a serious problem nowadays. And there are a few other, small, steps. These are all very small steps, but the North Koreans are looking for signals.

On their side of the picture, of course, they should stop doing personal insults of President Trump.

They can take steps, particularly if we do take action on the exercise program – they could take steps to, at least temporarily, halt nuclear and missile tests. And there may be some other things they can do as well.

So, the bottom line here is yes, there's momentum now. Yes, there's the window open. But past experience has told us that windows don't stay open and that gradually, over time, the momentum can erode, unless we move quickly to reinforce the momentum.

So, why don't I stop there? And Justin, I guess you will take questions from people?

MR. ARNOLD: We will move on to the question and answer session, and underneath the black box that says "camera and voice," there's a "raise your hand, ask a question." You can click on that if you'd like to raise your hand. Or you can type in chat and have your question asked there too.

I'm going to ask one question, just to get it started and get some questions in the queue. How significant is the opening of North and South Korea's military-to-military hotline and what are the potential consequences for this?

MR. WIT: Bob, why don't you take that, because you have been doing a lot of work on, at least the West Sea situation?

MR. CARLIN: I would say it's not huge. Obviously, potentially, if something goes bad, having that ability to communicate will be important. But, in current circumstances, it's just one more signal that the array of communications channels are lighting green again. And that encourages the two sides to take the next step.

Look, this is like climbing a mountain, and both sides know they're not going to get to the summit any time soon, probably, but there are a series of "base camps" that are being established as they move up, and this is one of the important ones. And it allows them to move to the next step, which is direct military-to-military talks to look at specific issues.

MR. ARNOLD: Great, thanks. And also, if you're on the phones, you can type in star-five to get your question in the queue. Let's start off with a phone question from – the last four digits, 0363. You're on.

QUESTION: Hi, can you hear me? Hello?

MR. WIT: Hello, yes, go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Hi. This is Francesca Irgulago (?) with the Yomiuri Shimbun Japanese newspaper. I just wanted to ask about the upcoming meeting in Vancouver of the command sending states. Are you concerned that pronouncements or actions coming from that meeting might upset the tenuous balance between the Koreas?

MR. WIT: I don't know. Bob, what do you think about that?

MR. CARLIN: You know, I'm impressed that, in a period like this when the North Koreans – in fact, both North and South – have made a decision to just move ahead, a lot of the things that we normally

worry about are – obstacles are – overcome in a way that we normally wouldn't imagine.

Just go back and look. How many days ago was it when President Trump talked about the nuclear button himself, "I've got a bigger one?" Under normal circumstances, you might have expected the North Koreans to reply to that angrily, as a threat, et cetera. Nothing! And, in fact, North-South moved ahead.

So, at least for the moment, I think the two sides – and certainly Pyongyang – have decided the best thing to do is not to get sidetracked, but to move ahead.

The Carl Vinson is apparently moving toward Korea. Might that knock things off? Yeah, under some circumstances. But I think they have enough forward motion, for the moment, to overcome these things.

MR. WIT: Yeah, and I would also add that, with regard to that meeting, I'm sure, given the circumstances on the Peninsula right now, that the attendees to that meeting will be very careful about what they say publicly, because I think most of them there would not want to "upset the apple cart" in any way. So, they may even be – the statements coming out of that meeting may even be positive with regard to the developments on the Peninsula.

MR. ARNOLD: Okay, so we have a chat question. "What is Kim Jong Un's ultimate goal? Are there even deeper ulterior motives than merely nuclear recognition? Or is the regime's survival the only goal?"

MR. WIT: Bob?

MR. CARLIN: You know, when I was in the State Department and I got asked very broad questions like that, my answer was "Wrong question." We can't possibly know. And, by focusing on a question like that, we burn a lot of intellectual energy to no end.

The point is we can discern in the short term where things are moving. We can sustain them. And ultimately it doesn't make any difference what the final goal is, because the North Koreans will respond in the short and medium term to the situation at hand. So, I don't focus on questions like that, and I suggest that people – although they're interesting to speculate about, it doesn't get us very far to do that.

MR. WIT: Yeah, I guess Bob and I have the same experience. I can remember spending hours, days, asking that question of each other, when we were in the government. And, of course, there's never any answer. So, the point is that whatever policy you pursue has to keep that question in mind, of course, but as you're pursuing the policy, and particularly as you're interacting with the North Koreans and also following what they're saying and what they're doing, you might get more clarity but you may never have a definitive answer.

I mean, right now, we have no clarity and, of course, everyone thinks they know what the ultimate goal is, which I find kind of humorous given the standard line that North Korea is a mysterious place – you can't have clarity about a place that you think is mysterious. So, that's the point of what a process like this is supposed to achieve. It's supposed to give you greater clarity about what's possible with North Korea, what are they interested in, and clarity about where you're heading, in terms of the overall confrontation.

MR. ARNOLD: Okay, let's go back to the phone questions...

MR. CARLIN: We don't even know what our own ultimate – well, I was going to say, we don't even know what our own ultimate goal is. So...

MR. ARNOLD: Sorry, Bob, I didn't know you were going to pop in. I apologize. So, let's go back to the phones. A phone number ending 3699.

QUESTION: Hello. Can you hear me?

MR. ARNOLD: Yes. And if you could just state your name and affiliation.

QUESTION: Yes. Okay, great. Yes, Kylie Sertic, Kyodo News. My question is "How do you evaluate the possibility of this dialogue between South Korea and North Korea leading to a direct US-North Korea dialogue?"

MR. WIT: Do you mean whether we think that's likely or not? Well, of course, if you ask me for the odds, I would say the odds are against it, given everything that's happened over the past year. But it's possible. It's possible, if the US government understands that this is an opportunity, and it's an opportunity to at least try to develop some sort of face-to-face contact. And, in that context, to try to find a path towards resuming negotiations.

But, to do that, you need to understand you can't just sit back and watch how things unfold. The United States has to be part of this process. And I'm not sure if the Trump administration "gets" that. They may think that just having President Trump say a few words, and that, in and of itself, may lead to a dialogue. I think that's a big mistake. These signals have to be reinforced, they have to be consistent, and they have to just continue over the next month or two.

MR. CARLIN: Can I jump in? I think it's a mistake to focus on the Trump administration. It would equally have been a question, "Would the Obama administration have moved in?" This is an American dilemma, not one of political parties or personalities.

And some of us always thought when Moon Jae-in came in that would be the development that would help the South Koreans pull the Americans out of the swamp that they were in. And it was a little bit baffling to us why that didn't happen sooner. But that motive power was always available, and at least at this minute, as Joel said, we've seen the Americans, at least rhetorically, moving to the right position.

Over time, if the North and the South make enough seriously positive progress, I think it will start opening "mental doors" in Washington and people will start exploring what's possible, at least in the short term, to take advantage of that.

MR. WIT: Yeah, and I completely agree. It's not just the Trump administration; it's an American problem. And the difference, of course, was when the Obama administration was in office, there were conservative South Koreans in office –

MR. CARLIN: Right.

MR. WIT: -- who would not have pursued the same policy as Moon Jae-in and not pulled the Americans along with them. So, in that sense, it's very different.

But, in the sense of it being an American problem, and our inability to fashion a realistic policy towards North Korea, I think it has been a problem for some time now.

MR. ARNOLD: So, Gareth Porter has a question in chat. "Can you be more precise about what kind of modifications of the US-ROK exercises could be proposed, as a way of converting the North-South talks into US-North Korea negotiations?"

MR. WIT: Yes. And let me say a few things about that, but I refer you to an article that I wrote with a former US Army planner at PACCOM, and his name is William McKinney. And it was in *The National Interest*, I don't know when -- a few months ago. I'm sure you could find it. And it lists specific things that can be done.

So, for example, I think one of the things that can be done is we can downsize the exercises and make them smaller, which in and of itself may be a helpful thing, because I think the size of our exercises are a concern to the North Koreans. So, you can put together an exercise program with smaller exercises, that aren't seen as threatening.

Secondly, another thing you can do in the exercises is tone down or even eliminate what is seen as a nuclear component to them. And everyone knows what that means. I think that's not productive. It's meant to reassure our allies and to scare the North Koreans, and I think it would be very easy just not to do that for some period of time, and say so publicly.

So, those are two of the things that could be done, very easily. And, let me emphasize that we could still maintain our ability to jointly defend South Korea if necessary.

MR. ARNOLD: Bob, do you have anything on that?

(No response.)

MR. WIT: Okay?

MR. ARNOLD: Okay. So, Tom O'Connor from *Newsweek* is asking "What do you think is the best-case scenario in the coming weeks? North Korea has said its nuclear weapons are not on the table and the US has said it won't recognize any talks until North Korea had already made concessions in missile tests."

MR. WIT: Bob, why don't you talk about what the North Koreans have said about their nuclear weapons? Because, you know, I think there's a lot of very simplistic portrayals of that out there.

MR. CARLIN: Right. You know, none of this stuff is a surprise. Given where the negotiations are and who is involved at the moment, I wouldn't expect, we shouldn't expect, any real change in the North Korean's bottom line, rhetorical bottom line, on this. And, in fact, a few days ago there was a flurry of reporting, some of it "breathless," that the North Korean delegate to the talks had, in effect, threatened the United States, by saying all of their weapons were aimed at us and not at the South.

Well, in my view – and I never saw a real good readout of what was said and, therefore, the context of everything, but the best I could discern was that was a response to the South Koreans raising the issue of denuclearization. Now, the South Koreans knew that by raising it they'd get a negative answer by the North Koreans. And the North Koreans knew the South Koreans were going to raise it and that they were going to push back. So, nobody was surprised.

And what the North Korean delegate was saying, in so many words, to the South Koreans, was “Look, you don't have any reason to raise this, because our weapons are not aimed at you. They're aimed at the Americans and therefore” – subtext – “this is something the Americans should talk about.” That's not a surprise. It's not a change in the North Korean position. And it's nothing that we should be, at the moment, overly concerned about. We'll get to that issue.

If we try to get to that issue too soon, in this moment of discussions, we're going to crush everything. This is still a very fragile flower peeking up from the ground, and we don't want to put our boots on it right away; it's a silly thing to do.

So, let's let this thing develop a little bit. Just be prepared to absorb the fact that the North Korean rhetoric is going to be the same on nuclear weapons, and we'll get to it, when the circumstances are right. They're not right, at the moment.

MR. WIT: Bob, how would you characterize the North Korean position on whether or not they give up their nuclear weapons?

MR. CARLIN: Hmm. (Pause.) Their fundamental position is they are now a nuclear power, weapon state, and they're not going to back off of that. So, the envelope, the edges of that envelope, are not “Can we take the whole thing away?” but “How do we stabilize the situation?”

We might have been able to do something different 10 years ago, maybe even five years ago. The fact is there are facts on the ground now about the development of their program, which make it just impossible for us to reverse things right away.

So, we've got to deal with what we have, and the North Koreans are going to make sure that we recognize that. In the short term, that's the reality of the world we have to deal with.

Do we have to accept them as a nuclear weapons state, formally in some way? No, we don't have to do that. Can we keep our goal, that our ultimate goal is denuclearization? Yes, absolutely, and we should do that. And, in fact, that's a stated North Korean goal as well, denuclearization.

But everybody should know that that's off in the future and our problem right now is to prevent a disaster, either deliberately or by accident, and to stabilize the situation enough so that we can begin to explore ways of further cutting back the dangers of a nuclear war in Northeast Asia.

MR. WIT: Great. I don't have anything to add to that, Justin.

MR. ARNOLD: Okay. So here is an interesting question. “Do you think the track two talks between the US and North Korea over the past year have helped contribute to an environment that made



these Panmunjom talks possible, or do you see no connection between the two?”

MR. WIT: Well, I mean, I can just speak for myself. And I guess whoever is asking the question is asking the question about US-North Korean track two talks. Americans meeting with North Koreans. And, I don't know, I don't think they have really contributed much to the restarting of North-South dialogue.

I mean, in almost every track two meeting I've ever been in, North-South dialogue is not really a central issue; it's usually about US-North Korean relations. So, I'm skeptical that those track two help with the North-South dialogue. I think the South Koreans have probably been pursuing channels on their own, which they normally do, secret talks with the North Koreans. And those are more likely to have led to where we are today.

MR. ARNOLD: Great. “What does the US want to see from North Korea before bilateral talks take place?” I know there have been stated positions.

MR. WIT: I'm sorry, I didn't hear that. I didn't hear that.

MR. ARNOLD: Oh. That's okay. “What does the US want to see from North Korea before bilateral talks take place?” I know their stated positions, but are there unstated positions, I guess?

MR. WIT: Do you mean the US government?

MR. ARNOLD: Correct, yes.

MR. WIT: I'm not sure what that question means. If it means the US government position, I think that's pretty straightforward. I'm not sure if there are any hidden aspects to it. Bob, do you know any more?

MR. CARLIN: No, I don't. I don't know what the phrase “earn their way back to the table” means. It would be nice to have some clarity on that. That's what Secretary Tillerson said.

How much money do they have to put in the pot before they're allowed to get back to the table? I don't know.

MR. WIT: Yeah, I mean, that could mean any number of things. It could mean – well certainly, I think, the main thing it would mean would be to stop testing. It may also mean releasing the three remaining American detainees in North Korea. But, beyond that, I'm not sure what that would mean.

And, quite frankly, once again, it's not just the Trump administration. I think for a long time the Obama administration was very unclear exactly what their conditions were, to restart negotiations. So, hopefully the US government has some clarity in its own mind, but it's not communicating that clarity very well.

MR. ARNOLD: Okay. We've gotten a couple of questions on this, so I'm going to lump 'em together. So, as you know, President Moon said earlier that President Trump said that President Trump deserves big credit for the talks. Do you think he does deserve this credit, and was he right to take the credit?

MR. WIT: (Laughs.) At the risk of being snippy, if I was President Moon I would be thinking to myself, “I have to give President Trump a lot of credit, no matter what, because he reacts well to that.” So, that may be part of what’s going on here.

And, to some degree, maybe the Trump administration’s policy of maximum pressure has “some” effect. But, having done this for a long time, I think we need to be careful about analyzing why the North Koreans have sort of taken this move. There may be a lot of other reasons too. And “patting ourselves on the back” is fine, but I don’t think we should have a lot of confidence in that analysis.

Bob, did you want to add to that?

MR. CARLIN: Well, it’s always been the case that Washington needs to be able to convince itself that its policies have resulted in positive actions from the North Koreans. And vice-versa; the North Koreans are the same way.

So, if that’s part of the game – and I don’t mean that in a pejorative sense – that’s psychologically the way these things work, then okay, fine, someone has just said the right thing – President Moon – in order to move the peanut forward. And we don’t have to look too hard at that, it seems to me. And, in fact, it’s one of the things that helps the process move towards the next step. So, okay, the process seems to be getting into gear. It’s a dynamic. As Moon said, it’s “a virtuous circle” we’re looking for. And if this helps feed the virtuous circle, then I say “Yay, let’s just do it, don’t look at it, and keep moving ahead.”

MR. WIT: Let me just add one last comment. One of the dangers in the past has been there have been different junctions here, where we convince ourselves that sanctions are having an effect on the North Koreans, and so the reaction to that in many quarters is “Okay, let’s keep the pressure on. Let’s not reengage with them. Let’s just build more and more pressure.” And I think that’s a very dangerous impulse, because it may not be that the sanctions have been the main cause of the shift, and we may miss windows of opportunity because of that kind of analysis.

Right now, of course, the South Koreans are taking advantage of the window of opportunity and hopefully Washington will too. But I’m sure there are voices who are saying “Look, sanctions are working, the pressure is working, let’s not let up on it; let’s keep building it up.” And, by ignoring the opportunity, we may end up right back where we started.

MR. ARNOLD: It looks like we have one more question in queue. So that’s Gareth Porter. And, Gareth, are you there? Let’s see if he is there. (Pause.) Oh, we have another question. I’m sorry, the last four numbers, 2000. Go ahead. (Pause.) Hi. We can’t hear you. The last number of 2000?

QUESTION: Hey, can you hear me? Sorry.

MR. ARNOLD: Yes, we can.

QUESTION: Elliot Waldman from Bloomberg. Hey. I’m just wondering – I apologize, I got in a little bit late – but looking forward to the meeting on Tuesday in Vancouver – whether you expect there to be any sort of tangible outcome from that meeting.

MR. WIT: You know, look, that was a question asked earlier. I don't know what the tangible outcome will be, except that I think that, given the current situation, whatever the statements are that come out of that meeting, people are going to be very careful about not upsetting the current situation on the Peninsula, and I think whatever they do, whatever they say, it's going to be supportive of what the South Korean government is trying to achieve.

MR. ARNOLD: Okay. We have no more questions. Do either of you have any closing thoughts on this?

MR. WIT: Sorry?

MR. ARNOLD: I'm sorry, do you have any closing thoughts that you'd like to share?

MR. WIT: Oh, that's all for the questions, no more questions?

MR. ARNOLD: No more questions. So, if you have any more closing thoughts, we'd love to hear them. Otherwise... oh, Jesse Johnson with the Japan Times just weighed in. What are your thoughts on the deployment of B-2s to Guam yesterday, if you have any?

MR. WIT: Bob? How will the North Koreans react to that, or will they react at all?

MR. CARLIN: I think internally it's going to go on this list that they're probably making of actions the US has taken which don't seem to be supportive of the dialogue but seem to be part of a broader, deeper, US effort to get ready for military action. Whether or not they let that knock things off track right now, I don't know. They may just put in a file drawer and then when the talks founder, they'll pull it out again and use it as one of the many points to make the argument that the Americans were never behind it and, in fact, it's the Americans that have destroyed the dialogue.

MR. WIT: And this goes to an earlier point that I was making, that we have to recognize that this is a window of opportunity and we'll have to think about positive steps to take to reinforce that window. And unfortunately, I think the impulse is, as I said earlier, that pressure works, "Let's dial it up." And if that's the case, we may be making a serious miscalculation. And the window may peter out and then we're just left with maximum pressure again.

MR. ARNOLD: I think that's actually a good point to end this on. So, I want to thank both Bob and Joel for taking some of their time out today to talk with us. If you have any interview requests or other questions, please go ahead and email me. If you decide to write a story on this, can you email me at [Justin.Arnold@jhu.edu](mailto:Justin.Arnold@jhu.edu)? We would love to see what you wrote about this.

Thank you very much for joining us. We appreciate you taking the time out to listen, and we'll see you next time. Thank you very much. Thanks Bob and Joel.

MR. CARLIN: Okay, then thank you.

END