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A CONVERSATION WITH U.S. SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE

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A Conversation with U.S. Special Representative

Stephen Biegun

(11:00 a.m.)

MS. COOPER: Hi. Thank you for being with us today. We have Steve Biegun who is the -- was appointed in August 2018 to be the U.S. Special Representative for North Korea. He's the tip of the spear of diplomat -- of diplomatic, the Trump administration's diplomatic initiative in North Korea. And I'm very happy. I'm Helene Cooper, Pentagon Correspondent with The New York Times. I'm very happy to be here. And we're really excited to have Steve, so welcome, Steve.

MR. BIEGUN: Thank you very much.

MS. COOPER: So you've now been on the job for 6 months. How is it going?

MR. BIEGUN: I feel it's like a lot more than 6 months.

MS. COOPER: Really?

MR. BIEGUN: Yeah. Let me start by saying the obvious that diplomacy is still very much alive. And while we haven't made as much progress in the 6 months...
as I would have hoped coming in on the first day, we stay closely engaged with our counterparts in North Korea. And we just came off of a summit meeting in Hanoi where President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un spent 2 days together discussing some very weighty issues. And the President said in his press conference, and it's true, that we remain engaged, the doors is open, and we will continue to work with the North Koreans to try to achieve our shared goal of the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Our goal, final fully verified denuclearization.

But let me frame it a little bit more broadly, Helene, so you have a sense of what we've been up to for the last 6 months as well. So the President held his summit with Chairman Kim on June 12, 2018, so about 8 months ago. And out of that summit meeting the leaders agreed to a joint statement that laid out 4 areas that we would work together in order to try to advance a better outcome for the Korean Peninsula.

The first was to transform relations between the U.S. and the DPRK. The second was to work towards a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. The
third was the complete denuclearization of the Korean
Peninsula. And the fourth was to recover the remains
of those who fell on the Korean War, and that remains a
very important priority.

Since June of 2018 we've had steady engagement
with the North Koreans. Secretary Pompeo made his
first trip after the summit to Pyongyang in July of
2018. He spent an entire day with his counterpart, Kim
Yong-chol, a Senior North Korean official who Chairman
Kim has appointed as his primary -- Secretary Pompeo's
primary counterpart. Those meetings were tough. They
were the first time where we started to try to put
detail into the agreements, particularly around
denuclearization. And while those meetings didn't
produce a certain outcome, they set the stage for many
of the future discussions that have taken place after
that.

In August is when I started with the State
Department, August 23rd. And I started -- the 2 days
after I started, the Secretary and I were scheduled to
visit North Korea for the Secretary's next visit. The
President in reviewing the circumstances around that
trip made a determination that North Korea probably
wasn't yet ready to make some of the commitments we
were looking for, and he asked the Secretary of State
to postpone that trip and the Secretary did. In
February the Secretary traveled to the UN General
Assembly in New York and he and I had a very good
meeting with the foreign minister of North Korea, Ri
Yong-ho, where we covered a number of issues. Although
Foreign Minister Ri was quite clear that the
denuclearization issues were not going to be in his
portfolio at present, that they were assigned to Kim
Yong-chol from the United Front Department of the
Korean workers' party.

In October, Secretary Pompeo was invited to
Pyongyang a second time. He and I went to Pyongyang in
5th of October, spent an entire day with Chairman Kim
Jong-un, with his sister Kim Yo-jong. Some of the day
was spent with Kim Yong-chol. And again, we had a
chance to surface a lot of the very important issues
around all four commitments that the two leaders made
in the Singapore joint statement.

Going into November it was our expectation
that we would have a final framing meeting and really
the kickoff of working level talks. And that was
scheduled for the first part of November. And a few
days before that meeting we received a word from North
Korea that there were scheduling issues, that they had
other issues that were complicating their participation
and they asked for a postponement of that meeting. We
don't know the full circumstances around that. And
like so much else about North Korea, even with the
incredible resources we have available to us we had to
engage in some speculation as was what was happening.

At the same time North Korea was disengaging
also from China, from Russia, from South Korea. And
we're not quite sure what happened and what transpired
inside North Korea during the months of November and
December. But whatever it was it's like a switch came
back on in late December partially driven, in fact
really driven by an exchange of letters between
President Trump and Chairman Kim.

We began to see tightened up engagement
between us and the North Koreans that flowed into
Chairman Kim's New Year's address. In his New Year's
address, which is their equivalent of the State of the Union address, Chairman Kim reaffirmed his commitment both to denuclearization as well as to transferring the resources and his economy to developing -- in his country to develop the domestic economy. Those messages were reassuring and they set in motion a series of visits that have had us engaged with North Koreans almost nonstop since the New Year.

Kim Yong-chol, the Secretary's counterpart came here in mid-January, spent a full day with the Secretary. He also spent and had an extended visit with President Trump in the Oval Office. They covered lot of topics. At that same visit in mid-January I was introduced to my new counterpart recently appointed, the special representative for the United States. So a direct mirror of my portfolio here in the U.S., and his name was Kim Yong-chol. And during that visit in mid-January we had our first working level negotiations, six months after the Singapore summit.

But we were finally engaged by mid-November, excuse me, mid-January in rather intense discussions with the North Koreans framing out an agenda for
discussions and a schedule for discussions. And also during the course of that meeting in mid-January the decision was made to proceed with a second summit meeting at the end of February in Vietnam.

So working toward that, I took a team of experts and scientists, international law experts, negotiators to Pyongyang in early February. We spent several days in Pyongyang, engaged with our North Korean counterparts, again further framing out a set of issues that we -- both sides would like to advance in the framework of the joint statement that came out of the Singapore summit.

We broke briefly and then returned to meet again in Hanoi where we met for several days in the run up to the summit and then participated in the summit meeting between the two leaders. The point I want to make with that framing is that we have been closely engaged with the North Koreans especially over the last couple of months, and certainly our expectation will be able to continue that close engagement in order to advance the shared goals of the 2 leaders as expressed in the Singapore summit.
MS. COOPER: Okay. Well, thanks for the framing, and I'm glad that you bring up the sort of the relaunch of talks in January, because the January timeframe is sort of what I wanted to start speaking with you about.

In your Stanford speech, back in January, you seem to suggest that you, the United States was totally open to confidence building steps. And there is certainly -- one of the things, you know, as soon as, I've been getting a lot of tweets from people and questions from people wanting to direct to you the whole idea of whether or not the American stance is hardening, because in your Stanford speech you said, "From our side we are prepared to discuss many actions that could help build trust between our 2 countries and advance further progress in parallel on the Singapore summit objections -- objectives of transforming relations, establishing a permanent peace regime on the Peninsula and complete denuclearization," you said that. And that sounds totally -- that sounds like a an opening for negotiations.

But last week a senior administration official
said this at the State Department, "Nobody in the administration advocates a step-by-step approach. In all cases expectations is complete denuclearization of North Korea as a condition for all other steps. That's a position supported by the entire inter-agency."

Which is it?

MR. BIEGUN: It's -- so the semantic differences I have to say escape me. All four of these priorities are linked. The United States is interested in transforming relations with the DPRK. United States is interested in advancing a permanent peace regime with North Korea. United States is absolutely interested in pursuing denuclearization with North Korea. And the fourth pillar, as I mentioned, the return of remains very much remains a high priority for us as well. They're all linked. They're all proceeding in parallel.

The United States has discussed many initiatives in each of these areas with the North Koreans, but as is so often the case that nothing can be agreed until everything is agreed. That's a clear principle that has permeated our negotiations on both
sides with the North Koreans. That's not to say that we can't take steps to build confidence between the two countries. But the foundation of this policy is denuclearization. And until we can get to some point where we have the same traction on that issue that we have on the other issues, that makes it very difficult for us to move forward.

You've heard the President himself talk about many of the issues that would build confidence. And most recently at the summit he had an exchange in front of the press on this very point. These are issues that we have explored in detail with our North Koreans in parallel with denuclearization. But we're just not there on denuclearization, and that's -- that was the issue at the summit that really challenged us to move forward with a more complete agreement.

We've closed some gaps. As the President and the Secretary said, we had a very constructive discussion, but we're not there yet. And that's the place where we need to, really need to exert the most effort to see if we can advance an agenda that achieves
all of these issues in parallel, not just in isolation.

MS. COOPER: But I think that's where there's some confusion. Are you saying then that you -- that the United States is going to do this incrementally? And if you don't do this incrementally how can you get it all done? Why should North Korea believe that at the end of this rainbow we'll get a pot of gold?

MR. BIEGUN: Yeah. We are not going to do denuclearization incrementally. The President has been clear on that and that is a position around which the U.S. government has complete unity. Our goal, our objective is the final fully verified denuclearization of North Korea.

One of the reasons we were unable to reach a final agreement in Hanoi was, as the President laid out, the North Koreans had offered a portion of their nuclear program in a sense in exchange for lifting basically all the sanctions against North Korea.

In effect, that would have put us in a position where we and presumably the international community, because these are United Nations Security Council sanctions, not United Nations sanctions, we
would be in a position where we would be lifting all
the economic pressure that's been imposed upon North
Korea for the totality of its weapons of mass
destruction programs. We'd lift that pressure, but in
exchange for only a portion of those weapons of mass
destruction programs. That would have put us in a
position, a very difficult position of essentially
subsidizing what would potentially be ongoing
development of weapons of mass destruction in North
Korea. We need a total solution.

This is why the President, this is what the
President brought to the table and this is what the
President has sincerely conveyed to Chairman Kim Jong-
un. The United States is ready to go down this road
with North Korea to transform relations, to create a
permanent peace regime, to denuclearize and also to
close some of the humanitarian issues like the return
of remains, but North Korea has to be committed.

And what the President -- as the President
said at his press conference, he challenged Chairman
Kim to go big, to buy into the vision, to do this
together with us. I know the North Koreans found that
difficult to accept. Obviously we didn't get to a point at the summit in Hanoi where we could have reached an agreement on that broad framework. But we're prepared to continue trying. The door is open to diplomacy.

We want a very different future for the United States and North Korea on the Korean Peninsula. And the President is 100 percent supportive of us remaining engaged diplomatically to try to achieve that goal. The gap is still just a little bit too large for us to get there today.

MS. COOPER: I'm going to try this one -- a slightly different way because you are certainly aware that there is a narrative that is out there right now that National Security Advisor John Bolton has now got a hold of the process and that the United States' position has hardened considerably. Are you saying that we -- the Trump administration position has not hardened?

MR. BIEGUN: No. The Trump administration position is not hardened. From the very beginning the U.S. view has been to achieve the final fully verified
denuclearization of North Korea. The President on down (phonetic) have said that the lifting of sanctions will come with attaining that goal. That's not to say that we can't continue to talk with the North Koreans and that there aren't other areas we can explore outside of the lifting of sanctions that can potentially advance all the Singapore commitments the two leaders made, but there has absolutely been no difference in -- or distinction in the U.S. policy on denuclearization.

I will say that I have -- I am acutely aware that I inherited a portfolio that for 25 years has been mired in political disagreements, in policy differences and also has a fairly miserable record of achievement. We started this diplomacy with North Korea with the agreed framework in the early 1990s and one can debate why each subsequent initiative failed and who was at fault, but you can't deny the outcome.

Starting in 1994, really starting in 1992 when the North and the South agreed to not pursue nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula racing forward 27 years to today we have a nuclear weapons state on the Korean Peninsula. So the policies have been a failure. The
Trump administration's policy is to push very hard across all fronts. We want to build confidence, we want to build trust, we want to end the war, which is currently in abeyance with the 1953 armistice. We want to heal the wounds of war. We want to recover the remains of the soldiers very much for the same reasons that that helped us normalize relations in other places like Vietnam at the end of the conflict. It's all part of a total strategy. But it does require North Korea to be fully committed to the elimination of its weapons of mass destruction and that's what the President was challenging Kim Jong-un, to buy into that vision completely. And if they do, as the President has said, we will exceed their expectations in what we can achieve together on the Korean Peninsula.

MS. COOPER: You guys all know that we're going to be taking questions in a very complicated iPad-related manner in a few minutes. My former colleague, Michael Gordon, didn't trust this, so he e-mailed me a question he wanted me to get in. And I want to -- I want to read this e-mail from Gordon because it gets to the point that you're talking about.
And it gets again to the, are we moving the goal post issue. "President Trump has repeatedly stated publicly that he has no fixed timeline for completing the negotiations with North Korea and is not in a rush to denuclearize North Korea as long as Pyongyang does not conduct nuclear missile tests. At UNGA in September, Mr. Trump said, "I don't want to get into the time game. If it takes 2 years, 3 years or 5 months it doesn't matter. There's no nuclear testing and there's no testing of rockets." But last Thursday the senior State Department official said that the goal was to denuclearize North Korea and eliminated -- eliminate the North ICBMs during Mr. Trump's current term in office. Who is right, President Trump or the senior State Department official?"

MR. BIEGUN: So the President has not set an artificial time limit on this process, that's absolutely right. In question to how long would it take us, we stand by the expectation that if we fully mobilized our resources and if we worked with the North Koreans and not had to do this over their objection, that we could align our ourselves in a manner
sufficient to achieve this in something approaching a year. We continue to push for this process to begin. And it has been said many times that this will be something that we would like to get done in the President's first term. But ultimately it requires the North Koreans to start early (phonetic). And that's the missing variable right now, is that the North Koreans have to be similarly bought into that objective. And so the pressure is not on us, and I think that's implicit in what the President is saying.

The United States has preserved all of the pressure of its international sanctions coming out of the Hanoi summit. And the international sanctions are actually quite tough and continue to put significant hardship on the Korean economy. At a minimum this limits the resources that could be available to divert the weapons of mass destruction programs, but in the best case also it creates the right combination of incentives for North Korea to choose this path.

The President has been also very clear about sanctions. He doesn't desire to impose or sustain sanctions against North Korea. He'd like to have us in
a position where we can lift them, but we have to get
the North Koreans to begin that process of
denuclearization. There is no artificial timetable on
this. It doesn't have to be done by x date and we
won't be driven by an artificial timetable. Key here,
again the missing variable is North Korea has to be
fully invested in the final fully verified
denuclearization.

We've discussed that with them, we've
discussed what that means with the North Koreans. They
understand our point of view. And we're going to
continue to work to see if we can close the gaps and
reach a common approach on that. We weren't able to do
that at the summit in Hanoi and so we'll continue to
work at it and see if we can get there as soon as
possible.

MS. COOPER: Okay. What do the North Koreans
mean when they say close Yongbyon? There is some
confusion about what exactly that might mean. I mean
you had working level talks in Hanoi before Trump
arrived. How do you think that -- do you -- do both
sides agree on what exactly, do both sides have a clear
understanding of what exactly that means?

       MR. BIEGUN: So we have no agreement to close Yongbyon. Let me just state that upfront. So there is no agreed approach to anything related to Yongbyon at present. But that's a good question and it's the right question you asked, because Yongbyon can be many different things.

       MS. COOPER: Yes.

       MR. BIEGUN: Yongbyon in the 2008 declaration as part of the six-party talks was a plutonium reactor and a plutonium reprocessing facility. We also know that at -- over the course of that decade that the North Koreans had developed a undeclared highly enriched uranium capability at Yongbyon. And so obviously the production of fissile material at Yongbyon comes from both a uranium facility as well as a plutonium facility, both of which are usable in the development of nuclear weapons.

       The Yongbyon is much more than that too. Yongbyon is a whole industrial complex involved in the nuclear fuel cycle and nuclear weapons development in North Korea. Consists of dozens if not hundreds of
facilities spread across a large area that is generically referred to as Yongbyon. What we're asking the North Koreans to do in the process of denuclearization is to eliminate all dimensions of the nuclear fuel cycle and the nuclear weapons program. And so our definition of Yongbyon would be quite expansive.

In our discussions with the North Koreans -- I won't go into every detail of how they have chosen to describe Yongbyon, but let me just say, you know, in general it's been shifting. Things like this are why it is so important that in the denuclearization process you also have an accompanying declaration. We need to agree on the definition of the North Korean weapons programs. We can begin some elements of the denuclearization before that declaration is complete.

In the case of the 2008 declaration it took approximately 9 months to generate it.

And if the North Koreans are willing to proceed immediately with steps to begin addressing elements of their weapons of mass destruction program, we won't hold up for that. But we do have to have a
complete declaration. An industrial site like Yongbyon illustrates exactly why it's so important that we agree on the full set of capabilities and also the hold -- what they hold as a consequence of their complex of weapons of mass destruction.

MS. COOPER: I'm going to try to resist asking you to channel the mind of Kim Jong-un. But it's a little difficult and I've been trying to restrain myself. There have been some missile launch site activity recently which U.S. satellites has picked up. What do you think Kim is trying to signal with this?

MR. BIEGUN: So I think you're referring to the -- some of the --

MS. COOPER: Sohae.

MR. BIEGUN: -- some of the open source reporting that didn't show a missile launch, it shows activities at some of the sites that have traditionally been involved with their rocket and/or missile programs. And so just, you know, I think you and I would agree, Helene, it's very important that we be precise --

MR. BIEGUN: Yes.
MR. BIEGUN: -- when we talk about things.

North Korea has not launched a missile, that's not --

MS. COOPER: No, but there is activity there

like this.

MR. BIEGUN: Right, there is activity, right.

So the short answer is we don't know. And what Kim
Jong-un will decide to do, you know, may very much be
his decision and his decision alone. We have -- I
think the President has made abundantly clear what our
point of view is on that. The President's statements
last week that he would be disappointed, very
discharged if in fact this happened. And we don't
know that it's intended to send any particular
statement to us.

You know, one of the things -- I
mentioned that I'm acutely aware that I've inherited a
portfolio of issues that is steeped in 25 years of a
difficult policy battles and politics. But also there
is a phenomena that I would observe around the North
Korean issues, and that's of the snap judgment of so
many experts to drive to an immediate conclusion about
anything that's happening in North Korea.
So two instances I would cite that aren't entirely dissimilar from this where we also don't know. So some time during the fall last year the North Koreans surprised the world with a press report that they had just completed the successful test of an advanced tactical weapon. So tactical, so they were signaling in their own wording that that was not a strategic weapon, which would imply weapons of mass destruction.

And I was astounded by the immediate analysis that this was a message to the United States, that this was the end of diplomacy, that this was a provocation directed at us. And here we are probably 4, 5 months later. I don't think there is an expert alive who can even tell me what they tested or if they tested anything. All they released was a picture of Chairman Kim Jong-un standing on a beach in a coastal area surrounded by men in uniform, holding notepads writing notes.

And in a large part of the analysts and the commentary we're immediately interpreting this as a message directly at the President, directly at the
United States. To this day we don't know what that entailed. The more recent example is last week while speculation was building about what's happening around Sohae and some of the other sites traditionally associated with North Korean nuclear and -- excuse me, missile and rocket tests. There was a seismic event that the press reported was measured somewhere north of the DMZ at some level on the Richter scale of approximately 2.0.

And immediately I saw messages, I saw headlines and analysis that this was a statement coming out of Hanoi summit. There was even some implication against defiance of all analytical evidence that this could have been a nuclear test. And it just -- it continues to boggle my mind how quickly so many are pressing to reach conclusions about all this.

MS. COOPER: You think the press is beating the war drum beat?

MR. BIEGUN: It's, you know, it's a competition in the 24 hour news cycle, but it's not just the press, it's the think tank and the analytical community as well. If you read the analysis in the run
up to the Hanoi summit and you were sitting where I was sitting, you would think a lot of it was completely detached from reality on what was being speculated and provided as fact. Now that's just -- that's an operational challenge that is going to exist in any important international diplomatic endeavor like this. Added to it is the fact that there is multiple national interests at play here.

So I wouldn't lay any blame and I won't say anybody is pressuring us. I just say that the tendency to reach these snap conclusions is in my view a little bit hasty. And I will say that we take very seriously what the reports that we've seen about what's happening at Sohae and we're watching it. As some of my colleagues in the administration had said, we have the resources to do that and we don't need to depend upon commercial satellite photography.

But I will say that let's see how it plays out. Right now I don't know what message they are trying to send. We certainly have sent our message loudly and clearly from the President of United States that we would not think that that would be a productive
step for them to test a rocket or missile.

MS. COOPER: Okay. Some of the reporting that came out of Hanoi suggested that we've now added chemical and biological weapons developments at the table in the negotiations, have we? And again this again gets back to the whole moving the goal post thing that we keep -- I keep harping on?

MR. BIEGUN: Yeah. So since the day I arrived and adopted this portfolio, the effort to bring a more permanent peace to the Korean Peninsula has involved the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction. It would hardly make sense to remove the threat of nuclear weapons from North Korea and endorse the continued presence of chemical and biological weapons. It would be unacceptable to us, it would be unacceptable to North Korea's neighbors, including Russia, China, Japan and South Korea.

But also it -- to suggest it's moving the goal post is in defiance of the factual history of the issue of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction programs. If you read the UN Security Council resolutions, they are as pointed on the issues of chemical and biological
weapons as they are on nuclear weapons. And ultimately the process of final fully verified denuclearization is to set the antecedent for the lifting of those sanctions. Those sanctions, which are international sanctions imposed unanimously by the UN Security Council would also look to the elimination of biological and chemical weapons programs as part of the complete process that we're undertaking. So this issue is one that we've discussed with the North Koreans, it is not new, and it would be a very serious oversight on our part to leave any weapons of mass destruction out of the equation if we truly are going to be successful in transforming the Korean Peninsula in order to have a much more peaceful and engaged relationship, not only between the United States and North Korea, but between North Korea and all of its neighbors.

You know, Helene, we talk a lot about the challenges of the diplomacy, about the need to decipher opaque messages that are sent to us and also about the complexities that are involved in this process which generically is called denuclearization, but really is
the elimination of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery. But I also think we need to focus just as much on the positive possibilities too. The diplomatic engagement between the United States and North Korea since June of last year has not been without its results.

Yes, the President has frequently cited the moratorium the North Koreans have on nuclear missile tests as well as the partial dismantlement of Sohae and Tongchang or Tongchang-ri as it's called and also Punggye-ri. And while these steps aren't permanent and irreversible as the news accounts for the last few days have sent us, they also are not inconsequential entirely. They offer some insight into the direction that we believe North Korea is willing to take. And what we need to see them do is go further down the road. But outside that there has been much else as well.

The United States is more engaged with North Korea diplomatically right now than we have been in the past decade. We are deeply engaged in a regularized contact that I laid out a little bit in my framing
remarks upfront. And the North Koreans are also involved in outreach with their neighbors, with China, with a halting discussion with Japan, and with South Korea. And the South Koreans and the North Koreans are working very closely also to try to lower hostilities on the Korean Peninsula and create an opening for the full vision that President Trump laid out at Singapore to come fruition. I have traveled recently to the demilitarized zone in North Korea. The demilitarized zone was affected by a number of confidence-building measures that were negotiated between Chairman Kim and President Moon Jae-in of South Korea late last year in consultation with the United Nations Command and the U.S. Forces Korea.

They've done a number of -- taken a number of steps around the demilitarized zone in order to lower tensions. The elimination of all weapons has been implemented in the joint security area around Panmunjom village. It's a remarkable thing. And for those of you who are in Korea or have the opportunity to visit the DMZ, I would strong commend it.

I think some of the details are still being
worked out in the final arrangements in the DMZ. I had heard from someone recently that it's not so easy to travel there until all the remaining issues are implemented around this set of agreements. But I was able to visit. And I'll tell you, just palpable difference from anything I've seen since I first visited the DMZ in 1988. Over those 31 years we have gone from a feeling of two armies brisling with weapons poised on a very narrow buffer on the Korean Peninsula to a more calm and orderly and engagement. There is regular communications between the North, South, and between -- and with the UN Command in the DMZ.

You know these are not inconsequential changes that have taken place on the Korean Peninsula. So as we focus on the urgency of this particular issue or the crisis or potential crisis du jour, I think we also need to step back and realize that over the past 8 months President Trump's diplomacy with North Korea and South Korea's diplomacy with North Korea have created space for many constructive things to happen.

And while we're a long way away from where we need to be, and as I said at the beginning of my
remarks, we're not nearly as far long on
denuclearization as I would have hoped we are. You
know, we're making progress. We're still engaged
diplomatically, the door remains open, the President
was emphatic on this point coming out of the Hanoi
summit. The conversations were constructive. They
ended without an agreement, but they didn't end badly.
And so I don't want to lose sight of the positives in
this environment as we focused on the particular issues
or controversies or semantics of the moment.

MS. COOPER: That's a lovely wrap-up. And if
I was a nicer person, I would now open it up to
questions. But I have a couple more of my own that I
want to squeeze in there. I think at this point I'm
supposed to tell you guys that the app, whatever we're
doing here is open and you can send in your stuff. It
says incorrect password, so I don't even know if this
is going to work. This isn't working.

But in the meantime, you brought up steps that
we've taken, one of them, you know, I couldn't sit here
as a Pentagon reporter and not ask you about the
suspension, the continued suspension of military
exercises with -- between the United States and South Korea in the peninsula. President Trump himself has called them expensive and provocative. How do you see this continued suspension playing part or -- what kind of role do you think that this continues to put in your negotiations? You know the people at the Pentagon don't like this.

MR. BIEGUN: Yeah. So what the President said is -- and this is a unilateral policy, but the President is committed to it, it is that he has suspended major joint military exercises between the United States and South Korea and -- or as he would refer to them as war games. And that remains the policy. The President reaffirmed it from the podium --

MS. COOPER: The war games thing really got them at the Pentagon because they really don't like that.

MR. BIEGUN: The President reaffirmed that point from the podium in Hanoi when he did his press conference. But I will also say that I think the Pentagon has done a fantastic job of working within the parameters of that policy --
MS. COOPER: Because we continue to do the military exercises, we just don't call them that.

MR. BIEGUN: To make sure we do the necessary military training that any responsible decision-maker at the Pentagon would want to undertake. You know, we do -- militaries have to train. We have 28,500 U.S. soldiers on the Korean Peninsula and they need to be prepared always to defend the mission that's been assigned to them.

My job from the Department of State is to give them the diplomacy they deserve. General Robert Abrams, our commander of U.S. Forces Korea and the head of United Nations Command, his job is to make sure they're ready. President's job is to set the policy for the United States of America. And the President has done that clearly, unambiguously. And notwithstanding what you're hearing, my view is that he's fully supported by his advisors and that they have within the parameters of that developed an approach to training our forces that is acceptable. So, you know, I think we're in a good place.

MS. COOPER: I'm going to be going to
questions shortly. But just one, I would be remised if I didn't ask you. Why in light of the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, why would the North -- this goes back to the issue of trust, why would North Korea feel comfortable at all in striking an agreement with the United States?

MR. BIEGUN: So I'm not expert on the JCPOA, although -- and much of that was -- all of that was negotiated during a period when I wasn't serving in government. But I would make an observation as a layman, which is probably somewhat dangerous since I'm no longer a layman. And that is that my sense is the JCPOA failed for a number of reasons, including the fact that once it was put in place it appeared at least to me from the outside that Iran doubled-down on its aggressive behavior in the region.

MS. COOPER: But this wasn't an Iran nuclear deal. It wasn't a deal about Iran and funding Hezbollah and anything like that. This was a nuclear deal.

MR. BIEGUN: Okay.

MS. COOPER: It did not renege on the nuclear
obligations.

MR. BIEGUN: I didn't say they reneged on it. You're asking me how the North Koreans would see that differently. Let me tell you how they would see it differently, Helene. What we're engaged with the North Koreans is much bigger than denuclearization. Although the denuclearization is the foundation for the policies and it's ultimately the test of whether or not we're going to be successful, the President is also committed to transforming relations, creating a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula and also an agenda to close and heal the wounds of a war that happened almost 7 years ago.

President Trump's vision is much bigger than the very narrow vision in the agreed framework. And it seems to me it's not a flaw of the agreed framework, it's a flaw of the diplomacy with Iran. The presumption that we could reach a narrowly focused denuclearization agreement regardless of what you think about the merits of it. And at the same time the relationship will develop in a manner that was successful while Iran was doubling down on aggressive
behavior around the region and around the world.

And so what's different is that this is a much larger vision than what was encompassed in the JCPOA. That doesn't mean it's going to be easier. And ultimately whatever we do in this diplomacy will have to pass the test of public opinion. And ultimately we'll have to pass the test of support in the United States Congress. That's another flaw of the JCPOA agreement. Is it's a shortcut to bypass the Congress. And the JCPOA did it and the Agreed Framework did it too for that matter and it makes them much less terrible.

So if I were coaching the North Koreans, I would say do the right thing, denuclearize, engage in this full agenda, shift the momentum of the entire 70-year history of war and hostility on the Korean Peninsula to one in which the United States and North Korea are engaged toward a much brighter future. That's what we're working on. That's what we're doing in parallel. That's all the things we're doing. It's not at the expense of denuclearization. That is the foundation for our policy and that will
ultimately be the test to success. But our vision is
bigger than that too.

MS. COOPER: Okay. I'm ready to ask your
questions. Jeff Brumfield (phonetic) --

MR. BIEGUN: You sound skeptical.

MS. COOPER: I'm not skeptical at all. From
Jeff Brumfield, "Can you tell us your understanding of
what the North Koreans offered in Hanoi? And if the
North agreed to more limited sanctions relief in
exchange for Yongbyon, would you be receptive?"

MR. BIEGUN: The -- so ultimately it was the
President's decision in Hanoi. And I think like
virtually all -- all of his advisors, I think we had a
pretty good understanding of what the North Koreans
were proposing. And what the North Koreans were
proposing is to eliminate some portion of their nuclear
weapons program in exchange for the lifting of
basically all sanctions.

Now whether that portion -- that really
doesn't rest upon the definition of Yongbyon.

Although, as I said earlier even over the course of the
last few weeks and months, North Korea has had a
transcript not checked upon delivery

1 shifting definition of what Yongbyon is. But really
2 the question is would the United States lift the
3 sanctions against North Korea in exchange for closing
4 down part of its nuclear fuel cycle, part of its
5 weapons of mass destruction programs and allow the
6 attended benefits to flow in a manner that in some
7 cases might directly subsidize the ongoing development
8 of weapons of mass destruction in nondisclosed or
9 noncommitted parts of the weapons program.
10 And the administration has been clear from the
11 President on down that we will not lift these sanctions
12 until North Korea completes the process of
13 denuclearization. That's been the President's policy
14 for a very long time, that didn't change at Yongbyon
15 and -- excuse me, didn't change at Hanoi and hasn't
16 changed now.
17 MS. COOPER: Can I ask you briefly, and this
18 is a little bit off the topic. But can I ask you about
19 Otto Warmbier.
20 MR. BIEGUN: Uh-huh.
21 MS. COOPER: This gets back to the whole issue
22 of trust again. How do you as a negotiator deal with a
leader who apparently said to our President that he knew nothing about the torture, what happened to Otto Warmbier and how does that affect your ability to trust what comes out of KJU going forward?

MR. BIEGUN: Yeah. So the real question underneath that, Helene, is bigger, which is how do you negotiate with the leader of a system like North Korea because that's a bigger question, but it's all subsumed in that statement. And the answer is you do it carefully, you look for sufficient verification in monitoring to ensure the outcome of the agreement and you make sure it's done right.

It's no different I suppose than any other negotiation even with a benign power. United States has to have -- it's going to have to be a thorough agreement, it's going to have to have verification, it's going to have monitoring. These are all the components of a final fully verified denuclearization. And it will be hard to get because it also is intrusive and it's -- and in our intention it has to be irreversible.

Now part of the approach that we're also
undertaking is to try to change the tenure. And so we are engaging with the North Koreans directly through diplomacy. The President has in Singapore committed to transforming relations to establishing permanent peace and the other steps that I've mentioned multiple times today. It's not going to be done in isolation. But, you know, we're negotiating with a country that poses a very credible threat to its neighbors, to the region, and to the world. And we don't get to pick other countries' leaders. Chairman Kim is the leader of North Korea. We will engage with him and his representatives to see if we can address this threat.

MS. COOPER: Kay Huyen (phonetic). "You mentioned that the U.S. despite not being open to incremental denuclearization is open to pursuing confidence-building measures. Could you give a few examples of these confidence-building measures?"

MR. BIEGUN: The -- certainly we're very interested in getting inspectors into North Korea. And as part of that we're going to need some sort of permanent liaison with the North Koreans in order to be able to look out for the welfare and the rights of our
people who are there. You've heard the President in fact at the summit in Hanoi, there was an exchange in front of the cameras between President Trump and Chairman Kim on this very issue. We're not there yet, we're not able to establish a liaison office, but this is just one that's been mentioned in public. There are a lot of other initiatives that we have discussed in private with the North Koreans that I would be loathed to lay out in public because they are the subject of private discussions and negotiations between us. But we've discussed a lot of ideas and we will continue to engage with them diplomatically to see if there is an opportunity to engage and reach agreement on some of these.

But the confidence building is important here. We should never lose sight of the fact that we are fighting against a tide of 70 years of war and hostility on the Korean Peninsula. Yes, there are dramatic systemic differences between us and the North Koreans that make that additionally difficult. This is the longest open war that the United States has anywhere in the world. The fighting ended in 1953 and
the President has been quite clear that he's prepared
to change the trajectory on the Korean Peninsula for
the better.

MS. COOPER: You guys know this is an
international month of women, so I'm only going to read
questions from women.

(Applause)

MS. COOPER: Ms. Corey Hinderstein (phonetic),
has what I think is a really good one. "For the
working discussions and the lead-up to the Hanoi
Summit, the United States brought a robust delegation
of nuclear, sanctions, legal and military experts. But
I've not heard whether the DPRK brought an equally
equivalent expert technical delegation? Were the North
Koreans prepared for negotiations with an appropriately
technical team across the table? Or were they only
interested in an exchange of views?" Was this the case
of you guys just sitting there and reading talking
points to each other, particularly from the North Korea
point of view?

MR. BIEGUN: Yeah, I'm not going to -- I'm not
going to go into detail about what happens behind
closed doors between us and the North Koreans. I think both sides owe each other a certain amount of sensitivity and respect in that regard. I will say that the North Korean delegation that has sat across from the table was highly qualified, and we presume speaks with the authority of the government of North Korea. We don't get to pick who we negotiate with. The North Koreans get to pick who they put across the table from us. But we had very good discussions. We would not have gone on for practically 2 full weeks with a gap in between if both sides weren't adequately represented.

However, for sure, as we move forward in this, if we begin to get interaction, we are -- both sides are going to need to increasingly drop on technical experts. The issues at work here are highly complicated. The issues of the nuclear fuel cycle will require some of the most talented and experienced individuals in the United States government to be participants in this. And likewise the same for the North Koreans.

MS. COOPER: From Ms. Shigao (phonetic).
"Could we expect a third summit between President Trump and Chairman Kim shortly?"

MR. BIEGUN: Between?

MS. COOPER: Trump and Kim Jong-un?

MR. BIEGUN: Exactly --

MS. COOPER: A third summit.

MR. BIEGUN: A third summit. So I know the President has spoken about his willingness to continue to meet with Chairman Kim possibly in a third summit. We don't have anything to announce today, Helene. But in our view and the President's view, this top-level engagement does help create the space. And from my point of view as a negotiator, that kind of engagement does create space for us at the working level to test out ideas and see if we can close the gaps. So that will ultimately be up to the President. It will be driven by the course of events. But the President hasn't ruled that out.

MS. COOPER: Ms. Laura Rockwood (phonetic).

"Is the U.S. pressing North Korea to accept IAEA inspectors?"

MR. BIEGUN: We would very much see part of
the complete process of denuclearization in North Korea to include North Korea's return to the nonproliferation treaty and the additional protocols. And towards that end, IAEA has a very important monitoring role in order to ensure that certain practices continue to be observed to international standards. The -- we are not at the point where -- with the North Koreans where we're negotiating the specific composition of inspectors for some of these issues. And it's also there's an additional level of complication that comes from the fact that as is well known, North Korea now is -- has acquired, has mastered the technology necessary to produce nuclear weapon.

IAEA inspectors are generally precluded from engaging in nuclear weapons programs under the nonproliferation treaty. So it's a complicated issue. But ultimately, we would be reassured very much by the involvement of the IAEA in this process as they bring tremendous expertise to bear on these kind of nuclear issues around the world.

MS. COOPER: Ms. Cayley Thomas (phonetic) has -- I know I'm pronouncing that name and I apologize.
But she's getting again to this whole idea of step-by-step. "If lifting sanctions is untenable until full
denuclearization is achieved, what incentives is the
U.S. willing to offer the DPRK in order to achieve any
progress moving towards that goal and the full vision
of a U.S. DPRK relations that you described?"

MR. BIEGUN: So again, I wasn't in government
in June of last year when the Singapore Summit
occurred. But I remember hearing much reporting and I
think it was some official statements that suggested
that the United States was prepared to move very
quickly and within a year to complete the process of
denuclearization.

As I look back on that, I think about how had
this process really begun in earnest in July of last
year, we would potentially be 3 or 4 months away from
the moment at which we might be able under -- whatever
analysis was brought to bear at that point, we might be
in a position to actually lift sanctions. This has
occurred to me many times because the lifting of
sanctions of course is an issue that comes up in our
discussions with the North Koreans, and with good
reason. We think the sanctions are having a huge impact on the North Korean economy.

You know, the President bypassed this process question at the Hanoi Summit and he did it very convincingly by challenging Chairman Kim to go back, to move fast. Let's go for a big proposal here to eliminate these weapons of mass destruction programs. United States is prepared to act on all of the commitments in the Singapore Joint Statement, which truly would transform events on the Korean Peninsula.

The President has gone even further to begin laying out a vision for what he believes is a very bright economic future for North Korea as well with its rich natural resources, its relatively undeveloped economy, and its critical location at a crossroads of China, Russia, and South Korea. The economic potential the President describes is enormous. And this is the vision that we're trying to inculcate our North Korean counterparts with, that the faster they move, the faster we get to this brighter future.

United States -- I cannot be more emphatic. The United States has chosen to take this course. The
President has created the space and the momentum for diplomacy. The missing variable is North Korea itself has to also fully commit to the elimination of its weapons of mass destruction and affiliated programs. And if they do that, we will get to this end point quickly.

MS. COOPER: I spent a lot of time at the Pentagon trying to get them to not talk in acronyms. And Ms. Alexandra Bell (phonetic) sounds like she belongs to, in that building.

(Laughter)

MS. COOPER: Listen to this. "Are we demanding that DPRK sign and ratify the BWC, CWC, and CTBT? I assume we're talking about the Biological Weapons Convention, the Chemical Weapons Convention. I never could figure out, CTBT that's --"

MR. BIEGUN: Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty.

MS. COOPER: Thank you. Further, given that BWC lacks the verification program, what tools and techniques are we planning to use to ensure their biological weapons program is eliminated?

MR. BIEGUN: Yeah. Great question. Acronyms
and all. All three of these are part of the UN Security Council resolutions, so it's not the United States that would be asking. This is actually the unanimous vote of the United Nations Security Council called upon North Korea to abide by these. North Korea is a signatory, but not in compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention. North Korea is not one of the 190 some countries that are members of the Chemical Weapons Convention. And North Korea is not a member of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty nor is the United States, as that was not ratified here as well.

We are pressing North Korea certainly for the elimination of nuclear, chemical and biological consistent with the longstanding wishes of the United Nations Security Council. And so that's very important. The mechanism for doing those in my view seems very usefully available in the Biological Weapons and the Chemical Weapons Convention, particularly in the case of nuclear weapons we're going to be pursuing a much larger vision than simply Comprehensive Test-Ban. But it's not in conflict certainly with the objectives, but our diplomacy is about much, much more
than the absence of nuclear testing.

In the case of Chemical Weapons Convention, as the questioner points out, there is an organization called the OPCW, the -- which is the implementing body for the Chemical Weapons Convention based in Hague. And they could be a very important partner in working through and resolving the issues of chemical weapons in North Korea. And it's an idea that we should consider.

On Biological Weapons Convention, the point was also made, there isn't a similar implementing agency associated to the Biological Weapons Convention, so it's going to be a little bit more complicated in that case to ensure that North Korea is in full compliance with the BWC. That's our goal in both cases -- in both the cases of Chemical Weapons and Biological Weapons. But we may need to develop some other mechanisms in order to arrive at the necessary assurances in the case of the Biological Weapons Convention.

We've got a lot of work to do. Not all these issues are yet on the table with us. As I said to Helene earlier, we have raised all of them with North
Korea. But the modalities and methodologies through which we're going to be able to achieve our aims, we're still working through. And of course ultimately we need the agreement of the North Koreans to do that if we're going to be successful.

MS. COOPER: We have 2 more minutes left. Last questions, please -- well, I'm going to take it then. What are they like to negotiate with?

MR. BIEGUN: They being the North Koreans? You know, all of us who work on this issue are acutely aware of the magnitude of what we're undertaking. We don't undertake it lightly. It is hugely reassuring to have the full support of the President and the Secretary of State for diplomacy, the entire administration is engaged on this issue. And as we go into the room with the North Koreans, it gives us a lot of confidence in speaking with them as to what -- what is America's objective in this negotiation.

I have to assume that in the room the person sitting across the table for me has the same mandate and has the same sense of mission from their government. It can be challenging for sure in a system
like that you don't have a robust internal debate, you
don't have thoughtful commentary from think tanks, you
don't have critical or thoughtful reporting from media,
you don't have -- even have the makings of what we
would have inside the U.S. government of an interagency
process that, you know, constantly is dealing with the
tension of keeping alignment on policies as complicated
to this one. It's a very different system. It's
driven by the top-down. And that's why I am such an
enthusiastic supporter of the way the President has
approached this.

We have tried for 25 years to percolate
positions up from the working level to the leadership
level with no success. President Trump in engaging
Chairman Kim has engaged the real decision-maker in the
North Korean system. And the one who can truly create
the space for my counterparts sitting across the table
for me to be flexible, to be agile, to be creative to
find solutions to these issues, there's a lot of stress
on the people on the other side of the table.

You can feel that palpably when you talk with
them. And these issues are difficult as they should be
because these are very important issues for both
countries. And as I said before, we're swimming
against the tide of 70 years of history. But, you
know, there's lot of things that come into play.
Personal relationships, building of trust, the ability
to communicate. It's going to take us a while to get
there. But I'm confident we can. The North Koreans
like the President have made the decision to engage in
this diplomatically.

I have to operate under the assumption that
those people are the right people, that they are
capable, which I think they are, and that they have the
trust and direction of their leadership in these
negotiations. So, you know, it's complicated with
North Korea, that's a huge understatement. It's not
like negotiating like I did in the private sector. And
the consequences for failure for both sides are
enormous as well. And so that weighs on it.

But we've had a very successful set of
engagements. We've been in discussions. You know, we
haven't produced an agreement. We didn't produce a
joint statement out of the summit. There's not yet a
point where we've closed the gaps necessary. But the
discussions have been constructive and we've been
engaged. This is what diplomacy is. This is what the
President has committed and recommitted to coming out
of the Hanoi Summit. And so they're people, that's
what they are. And we just have to find a way to get
to the right answer that represents the national
security interest of our country and they have the same
mandate for their government.

MS. COOPER: Thank you so much, Steve. We're
apparently going to be beaten if we don't stop right at
noon, so we're stopping. At the end of -- I will read
this. "At the end of your session, please state the
following. Please join us for lunch across the atrium
in the ballroom." Steve, thank you so much.

MR. BIEGUN: Thank you, Helene.

(Applause)