

NWX-WOODROW WILSON CENTER (US)

**Moderator: Drew Sample
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Coordinator: And I'd like to inform participants that today's conference call is being recorded. If you have any objections you may disconnect at this time. Mr. Sample, you may begin.

Drew Sample: Thank you. Yes, thanks again for coming to this media briefing on the President of South Korea's visit to Washington, D.C. next week.

We have here a few experts from the Wilson Center, Director of our Asia Program, Robert Hathaway, the Northeast Asia Associate for our Asia Program, Shihoko Goto and Project Coordinator for our North Korea International Documentation Project, James Person.

We're here to take some media questions on the - President Park's visit and I think with that we can go ahead and kick things off. Mr. (Misimoto), if you have any questions feel free to start.

Mr. (Misimoto): Thank you very much. My question is on North Korea. And the first, what kind of (signal) (will be okay) U.S. and ROK (trying) to show. Is that (dialog) or a concrete principal which is denuclearization? Thank you very much.

Robert Hathaway: Well why don't I start this that - this is Bob Hathaway. I guess the first thing I'd like to say is that the U.S.-ROK partnership is certainly not just about North Korea.

North Korea will certainly be a central component but I think all of us, certainly us in Washington, tend to sort of start from the assumption that it's all about North Korea.

Now let me - I don't think that's the case. I think this summit is going to be a much broader discussion with a focus on a number of things besides North Korea.

That having been said, North Korea, I think the two presidents and the two administrations pretty much see eye-to-eye on what to do right now, but also in the long term with the DPRK.

I mean the temptation I think on the part of all of us is to tell Kim Jong Un to go to his room until he learns to behave. And that might be somewhat satisfying but obviously is not a policy.

My sense is that both presidents agree that you cannot encourage the North to act badly by rewarding them for bad behavior. So I would not expect any dramatic turnarounds in the approach via the U.S. or South Korea in the coming week.

But I'd be very surprised if the presidents didn't send a signal to the North that we are prepared to reengage with you. We think that there are important reasons for you, North Korea, to want to engage with us and we're willing to engage with you.

So I think it'll be a message of resolve not to be bullied, not to bow to temper tantrums or bad behavior on the part of the North, but also an invitation to the young Kim to reengage with polite society because there would be concrete benefits for him.

Now my colleagues may see things slightly different, but that's what I expect next week.

Shihoko Goto: I just want to follow up on that point about North Korea is a major component of the talks, but it is certainly not the only one. President Park certainly comes with a very ambitious agenda for South Korea looking forward.

She's already outlined something called the foolproof of where South Korea wants to take a more leadership role in ensuring greater stability, both politically and economic - economically across the region.

And part of that process is really looking at the non-political issue, i.e., not North Korea, not about nuclear proliferation, and instead it'll focus on more broader issues like terrorism, anti-terrorism strategy or taxing climate change on a global scale.

So she certainly comes with a big ambition for South Korea as a leader in the region that the United States could really partner up with.

James Person: Bob, I would - I tend to agree with you. I think, you know, when North Korea does come up I think there will be discussions about reengaging or, you know, encouraging North Korea to reengage in or to, you know, come to the negotiating table and perhaps consider giving up their strategy of engaging in

military adventurism to - in order to get attention and try to come up with a way of denuclearizing their (unintelligible)

What they got certainly was. But they'll encourage. Are you still there, Bob?

Robert Hathaway: Yes. No, I'm still here.

Shihoko Goto: Okay, okay.

Robert Hathaway: Yes. No, I was just waiting to see if there wanted to be a follow-up question on this or something else.

Man: (Unintelligible).

Shihoko Goto: If you have any - are - do you have any more questions?

Man: Yes.

Shihoko Goto: Are we...?

Mr. (Misimoto): No, no.

Shihoko Goto: No? Okay.

Mr. (Misimoto): Thank you very much.

Shihoko Goto: All right. I think we're done.

Robert Hathaway: Before you go then can I make one more - a point?

Shihoko Goto: Yes.

Robert Hathaway: I think it is very much on President Obama's mind and the minds of his people, but I also expect that the rising tensions throughout East Asia are going to be on the mind of President Park and her colleagues as well.

North Korea is obviously a component of this, but the dispute between the Chinese and the Japanese and the Taiwanese over what Japan calls the Senkakus is frankly as dangerous a situation at this point I think, as is North Korean provocations.

And I think there are number of things that President Park and President Obama might talk about in terms of regional tensions. Now I know - I'm quite confident that President Obama would like to see a reduction of ROK Japanese tensions at this point.

He will suggest, and I use the word suggest advisedly, because he not going to give President Park advice. They're going to exchange views. And I think in the exchange of views if President Obama will suggest that one way to minimize the threat of North Korean provocations is for the ROK in Japan to consult more closely together to coordinate in the defense realm.

Obviously Washington would like to see that the intelligence (shareman) sharing agreement that was set aside last summer between Japan and South Korea, Washington would like to see that resurrected.

But I think that North Korea is part of a broader tapestry of tensions in the region. And if these tensions get out of control everybody suffers, including South Korea. So I expect that there will considerable discussion about these broader tensions, not simply focused to - on North Korea.

Shihoko Goto: Drew is not here so I'm not exactly sure what the little bleeps meant but I just want to confirm there is no one else on the line at this moment or did someone join in?

(Shawn): I just joined. I think this is an open line. This is (Shawn). I'm with AFP.

Shihoko Goto: Oh, okay. Hi, (Shawn).

(Shawn): Hi.

Shihoko Goto: So if, (Shawn), if you have any questions - I'm Shihoko here so Northeast Asia Associate. With me is James Person who is the Head of the North Korea...

James Person: International Documentation Project.

Shihoko Goto: Yes. And Bob Hathaway, the Director of the Asia Program. So if you have any...

Paul Eckert: Shihoko, I'm Paul Eckert of Reuters. I'm also on the call as well (unintelligible).

Shihoko Goto: Great.

Robert Hathaway: Hey, (Paul). Hey, (Shawn).

Paul Eckert: Hi.

(Shawn): Hi.

Robert Hathaway: This is Bob Hathaway. I'm in Atlanta in this weird world we live in.

Shihoko Goto: So I, Paul, I hope you got what I just said to who's on the line so.

Paul Eckert: Yes I got that. I came in late-ish mainly because I - the numbers were mixed up for some reason. Drew Sample sent on the correct number just now so - but he said you just started so I missed maybe several minutes.

Shihoko Goto: Right.

Robert Hathaway: Yes, yes. We only...

(Shawn): I'm in the same boat too.

Robert Hathaway: We only talked about one or two questions - answered one or two questions.

Shihoko Goto: But we're happy to go back to any issues that may have already covered - been covered, so fire away.

Paul Eckert: I'm just saying the - I heard - I entered during when Bob was talking about the broad tapestry of tensions in the region of which North Korea is just one.

And I just sort of wondered if people are looking to President Park's visit next week in terms of like kind of deliverables or proposals, ideas on North Korea on sort of cutting the Gordian Knot and, you know, getting things moving towards dialog again. That kind of thing. Any thoughts you have on that.

Robert Hathaway: It's Bob. I'll start first. I'm not sure that we all - we among ourselves agree on this so I'll start and then let my colleagues amplify and amend as appropriate. I

think it's wrong to talk - to think of this particular visit in terms of deliverables.

I think it comes at a pretty important time for reasons that we have already mentioned, not only the last five months of North Korea challenges, but also the broader tensions in the region.

There will clearly be I think a celebratory tone to this visit in as much as President Park has just been elected. She is the first female president of South Korea which I think a lot of people will rightly think is a pretty big deal. It's the 60th, as you know, the 60th anniversary of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

And she is going to give an address to a joint session of Congress which in itself is a pretty big deal in the sense that virtually every head of government or head of state who visits Washington covets such an invitation, but very few such invitations are actually extended.

I think the fact that the leaders of the House and the Senate chose to offer this invitation to her says a great deal about the value which the U.S. Congress places on our partnership with South Korea. I think it says considerably about their respect for and admiration of President Park.

So I think for all these reasons there will be more an element of celebration. There'll be a feel-good aspect to this visit. There will obviously be close and intense consultation on some of these issues and problems and challenges we've already talked about.

But I don't think it's very realistic to talk - to think in terms of big deliverables. If one of my colleagues would like to suggest something different I'd love to be informed.

Shihoko Goto: Yes. Adding to the list of celebrations, it's the one year anniversary of the KORUS U.S. South Korea Free Trade Agreement. Korea is currently mulling the possibility of joining TPP, but again this is not going to be a deliverable for this particular meeting.

The trade relations between the United States and Korea will certainly be a topic for discussion but it will be more of a exploratory issue. Korea also has other options in terms of free trade agreements within the region, not least (RSEP), as well as the trilateral agreement. So that's one thing.

The other contentious issue was also being nuclear reprocessing issue as well. And the deadline was coming up later this year but I don't - given that they've already decided to postpone that by two years, this is probably not going to be something that's going to be - have an answer to at this particular meeting.

James Person: Yes, I think the South Koreans would have loved to have had that sealed and ready for delivery. It's not going to happen. The polite way to say where that is is that the treaty which was due to expire next year is going to be extended for two additional years. That's the polite way to say it.

As say the more - the less polite way but equally true fact of the matter is simply that the talks failed to resolve the outstanding differences between the two sides and so the process will continue. But Shihoko is exactly right. I don't think we expect any deliverables in terms of civil nuclear cooperation.

Paul Eckert: And the North Korea that we all know and love, to speculate about at least, would be likely - could easily try to rain on that parade in some time. Of course you can't know for sure.

But what are your thoughts on that in terms of, you know, past behavior and whether it would be - whether it could dampen the mood, the celebratory mood that you expect?

Robert Hathaway: Well, it's Bob again. If suggesting something as concrete as say a missile test or something, a lot of us have spent a lot of time, frequently unsuccessfully, trying to predict what the next North Korean move is going to be.

If the North Koreans certainly next week or this weekend were to test another missile I think that would simply serve to reemphasize the importance of the partnership between Seoul and Washington.

I mean obviously if the North did something that resulted in the loss of lives, presumably South Korean lives, that would be, as they did twice in 2010, that would be considerably different nature of a provocation.

But assuming they didn't go that far but they did do something, a rhetorical blast, a missile test or something like that, you know, at some point you just get to a point where you shrug your shoulders and say, "What's new?"

So I don't think that type of action on the part of the North would in any fundamental way change the dynamics of the meeting between the two presidents.

(Shawn): Let me jump in. This is (Shawn). One thing I would be curious to hear your views on is what the South Korean's want out of this. I mean Lee Myung-bak had a quite a good relationship with Obama and the projection of the global career and everything.

What do you think from this, even if it's more of the symbolic aspects, what do you think the - what do you think they're really looking for out of this as the first meeting between President Park and Obama?

And as part of that I wondered to what extent you think Japan could be an elephant in the room? Obviously despite the U.S. hopes for a good relationship between the ROK and Japan there's obviously historic tensions there.

And you had Abe just at the White House. To what extent do you think that the South Koreans might be (massaging) up the reception that they're receiving compared to what Abe had a few weeks ago?

Drew Sample: One of my colleagues want to start then?

Shihoko Goto: I just want to go back to President Park's launching of the so-called Seoul process and her grand vision for South Korea to take a leadership role in the region, especially on non-political issues.

That's - very much depends on South Korea's relations with its neighboring countries, particularly Japan. And as Bob outlined relations between Seoul and Tokyo are tense, to put it mildly.

The fact that a number of high-level meetings between the Japanese government officials and their Korean and Chinese counterparts have been counseled over the past couple of - over the past week or so and continue to be counseled in coming weeks directly as a result of Japanese legislature visiting the controversial Yasukuni Shrine really does put a damper on to what extent can Korea be able to take on the role that it really has aspirations for itself.

That doesn't really answer your question. But I think that that is something that will continuously be on the Korean delegation's mind.

(Shawn): Sure. Well that's interesting. Maybe just a more straight-forward question would be, I'm sorry if you went through this earlier, but in relation to - in addition to North Korea to what extent do you think Japan ROK relations could be on the agenda for President Park?

Or, is there a limit to what can actually be done from the U.S. side to nudge the two allies closer together?

Robert Hathaway: Yes. We talked about that, Paul, a bit before you picked up and I - I'll get to that. Let me simply underscore what was just said a minute ago. I think the Koreans are going to be very anxious to see if and - if their president is accorded the same honors, the same prestige, the same marks of distinction that Abe was when he visited shortly.

I think Americans frequently are not very good at these things. But I think the administration understands that this is going to be very important to President Park and her entourage. So the symbolic nature of the visit, the fact that Japan is accorded the same marks of distinction that...

Shihoko Goto: Korea.

Robert Hathaway: ...Japan was extended I think that's going to be very important. Now on Japan, I think I probably said earlier that I don't imagine Obama is going to give President Park a great deal of advice about how to manage the ROK Japanese relationship frankly because the South Koreans don't need U.S. advice on this.

There's no question that the Obama administration would like to see Japan and South Korea begin to repair some of the tatters in their relationship partly because a united ROK Japan-U.S. front makes dealing with the DPRK marginally easier.

And it certainly reduces the temptation for the North to try to drive a wedge between the other countries. But I think Obama and the people around Obama believe that there's a great value in reducing ROK Japanese tensions for reasons that go far beyond North Korea.

And we talked briefly about the growing tensions again just in the last few days over the what the Japanese call the Senkakus. This clearly represents a disaster waiting to happen if everything goes wrong. Now I'm not predicting everything goes wrong.

In fact I think the chances of a disaster are very, very modest, but they're not zero. And so I think it behooves all the parties and not simply those most involved in the dispute, who's all the parties who would suffer should things get out of hand to do what they can to minimize that.

And I think one of the things that the Japanese and the South Koreans could do is simply to begin to repair their relationship. Now I would argue that the burden of - the burden is to an important extent on the Japanese here.

The Japanese, as Shihoko has just suggested, have just in the last few days taken a number of new steps which have created considerable heartburn in China and South Korea. And I would say that the Japanese really have to step back.

But it's clearly in - let me start again. From the American standpoint it's clearly in South Korea's interest to get beyond some of its difficulties with Japan.

And I'm sure there'll be considerable discussion of that even as I'm also quite sure President Obama will not presume to advise President Park on what she should do.

Shihoko Goto: But I think from an economic perspective Korea is now at a stage where it is more concerned about what's coming up next in its growth trajectory. It has significant GDP growth, an average of about 6% for the past few years. And it's really slowed down to a mature industrialized country region of about 2%.

And that is - and at the same time the problems that the Korean economy faces are very similar to that faced, particularly in Japan, but all across the industrialized countries, meaning a slowdown in growth, an aging population, a greater disparity in income amongst the high wage earners and the low wage workers, the challenge of meeting the needs of a knowledge-based economy.

And I know that these are issues that President Park rallied around to address when she was elected last December. So these are probably issues that will be something that will unite the United States and Korea in terms of sharing common apolitical issues.

(Shawn): Yes, thank you. Maybe can I just follow up briefly on, this is (Shawn) again, the flipside of that what Bob was mentioning about the actions by Japan or the, you know, the various issues there.

I mean, do you think that - to what extent do you think President Park's visit will be viewed in - will be watched in Tokyo? I know obviously they'll be watching it.

But, you know, you mentioned how the South Koreans, you know, would be quite sensitive about being accorded the same treatment that Abe was. Do you think the reverse holds true? Is there also a balancing act on the other way of the Japanese being concerned about the treatment of the South Koreans?

Drew Sample: The one-word answer is yes. (I'm going to) let Shihoko flesh it out if she can.

(Shawn): Sure, sure.

Shihoko Goto: I think - actually (unintelligible) here is probably the better person to answer that. But it can be very petty, everything from the amount of time - the actual time that's given to the bilateral conference, the fact that she's being given this opportunity to address Congress, how does that compare to Abe or is this a symptom of Japan passing, to everything from how much coverage are the personalities getting, Abe versus Park.

It will be closely watched. It will - but - on a superficial level. But on a more systemic level it will be the whole idea of the United States rebalancing its military, economic and security interests to the Asia-Pacific region and redefining the existing alliances.

Where does the United States look to the most when it does - as it rebalances towards Asia and any signs that the United States are still chained towards one country or another will be closely monitored by both sides.

Robert Hathaway: I want to - I think Shihoko is exactly right because we haven't really talked - we haven't talked so far about the rebalance. I'm going to guess that President Park will be very interested in getting some clearer explanations from the American side as to what the rebalance is and is not.

How, for instance, China fits into the rebalance. The Obama administration of course insists that the rebalance is not simply about containing China, but I think that the administration has not fully explained what it is, what the rebalance is.

I would expect that the Koreans would be very interested in getting a better understanding of the non-military aspects of the rebalance because certainly most of the discussion in the high-visibility steps, with I guess the exception of the TPP, but most of the discussion has been on the rebalance of security approach.

So I would expect that the South Koreans would be very interested in getting a fuller sense of American thinking on the rebalance and how the rebalance will be carried out in such a way as to avoid creating new tensions and new irritants in the region.

Drew Sample: Do we have any further questions?

Paul Eckert: Actually - sorry to ask a question but just to follow up a little bit more, you talked a little bit earlier about the one, two, three agreement and how there's, you know, there hasn't been any agreement on that.

I mean how much of - how much significance do you see this, I mean, basically there's the kick the can down, you know, for a couple of years. But I

mean how much significance do you think this could eventually have for the relationship?

I mean it seems that the two sides are completely at loggerheads in the reprocessing idea. I mean could you see this potentially as becoming a greater irritant in relations between Washington and Seoul?

James Person: Greater than what? And the real answer is it depends on what happens between now and 2016. If the two sides figure out a way to meet their needs and therefore come to a mutually acceptable agreement over the next - between now and 2016 then today's inability to get there'll be simply a blip if in 2016 they still can't sort this out.

And yes it has at least the potential for being a problem but I think the Americans understand this.

And the Americans will be looking for ways to meet the legitimate energy needs of their friends in South Korea while simultaneously avoiding steps that in at least the eyes of Washington might undercut efforts to walk both the North Koreans and the Iranians back from their nuclear ambitions.

So, (Shawn), I mean I think the answer to your question is we won't know that for several more years. So - but if they get the deal done then this will be a very momentary glip.

(Shawn): Thanks.

Drew Sample: Okay. Any other final questions? All right. Well in that case I want to thank everybody again for showing up. And apologize again for the mix up on the

numbers. I know a couple people arrived late because of that so we'll sort that out for the next time.

Just a quick add for our next one, we're going to be doing another media briefing for those interested on Pakistan on Monday, May 6 at 10:30 am. So if anyone is interested in asking some questions about Pakistan's upcoming election that's the place to go.

Thanks again, everybody, and if you have any further questions feel free to let me know. Thanks. Bye.

Shihoko Goto: Bye.

Robert Hathaway: Thanks, everyone. Have a good day.

Shihoko Goto: You too.

Drew Sample: You too, Bob.

Mr. (Misimoto): Thank you very much.

James Person: Bye-bye.

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