

Press Releases: Briefing on the Situation on the Korean Peninsula

Special Briefing
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MODERATOR: Thank you. Thanks very much and thanks to everyone who's called in today for our on-the-record briefing with Acting Assistant Secretary Susan Thornton about the Korean peninsula. Just one word by way of a reminder, it's obviously on the record. That's your attribution. And this call will be embargoed until the conclusion of the call. And with that, I will turn it over to our speaker this afternoon, Acting Assistant Secretary Susan Thornton.

MS THORNTON: Hey, good afternoon, everybody, and thanks very much for joining this call. We've had quite a bit of activity in the East Asia Pacific region in the past couple of weeks. Of course, most immediately I think we've all been following events in Northeast Asia over the weekend starting – of course, we had the Vice President's trip to the Republic of Korea and his meetings with our South Korean allies. We had the failed North Korean missile test on Saturday. I think you saw the Secretary of Defense's statement on that, and our National Security Advisor General McMaster talked about that on Sunday as well as his deputy K.T. McFarland.

As General McMaster said, there's an international consensus that includes the Chinese leadership, and this situation just cannot continue. The President was also very clear that he will not accept the United States and its allies and partners in the region being under threat from this hostile regime and its missile and weapons and nuclear programs.

On Saturday, Secretary Tillerson also spoke to Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi by phone. They affirmed the positive course established by President Trump and President Xi Jinping at their meeting in Mar-a-Lago earlier this month. They also agreed on shared goals for the Korean peninsula, including strict enforcement of UN Security Council resolutions and the need for international action to press the DPRK to cease provocative actions and recommit to peaceful denuclearization.

So we are clearly working together with our allies and our partners to develop a range of options if this pattern of destabilizing behavior continues, but the U.S. goal, which is shared by our allies and China and the rest of the international community, remains the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

So with that as a leadoff background, I'll be happy to take any of your questions. Please, go ahead.

OPERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, once again, if you would like to ask a question, please press *1 on your telephone keypad. You will hear a tone indicating you have been placed in queue, and you may remove yourself from this queue by depressing the # key. Once again, for questions press *1. And our first question is from the line of Andrea Mitchell with NBC News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you very much for doing this call. There was a bit of confusion coming off of the Vice President's plane where a senior official said that there might be some change in the deployment of the THAAD, which, as you know, has raised issues in both China and with some people in South Korea, but that the THAAD deployment might be delayed till after the election. And then that once they got on the ground, that was changed to be referring reporters to the Pentagon.

Could you at least explain whether there's been any change after China's criticism that some of their sanctions against South Korea about the THAAD, or there's any slowdown in the deployment of the – in the THAAD becoming operational? And significantly, could you explain, when the Vice President says that the North Koreans have to give up their nuclear weapons, how does the U.S. expect that to be done given how big their arsenal is?

MS THORNTON: Okay, thanks. So, yeah, first on the issue of THAAD, which I think is a pretty straightforward one, we made this decision to deploy THAAD. That's an alliance decision back, I guess, over a year ago now or about a year ago, and we have been sort of continuing apace in that decision. It obviously is a proceeding that takes a while to get all of the various pieces in line, and I think we're proceeding apace with that. There hasn't been any change and there hasn't certainly been anything about the decision-making process that would indicate any change. So we're on track as far as that goes for THAAD deployment.

I know that we have been in constant discussion with our ROK allies, that they remain determined to go ahead, and that we're proceeding through the steps necessary to get the THAAD deployment done. Of course, the main reason why we are proceeding with this is that there is this imminent threat from North Korea that threatens South Korea, threatens our allies, and threatens our troops in the region, and so that is the basis for the THAAD deployment.

I know you mentioned that there's been some concerns expressed by some others in the region. But frankly, we think that this is clearly a purely defensive deployment, and so the best way to deal with any concerns would be to get the North Koreans to reverse their threatening and provocative behavior that is

the proximate cause for us moving ahead with this. So I don't think that there should be any question that we're not moving ahead with THAAD. We're proceeding apace on that.

The second question is probably a little bit more involved, and that is the question about how to indeed pursue denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. We've undertaken a number of efforts in past years, but we will be continuing to work on this. We are looking for North Korea, obviously, to stick to commitments that it has previously made in this regard about denuclearization and rollback of its programs.

The Secretary of State, you may know, will be hosting a meeting at the UN in New York of foreign ministers later on this month in April to discuss international community's efforts to convince the North Koreans to take up this – the issue of denuclearization again and to show some serious determination and steps that would indicate to the rest of us that they are serious about doing just that.

And so we'll be talking about that with all of our partners; and in the meantime, I think you know that the decision's been made to really try to maximize pressure that would have the effect of galvanizing the decision making in Pyongyang to decide to take up that cause again and pursue denuclearization and the rollback of their illegal programs.

MODERATOR: The next question.

OPERATOR: The next question is from the line of Matthew Lee with the Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. This is very brief. I'm just wondering if the Secretary has spoken to anyone other than State Councilor Yang, or does he plan to, about this. I understand that the Vice President is meeting with the South Koreans, so I can see why he wouldn't call them and the Japanese. But does he have any plans before going up to New York at the end of next week to speak to people about this?

MS THORNTON: Well, he has been in constant contact with South Korea and his South Korean and Japanese counterparts. I think he had meetings with the Japanese last week, and there have been conversations between not just the Vice President and the ROK, and of course, the Vice President is on his way to Japan today. So I think there will be some follow-up conversations with the Japanese counterparts there.

But I think the Secretary has maintained a constant, kind of running contact with his Japanese and Korean counterparts, and I don't know if any particular plans, but I wouldn't be surprised if there are contacts with – between him and his counterparts in the run-up to next week's meeting.

QUESTION: Thanks.

OPERATOR: And the next question is from Lesley Wroughton with Reuters. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, good afternoon. Thank you for this call and for making it on the record. Number one, I – what – is there any light at the end of this dark tunnel that seems to exist? Is there any way that you see this impasse broken, either through the Chinese dialogue or any other way? Also, what kind of response would the U.S. have specifically if North Korea goes ahead with a sixth test?

MS THORNTON: Yeah, so – well, I think the sixth test you're talking about would probably be a nuclear test, and I think –

QUESTION: Yeah.

MS THORNTON: Some kind of a major provocation like that would draw a pretty significant international response. I don't want to – as the President, I think, has also indicated, we don't want to telegraph exactly what that is. But I think that the U.S. has been clear that we want to resolve this issue through the peaceful denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. We're definitely not seeking conflict or regime change, but we are committed to defending our people and our allies should it be necessary.

I don't think it's the U.S. and our allies that are violating the UN Security Council resolutions and are renegeing on our past commitments or that are threatening kind of military strikes. So I think the question about how do you see this unfolding, I mean, we have made a decision, and it's a decision that's been made with all of our allies and partners on this issue, to maximize pressure, economic pressure, on the North Korean regime to try to get it to make tangible steps to roll back their illegal programs.

And I think when you look at past efforts to ramp up economic pressure in various scenarios, one of the things that we can say is that you don't know that the sanctions are working until they work, and we're definitely determined to make sure that this kind of pressure will have the effect of changing – changing their mind about their path that they're choosing and to pick a different path going forward in the future. And I think we just have to stick with it, be patient, and make sure that our international coalition is rock solid and that we are – make sure that there's no lack of determination or resolve, and that we telegraph that to the leadership in North Korea and hope that that registers with them.

MODERATOR: Next question.

OPERATOR: Next we go to the line of Felicia Schwartz with The Wall Street Journal. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks so much for doing this. In terms of the elections in South Korea next month, how are you taking those into account? As you talk about economic pressure, it looks like a left-leaning candidate with less appetite for sanctions could come to power. And how are you looking at that? And then did Pence meet with the leading candidates? You said he's on his way to Japan, so I guess he wouldn't be able to if he hasn't.

MS THORNTON: Yeah, thanks for that. Yeah, so the new Korean elections, the

elections for the new president, are going to take place on May 9th and – which is coming up fairly quickly. I think they're still working through the primary process there and trying to see who the leading emerging candidates will be in that race. Vice President Pence did not meet with any of the candidates. He did meet with the current acting President Hwang, but he did not meet with the candidates. It's getting pretty close to the election, so things are quite active on the political campaign season in South Korea.

I think the question about how we're looking at the potential – a new potential candidate for president in South Korea is one that sort of we have to wait and see to some extent. We do see that both of the leading candidates in the current race appear to be very supportive of the U.S.-Republic of Korea alliance and have clearly articulated the priority that they place on the security of both the ROK but also on regional security. So I think that we're not too worried about various aspects of policies that might emerge. We'll have no problem working with whoever the South Korean people choose in – via that election, and we will, I'm sure, be working very closely with whoever emerges from the election as the new president.

MODERATOR: Next question.

OPERATOR: Next we go to the line of Nick Wadhams with Bloomberg. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks, Susan. I just wanted to check: Have you heard any new indication from China to suggest that they've changed their position or are more willing to sort of clamp down on North Korea, whether it be promises from the Mar-a-Lago meeting or after the Secretary's conversation with Yang Jiechi? And then also, I mean, there's just been so much reporting on the possibility of Trump not shying away from a unilateral strike or some other military action. How much closer are we to unilateral military action against North Korea? Thanks.

MS THORNTON: Well, I think the President and the administration have been very clear that we're not going to stand idly by while the DPRK develops and hones these threatening, illegal weapons and programs. So the rate of testing and launching illegal technologies currently far surpasses anything that we've seen previously. So there is a feeling that this is a very urgent and not just a local or a regional threat, but actually a global threat at this point. So I think that when you hear discussion of wanting to elevate this issue in the priority list, making it a top security priority, that is – that reflects the urgency that the frequency of tests and the threat that's felt in – especially in South Korea, but also elsewhere in the region, reflects that reality.

As far as the – so I'm not – I can't telegraph any specific response, but there's definitely a feeling that we are determined and resolved to not let North Korea continue to undertake this threatening behavior, that we have these ironclad alliances with both our allies in Japan and in South Korea, and that we will meet any threat or any attack with the appropriate response. But I think our preference – and clearly what President Trump has been talking about and what he telegraphed coming out of the meeting in Mar-a-Lago

– our preference is to put pressure on the North Korean regime so that they will undertake to cease this threatening behavior and roll back their illegal programs.

And I think he's – President Trump is very hopeful that the Chinese will undertake to use the considerable leverage that they have over the economic lifeblood of the North Korean economy in the service of this effort. And I think what he feels that he's heard and what has been discussed also in telephone conversations, in meetings with the Secretary and his counterparts and other administration officials, what they've heard is China has indicated appreciation of the urgency of the threat, of the need to have an international coalition mounted, and a need for China to do more in stepping up pressure on the North Korean regime and trying to make it clear to them that there is no tolerance for these illegal programs, both the ballistic missile programs and the nuclear programs. And China is also making clear that it is committed to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and that it will do its utmost, I think, in combination with all of the other partners in the region and around the world, to put pressure on the North Korean regime to show them that that's the only path forward for a brighter future for their people.

MODERATOR: Next question.

OPERATOR: Question is from the line of Mariko de Freytas with Kyodo News. Please, go ahead.

MS THORNTON: Hi, thank you for doing this call, on record as well. You've been talking a lot about economic tensions and pressures, but McMaster has said it's time for us to undertake all actions we can short of the military option to try to resolve this peacefully. So to decrease the tension, what's the possibility that the U.S. will pursue bilateral or multilateral talks with North Korea?

MS THORNTON: Well, I think that various administration officials have been pretty clear on this point. Vice President Pence said over the weekend in South Korea that the policy of kind of strategic patience has ended, and that what we really need to have is some demonstrable change in North Korea's behavior. I think there is a feeling that the time – the conditions are not really ripe for any kind of talks until North Korea shows that it is serious about what would be accomplished by undertaking such talks. And we're really looking for some kind of signal that they have realized that the current status quo is unsustainable and that they will have to make a fundamental decision about getting rid of these illegal programs in order to turn the page and have a more normal engagement with the international community.

MODERATOR: Next question.

OPERATOR: Question is from the line of Margaret Warner with PBS. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you very much for doing this and, again, on the record. I think it was the President's tweet that talked about maximum pressure and

engagement. Can you clarify what the engagement scenario looks like? In other words, your last answer – are you saying there are preconditions that North Korea has to meet for talks, such as freeze its program or something else tangible, before the U.S. would engage in any kind of talks?

MS THORNTON: Yeah. Well, I think that right now, the focus is on getting some tangible signal from the North Korean regime that it is serious about engaging in talks, and such signals would not include things like launching illegal missiles, as happened over the weekend. So there's not real – I don't think there's a realistic expectation of some kind of serious engagement from the international community while the North Koreans are continuing in all of this provocative and frankly illegal behavior. We need to see that there is some kind of a different path forward before we can engage in any kind of serious discussions with them.

So we haven't so far seen that signal, and without a signal like that that we're – I think the international community is going to be resolved to just continue ratcheting up the pressure to try to make it clear that there is no path forward without a discussion of denuclearization.

QUESTION: Well, I understand that, but would they have to make a vow to freeze their program?

MS THORNTON: I think that what I'm saying is there isn't some specific precondition, but we haven't seen anything at all tangible to indicate that there's any kind of possibility that they would be rolling back their program. And so until we see something that gives us an indication of that, I don't think that there's much enthusiasm for that kind of discussion.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MODERATOR: Next question.

OPERATOR: Next question is the line of Michelle Kosinski with CNN. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. What we hear a lot of is that the U.S. hopes China will do more. You described that they now have an appreciation of the urgency. That doesn't sound like a whole lot of solid commitment has come from China lately. Can you talk a little bit more about what kind of confidence you really have that they are going to put extraordinary pressure on North Korea? And the fact that we're still talking about hoping that they'll do more, is that kind of a bad sign at this point? Thanks.

MS THORNTON: Well, I mean, I don't think it's a bad sign. I think you've heard the President say that he's made clear to the Chinese that they should view North Korea as a liability, not as an asset, and that this is an urgent global threat that must be addressed by all peace-loving nations but especially by China, when they have so much leverage. So I think we're saying that we're – we think that they've gotten the message about increasing pressure and that they have said they want to increase cooperation with us and with the international community on this front. We've seen some tangible

indications of – that they're working towards this end, but it's still quite early. And I think the one thing that I would say on this is we've gotten a lot of positive signals from the Chinese, but it takes time to – as I mentioned, you don't know if these kinds of economic pressure will work until it works, and we've seen that time and again in different cases around the globe where we've tried efforts like these. And so I think there's not going to be an answer tomorrow or the day after that; it's going to take more time, and we're going to, obviously, be watching to see what the Chinese do. And I think that's where you've seen the President note that we're going to work with China and see if we can get them to do more, and if they decide they're not going to work with us or not cooperate with us, then we're going to have to change tack and try something else, maybe on our own. But up until that point, we're working with them and it's been – we've been quite encouraged. And I think that's all I can say at the – at this point.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MODERATOR: And our last question.

OPERATOR: Is from the line of David Clark with AFP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Oh, hi, thanks for doing this. Do we have anymore clarity on what type of device it was that they – type of missile it was that they attempted to test over the weekend?

And I also – I've heard it suggested that China is less worried than we are about the ICBM element of the development. Maybe they share U.S. concerns about nuclear weapons, but obviously an ICBM, they're on the same continent as North Korea. It doesn't bring them into any more danger than before. Do you think there's a difference in their attitude towards the missile program and the nuclear program? Thanks very much.

MS THORNTON: Yeah, so as far as the clarity on what the – what was the launch over the weekend, the launch failed very early on, so that makes it harder to know exactly what they were trying to do. But I think that our understanding is that it was not one of the longer-range missiles that they were trying to test there; it was something like a medium-range ballistic missile, but still with prohibited technology. But like I said, it's still, I think, a subject of ongoing discussion. But that's the latest indication that we have.

And I'm sorry, what was the second part?

QUESTION: That I've seen it – I've heard it suggested here in Washington that, whereas China shares U.S. concerns about the development of a nuclear weapon, the ICBM per se is not all that much of a concern to them since they're already on the same continent as North Korea; it doesn't bring them into the firing line any more than they already are. Do they share your concerns about the ICBM?

MS THORNTON: Yeah, thanks. Yes, they do share our concerns about the ICBM. I think, I mean, China has basically signed up to international conventions, they certainly are concerned about other ballistic missile technology that

the North Koreans are testing that's also illegal and much shorter-range than an ICBM. But they do realize that an ICBM expands, actually, the nature of the threat and makes it a kind of a – more of a global concern. And I think they do understand that, as far as the United States concerned – or is concerned, we see it as an escalatory step on the part of North Korea, and that makes it also of great concern to China.

So I think the nuclear test is right on their doorstep, that's true, but an ICBM is also a very alarming development for the Chinese.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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