



**AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE**

**INTELLIGENCE BEYOND 2018: A CONVERSATION  
WITH CIA DIRECTOR MIKE POMPEO**

**OPENING REMARKS:  
MIKE POMPEO, CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY**

**CONVERSATION PARTICIPANTS:  
MIKE POMPEO, CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY**

**MARC A. THIESSEN, AEI**

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DANIELLE PLETKA: Good morning, everybody. Welcome to the American Enterprise Institute. I'm Danielle Pletka. I'm the senior vice president for foreign and defense policy studies here at AEI. And it is really an honor for us to welcome the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Mike Pompeo, to AEI for I think the first time in this current role — in this current role.

So I'm going to read your bio. This is something that I don't always do. Those of you who know me know that I tend to kind of race through. But I sat down and looked at the director's bio this morning, and I was really enormously impressed. So I'm going to read it even and embarrass you.

So sworn in as director of the CIA in January of 2017, Mr. Pompeo was a congressman on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and the Committee on Energy and Commerce prior to that. He served on the House Select Benghazi Committee. But before that, he was in business for himself. He headed up his own company, and he was a graduate, the number one in his class, from West Point. Served with the Fourth ID and along the Iron Curtain when we still had an Iron Curtain, although we're well on our way back. And graduated after serving from Harvard Law School, where he was the head of the law review. That's pretty impressive. So really an honor to have you serving in our government and delighted to see it.

Now, normally, I would give you a little bit of a rundown on what the director was going to say, but unusually perhaps in this administration, I have absolutely no idea. No leaks out of the CIA. What's happened? You've imposed a kind of a discipline on everybody that is just heretofore unknown.

The director is going to come up here, he's going to speak for a little while, and then he's going to sit down with AEI's own Marc Thiessen for a conversation with Marc and then some questions for the audience.

So, without further ado, Mr. Director. (Applause.)

MIKE POMPEO: Good morning, everyone. Today is in fact exactly one year — in a few hours, it will be one year to the minute when I was sworn in as the director of the CIA. It was supposed to be the weekend before, but you know how the Senate goes. I got held up across the weekend.

Danielle, thanks for the kind introduction. Marc, thanks for having me here. I thought I'd spend a few minutes this morning talking about that year, that year from the Central Intelligence Agency's perspective. You know, it's been a very different role than I had, although I did serve on the House Oversight Committee as you describe, Danielle, so I have had a chance to see the CIA as a member of Congress. And I've told my friends that are still on the committee, it is not possible to gain a full — the full perspective of what the US intelligence services collectively can do until someone gets the incredible privilege like the one that I have to lead one of those organizations. Nothing can possibly prepare

you for the breadth, the depth, the scope, the scale, the magnitude of the efforts that we undertake each and every day as the nation's first line of defense.

You know, I go back to the president's inaugural speech. He talked about this being the hour for the American action. And, at the CIA, I have tried to live that and have my team live that. We're doers at CIA, trying to stay on the right side of decorum, but we just get stuff done. And I think if the American people had the capacity to see that each and every day — and they can't for good reason — they too would be as proud of the men and women who have joined the CIA as I am.

I came to quickly understand too that I wasn't going to improve the courage of our officers, the skill set of our officers, although we're working diligently to take it to even the next level. But having led two small businesses, having been a leader in the military, I could see that there was a bureaucracy that was preventing them from being unleashed — from doing the very things that they were directed, commanded, and indeed America needed them to do.

And so I wanted to be part of changing that understanding. I wanted to make sure our officers appreciated the fact that we were going to have an expectation nearly every day that we were going to steal secrets. It's what espionage services do. We ask our officers to risk their lives to steal secrets to protect America. It's our fundamental mission. We will never shy away from it. And we do so aggressively and without any apology.

But it wasn't enough for me to talk about it. We had to start to implement it. So we've tried to do that. One of the things that we have done — you all have seen this in every organization you've ever been a part of. It is true in government, but it was true in the private sector when I led there as well. Bureaucracies just simply slow stuff down. Government's worse than the private sector because the incentive systems are misaligned.

And so I led by example. Forty percent of the decisions that were previously made by the director of the CIA no longer are made by me. You might say, wow, that's reckless. I would tell you it was reckless to do it the other way. We made careful decisions about which pieces to keep. If it had significant risk, cost, political, military, risked the lives of our officers, that's important for the director to have. If the director brought a special knowledge to bear, if I had an experience set or if it needed full input from all of the intelligence community or the broader US government, I sit as a member of the cabinet, then I'd keep that decision.

But if it was coming to me just because I was the next fellow on the chain of command, then that's a mistake because I would inevitably slow it down and I would not be in the position to add any value to that decision-making process.

I spent a minute talking about that, my role. I have tried to impart that same thing everywhere in our organization. I have asked every leader to make sure and empower the people that work for them, and I have tried to encourage the people that work for them to go grab that authority. If we do that, we'll be as fast as our adversaries.

I've told this story once before. I was sitting in a very long meeting with some very senior officials, and I was asked, "Boy, if we did X, what would our adversaries do?" And I responded by saying, "They sure as heck won't have a meeting like this." (Laughs.) That's exactly how it was met in the meeting too, a little laughter and some real concern. But everyone knew I was right as well. We need to have a bias towards being as nimble as our adversaries. If we don't, we will serve America poorly, and we won't steal the secrets that our president and our senior policymakers most need at the most challenging times.

Here's another good example. We were forced by circumstances on the ground to close down one of our operations, a station. The team came and said, "Here's what I think we're going to lose." We all found it unacceptable. And I gave the commander's intent. I said, "We're going to be out, we're going to move out of that station, we're going to set the date, and we aren't going to lose a thing. Go figure out a way to do it." And, remarkably now, some months later, I can tell you that our intelligence posture's actually equal to where it was. We did some remarkable things, some creative things, some things that absolutely had real risk and continue to, but it's in a place and on a subject about an adversary that we simply couldn't afford to have a gap any larger than the one that we had before that facility went away.

I remember too — I remember when Assad used chemical weapons against his own people. The president called me personally and said, "Mike, I want to know what happened there." It took us some number of hours before we could deliver to the president a real response, a substantive response that could answer the key questions. It was clear from what I'd heard from the president he wanted to take action in response to the chemical attack, but he needed to know it was the regime. He needed to know that it was in fact chemical weapons that there were in fact used against civilians.

Those sound easy. Everyone could see the open-source material, but we all know for a president to act, you need more than that. We've put together a team that amounted to the hundreds that worked every intelligence channel. And we were in just a short order able to deliver to the president the three basic facts he needed to know with the certainty that I could stand in front of him and commit that he would not — we would not later find that we were wrong and that he had acted in error. And we delivered it to him in a way that represented the finest of what this agency does.

If I can leave one thing behind as the director — maybe next year I can stand here and tell you that we've even made more progress — it would be to be as agile and as speedy as we need to. The second thing would be to ensure that we continue to keep the American people's trust. It's in law. And as I was reading in preparation for my confirmation hearing, it continued to strike me how much power and authority are granted to the director of the Central Intelligence Agency and, through that, to our remarkable officers.

We have an obligation to do everything we can to operate in a way that engenders the American people's trust so that those power and authorities remain in place. If we don't, if we behave in ways that are lawless, if we behave in ways that you might see in the movies, then the American people would rightfully take those powers, that authority, that capacity

away from us. That would be unforgivable for an agency to find itself in that place. What we do is simply too important.

I see it against whichever target we're working, whether it's efforts to help the secretary of state, the president to understand what's going in North Korea, whether it's our efforts to counter Iranian influence throughout the world, whether it's work we're doing against Russia, those authorities, that trust that the American people have provided to us are central to us achieving our mission.

And so days like today, which are few and far between when I come out of Langley and speak publicly, it's important for the American people to understand that we operate inside a democracy, that we respect the rule of law deeply, that we have processes in place to ensure that we continue to do that, and that we are working diligently to make sure that the people entrusted with ensuring that's happening in clandestine space, our oversight committees and the executive branch in which we work are fully informed of the things we're doing. Everyone in my organization would know that's my imperative, my directive for them, and I believe we're doing that in a way that the American people ought to be incredibly proud of.

There are a handful of stories — I may wait for Marc to come up here, and I'll tell a couple of them. But you should know that we are focused on the same set of priorities that if you had the secretary of state or the secretary of defense or the president standing before you today, we would be very closely aligned. It's been in the news some. Last year, it was remarkable CIA creativity which has now led to our capacity to materially impact the capacity of the American government to interdict shipments into North Korea. We're not quite where we need to be. Our mission is not complete, but we have officers all around the world working diligently to make sure that we do everything we can to support the US pressure campaign and to tighten the sanctions in such a way that we have the opportunity to prevail and achieve the American president's mission, which is the denuclearization of the peninsula. This is the kind of task that the CIA was designed for. It's the kind of task we're delivering against.

I talked last week about the fact that North Korea's ever closer to being able to hold America at risk. I said there was a handful of months. I had said the same thing several months before that. I want everyone to understand that we are working diligently to make sure that a year from now I can still tell you they are several months away from having that capacity. It's not a static time frame. There is much effort all across the United States government to ensure that Americans don't have to feel at risk. We saw what happened in Hawaii. It is an imperative — an American national imperative that we as an intelligence agency deliver the information to our senior leaders such that they can resolve this issue in a way that works for the American people.

Look, I'll pause here and take questions from Marc and others. As we move into 2018, I want you all to know that we're going to continue to do remarkable things on behalf of the American people. We aren't just focused on North Korea and Iran. We're working diligently to solve problems in Venezuela and problems in Africa. Our mission set is broad.

The counterterrorism fight, which I have not yet mentioned, continues. CIA is a central part of making sure that policymakers understand the threat and how best to attack it.

Frankly, I have to tell you, I came in looking at several of these problems and realized that, frankly, we had been whistling past the graveyard for decades on some of these. And you should know that when I say decades, that is Republican presidents, Democrat presidents, Republican Congresses of which I was a member and members of — Democrats who were members of our legislative branch as well. Some of these need to be taken off the table. We need to reduce this risk, and CIA is prepared to do its part to ensure that those risks are reduced and that we ultimately can stare at these problems with fewer resources consumed because we have actually resolved many of them.

Marc, I look forward to our conversation. And thank you all for being here today. (Applause.)

MARC THIESSEN: Thank you, Mike, for being here at AEI. You've been a longtime friend of the organization, and so we're proud to have you here —

MR. POMPEO: Thanks.

MR. THIESSEN: — as one of your rare public appearances. So there's —

MR. POMPEO: I see all these people I haven't seen for a long time. How are you all doing? (Laughs.)

MR. THIESSEN: So we've had a lot of people without firsthand knowledge commentating and writing books and otherwise about the president's briefing practices. You brief the president almost every day as part of the presidential daily brief, so I'd like you, as someone with that firsthand knowledge, to take us inside the — and spend a little time on this — take us inside the president's daily brief. How does it work? How does he receive it? What kind of a consumer of intelligence is he?

MR. POMPEO: So nearly every day, I get up, get ready, read the material that's been presented early in the morning, and then trundle down from Langley to the White House. We present the president with the most exquisite information any policymaker would ever have the privilege of having a chance to read. That's the mission set every day for the analysts that prepare the book. And it is. It's quality material.

I'm there. General McMaster is there. Director Coates is there. I have a professional briefer with me as well, a CIA officer who attends the briefing as well. The vice president's there when he's in town. That's the gang that's usually assembled before the president.

Someone shouts, "Pompeo, you're in," and I take a deep breath. And then we deliver it to him with three buckets really so we will try — and this doesn't happen each day because the world is too varied, but each day we try to do something that's of the moment; that is, we'll talk about things that happened overnight. For instance, today, you can imagine we

would have talked about what's taking place in Afrin, Turkey, the Turks moving south out of Syria.

And then we'll try also to talk about something that is coming up. So, for instance, preparing the president for his trip to Davos or a foreign leader who's coming to visit. Or provide him with material that we know he's going to confront in the days or weeks ahead. And then we create some space as well — some space to do knowledge building for the team, strategic items, things that wouldn't be confronted — that won't be in the news tonight or next week, but that we know are central to having a shared fact-based understanding across all of the agency. And so those would be the three types of information.

The president asks hard questions. He's deeply engaged. We'll have rambunctious back and forth, all aimed at making sure we're delivering him the truth as best we understand it. He'll ask questions from time to time that we frankly don't have the answer to. We didn't bring it, or we just — weren't as complete as we need it to be. We'll go back and within a couple of hours deliver that information as best we can. It is a process — the process that we go through with the president each day is a process that it is my hope every senior policymaker is doing with the various briefers that we have throughout the administration. I hope they're all consuming the information that we're delivering. We spend a lot of money on it in the same way that the president does.

MR. THIESSEN: You said you had some stories. And we had talked earlier whether there was the possibility you could declassify a few things that had been discussed in the PDB. But is there an example or any examples of times where the president has pushed back on you and pushed you to get more information and you've been able to change the outcome of something or, you know — and I know this is the most sensitive debriefing there is.

MR. POMPEO: I'll give you a couple of examples. The president was very concerned about the humanitarian issues taking place in Yemen, the risk of cholera and starvation that was taking place. And he kept pushing us about what was really taking place on hand. What was the real layout? What was happening in the port? What was possible given the configuration of forces on the ground? And he pushed us a couple — three days until we were able to deliver him a satisfactory picture where he then could make a decision about which of our friends to call to try and make sure that that problem was at least diminished or mitigated.

And there's a second example I remember, it was a little bit before that. It was on Venezuela. The president was dissatisfied with the description of the situation as we had laid it out for him. And so we kept coming back. It was some financial issues he wanted more clarity on: Who had the money, where was the debt, what was the timing of that? There were multiple pieces. The array of the Maduro and his forces — he wanted to really understand how they all came together so he could have a complete picture, and it wasn't long thereafter that the — it would have been the first or second set of sanctions that the administration put in place were enabled by the very intelligence that we had delivered and he had requested.

MR. THIESSEN: So, as you know — I mean, different presidents take the presidential daily brief differently. President Obama didn't take it in person more than half the time. And it seemed like during the transition that President Trump was going to sort of follow that model. He said, you know, why do I need to take — get the same people telling me the same thing over and over again for every day for eight years of my presidency.

MR. POMPEO: Yeah. We try to avoid that.

MR. THIESSEN: And so what are his — that's obviously changed. So how often does he take the presidential daily brief? Is it daily? And what are his briefing habits?

MR. POMPEO: It's not daily, but it's near daily. It happened today. It happened yesterday. It will happen most days. It depends on the president's schedule. We'll often do it when he's traveling, too, although I don't travel to deliver that myself. We'll have a briefer provide it to him. It's scheduled for about half an hour. Often goes on for 40 minutes or so, depending on the president's schedule.

MR. THIESSEN: How did he become convinced of the need for it?

MR. POMPEO: I think it's about value. I think in life we all end up with our schedules shaped by things that are proving valuable in executing our jobs. And so the meetings that I take today are very different than the meetings that my predecessor took. My battle rhythm is different than his. This president's pattern of taking this information is different than President Obama's. I've done a little bit of historical reading. It's different than President Clinton's as well.

And I think the reason he does it is because he finds value. That is, we're able to convince him that the facts we're delivering impact his capacity to perform his mission. I think the day that we can't — I think the day that we can't deliver that would be the day that it starts getting pushed off and other things begin to occupy that time and space. I tell my team as they're preparing for what it is we're going to substantively brief — we have a big process, an elaborate process that picks those topics — we have to make sure that the information we're delivering meets the threshold for the president of the United States and is delivered in a manner which he can grasp sufficiently to actually be able to act upon — to provide real value, not just data, not just some set of random facts but real data that he can use to formulate policy. If we do that, I'm convinced we'll continue the pattern that I think is serving America well today.

MR. THIESSEN: How do you see him as a consumer of intelligence? Is he a sophisticated consumer of intelligence? And what do his — your interactions with him in that setting tell you about him as a commander-in-chief?

MR. POMPEO: I have seen 25-year intelligence professionals receive briefings. I would tell you that President Trump is the kind of recipient of our information at the same level that they are. Look, I learn a lot every day, too. I still — you can ask me about certain places in the world I need to get up to speed, right? None of us come with an encyclopedic

knowledge of the world, and the world moves fast enough that what we knew yesterday or a year ago is of only modest interest today. Things move awfully fast. He has the grounding for him to be able to grasp this information in a way that he can ask sophisticated questions that then lead to important policy discussions.

I watch it, Marc. We'll be sitting in a National Security Council meeting talking about a particular topic, and he'll bring up something that I briefed him on weeks or months ago. It could be that he knew that before that. I'm going to take full credit for having been the source of that knowledge, but I've seen this time and time again. So it's not simply the case that this is an exercise. He's using it. He's taking it on board, and I'm confident that our team is delivering in a way that's delivering value to the president and to not just him, but to our senior policymakers as well.

MR. THIESSEN: Is the fact that so many people underestimate him actually a valuable asset in terms of national security? It's often said, you know, people underestimated George W. Bush, a C student from Yale and all the rest, that he wasn't that smart. And he was actually a very smart man. Is that a useful tool in national security that people are underestimating him?

MR. POMPEO: I don't know. Lots of us have been underestimated many times. Just keep plugging.

MR. THIESSEN: All right. Well, let's talk about your leadership at the CIA. You recently said that your goal is to make the CIA more vicious, more aggressive, more inclined to take risks to come directly at the threats that America faces in the world. How are you making the CIA more vicious, more aggressive, and less risk averse in the fight against terror?

MR. POMPEO: It's all about incentives. It's all about the things that are rewarded. In every organization I've been a part of, it is the human condition that you respond to the guidance, to commander's intent, the incentives that are laid out in an organization.

So you used CT as an example. It's important. If you say it's a priority, you'd better mean it, and by mean it doesn't mean — it doesn't mean just giving really good speeches about it. It means if you care about something, you will apply resources against it. In the agency, that's money, people, technical skill, other tools that we have. You will actually take those and apply them against that problem set.

When you operate in a constrained environment — that is, we have a finite set of resources — that means you have to deprioritize something else as well. It's almost impossible to avoid that. And we've done it. We have said, hey, here are the things that matter most to us. Reprioritize and we have to reshuffle that. People see that and people then want to go to the place where they believe the mission set is, at least CIA officers are very much that way. And so we've done that. We have said, hey, here are the things that we're going to work diligently against, and here's the outcomes that we're going to deliver for the president, for the country. And we have prioritized that way.

The second thing we've done — Danielle talked about this a little bit — I ran a company that sold equipment to oil and gas industry before I came to Congress. It was the last job that I had before I ran. I worked with companies that were drilling for oil and natural gas — best companies in the world, smartest engineers, most talented people, and they drilled dry holes all the time. They didn't cry. They didn't punish the engineer who'd made that choice or that selection. They got up the next morning, tried to do a little bit better to make sure the next one returned something. I want to create that culture here at CIA too.

If we're going to do it right, if we're going to do this well, we're going to have failed missions. It is inevitable. Almost by definition — I'm an engineer by training — almost by definition, if you move out on the risk profile, you will increase the number of times you will have failure. We're going to do that. And we're going to make sure that people aren't punished for that, but they are rather recognized for having been professional, for having operated against the target set and having done something incredibly audacious. And if it turns out the coin just ends up tails instead of heads, so be it. We're going to go next day and go crush our adversary one more time.

MR. THIESSEN: That's great. Last time you were here at AEI for when we had this kind of a conversation, the topic was Guantanamo. You were a congressman. You had just returned from Guantanamo Bay, and you made the point that far from closing —

MR. POMPEO: It seems like a long time ago.

MR. THIESSEN: It does, yeah. But you made the point that apart from closing it, we ought to be filling it with new people. When are we going to get some new residents at Guantanamo Bay? (Laughs.)

MR. POMPEO: Well, I can't answer that. One of the glories of being the CIA director is you're out of the policy world. Here's what I — from my perspective now, here's what I can say. For the CIA, what is important is that if we're going to take down networks, we need the opportunity to engage with individuals whom have been pulled from the battlefield. We need to make sure we have the time, the space, the capacity to take onboard the information that these individuals may well possess.

And so US government policy, if we are serious about these fights, must reflect that. We have to make sure that not just the CIA, but all — but DOD and all of the others who have a part in the counterterrorism fight have that opportunity. And so I'm working diligently inside the administration to make sure that we have that. How that will play out, how Congress will — Congress will definitely have its say here, right? Today we have a set of rules for interrogation purposes. We have the Army Field Manual for detention purposes. DOD has the authority. That seems fine to me. But the moment I have officers come to me and say, "Well, we missed something. We missed an opportunity to conduct an interview on someone who I believe had information that could save an American life," we're going to begin to move heaven and earth to make sure that something like that does not ever happen again.

MR. THIESSEN: So since President Obama ended the CIA's interrogation program, we've captured and interrogated very few people. We've relied more and more on signals intelligence. But our signals capability has been decimated by leaks in recent years. And your predecessor, Mike Hayden, pointed out recently that in an age of end-to-end encryption, which is increasingly what we're getting, signals intelligence is going to be getting less content and more following what he calls digital exhaust. Can we keep the country safe without content? And doesn't that suggest that we need to start getting human intelligence again in a way we haven't been?

MR. POMPEO: A lot of predicates in your question.

MR. THIESSEN: Yeah.

MR. POMPEO: And I love General Hayden. He's a dear friend. We're still doing pretty good collecting signals intelligence, mostly our partner, not the CIA, but we have a small role in that as well. But that does not foreclose the absolute imperative that we continue to improve our capacity to collect human intelligence. That includes human intelligence through lots of different forms, not the least of which is the capacity to interview those folks who have been pulled from the battlefields. So there's lots of ways to collect human intelligence.

We should not put ourselves in a position where we are — we're making decisions on the assumption that we can't detain an interview to improve America's information center.

MR. THIESSEN: So the Trump administration — let's talk about North Korea. The Trump administration obviously inherited a mess in North Korea that, as you pointed out, has gone — in both Republican and Democratic administration preceding it so you could argue that for the last 25 years, kicked the can down the road on North Korea, and now we're out of road and this is coming to a head.

How does North Korea's missile program jump from a dozen unsuccessful tests a year ago to the state that it's in right now? And is that alarming in the sense that — are they getting at a build rate where they can actually will be able to overpower our ballistic missile defense capability? And what do we do about that?

MR. POMPEO: So I can't share much with you about this.

MR. THIESSEN: OK.

MR. POMPEO: Other than to say this: They have moved at a very rapid clip, make no mistake about it. Their testing capacity has improved, and the frequency that they have tests, which are materially successful, has also improved, putting them ever closer to a place where Americans can be held at risk. I think that's a true statement.

It is also analytically true that Kim Jong Un will not rest with a single successful test, right? The logical next step would be to develop an arsenal of weapons; that is, not one, not a showpiece, not something to drive on a parade route on February 8, but rather

the capacity to deliver from multiple firings of these missiles simultaneously. And that increases the risk to America, and that's the very mission set that President Trump has directed the government to figure out a way to make sure it never occurs.

MR. THIESSEN: Does the CIA assess that Kim Jong Un is a rational actor?

MR. POMPEO: We do. We do.

MR. THIESSEN: OK. And do you think that he believes that the Trump administration is actually willing to use military force, because the only way you can have a successful diplomatic solution is if he feels the threat. And he seems to perceive that he's untouchable because of what he can do to Seoul and what — even his conventional capability, much less his emerging nuclear capability. Does he really believe that we'd pull the trigger and do something to threaten him?

MR. POMPEO: So we're concerned that he may not be getting really good, accurate information. It is not a healthy thing to be a senior leader and bring bad news to Kim Jong Un. Tell someone you're going to do that, and try to get life insurance. I dare you. (Laughs.)

So we are doing — we're taking the real-world actions that we think will make unmistakable to Kim Jong Un that we are intent on denuclearization. We're counting on the fact that he'll see it. We're confident that he will. And then, we will continue to have discussions about how to achieve that denuclearization.

MR. THIESSEN: Can we live in a world where Kim Jong Un has the capability to destroy New York or Washington with a push of a button? I mean, is that a world that we're willing to go into?

MR. POMPEO: So that will be a decision for the president ultimately. I think he has been unambiguous about his view on that.

MR. THIESSEN: Is he deterrable? Is Kim deterrable, or does he want these weapons for another purpose? This is the debate within the people who have watched Korea is that does he want this for regime preservation. Or does he want it because it gives him the freedom of action to do things that are destabilizing in the region?

MR. POMPEO: So we've said — the CIA has said this publicly before. It is more than just regime preservation that we are concerned he will use. We talk about the nuclear risk all the time. That gets the brunt of the world's attention and appropriately so, but his conventional forces alone, right, close to a million under arms, depending on how you count them, is no small thing.

And so we do believe that Kim Jong Un, given these tool sets would use them for things besides simply regime protection; that is, to put pressure on what is his ultimate goal, which is reunification of the peninsula under his authority. And so we don't think it's the case that he's simply going to use this tool set for self-preservation. We think he'll use it

in a way that is either — call it what you will, call it coercive — is perhaps the best way to think about how Kim Jong Un is prepared to potentially use these weapons.

MR. THIESSEN: There seems to be a perception that the options in North Korea are nuclear war or going to a deterrence strategy. And there are options in between that. I mean, if he's a rational actor and President Trump decided to do something like a limited strike, like the one he had done in Syria, would — a rational actor would not respond the way the Syrian regime didn't respond, right, in the sense that it would lead to regime destruction. So if you're a rational actor who wants to preserve your regime, are there options to address his capability militarily that don't involve a nuclear war between the United States and North Korea?

MR. POMPEO: I'm thrilled that you asked. I'm equally happy not to answer. (Laughter.)

MR. THIESSEN: Good. All right. And, by the way, I have to ask, and we all understand when you can't answer. One —

MR. POMPEO: I might say this though. The American people should know, we're working to prepare a series of options to make sure that we can deliver a range of things so the president will have the full suite of possibilities. The president is intent on delivering this solution through diplomatic means. It is the focus. It has been uniformly that for now 365 days. It remains so today. We are focused like a laser on achieving that. We are equally, at the same time, ensuring that the — if we conclude that it is not possible, that we present the president with a range of options that can achieve what is his stated intention.

MR. THIESSEN: OK. Let's talk about Iran and sort of related to North Korea. I mean, one of the holes in the nuclear deal is old-school compartmentalization in the sense that — assumption that all the work on the country's nuclear program occurs within the country. To what extent could Iran use its — we know that there was North Korean cooperation with Syria, for example, in building that nuclear facility that the Israelis took out. To what extent could Iran use its nuclear cooperation with North Korea to conduct illicit nuclear work like on warhead design that would advance the — with Iranian scientists in North Korea that could advance their program without necessarily our catching it or violating the JCPOA.

MR. POMPEO: It's a real risk. We think we have a pretty good understanding of what's taking place there today. Having said that, I am the first person to admit that intelligence organizations can miss important information. These are terribly difficult problems in incredibly tight spaces. And when you're moving information, sometimes difficult to detect that information is moved. And so if someone asks me, "As the senior intelligence leader of the CIA, can you guarantee this?" I would say, "Absolutely not." But we're working diligently to make sure that doesn't happen.

This actually harkens back, Marc, to your previous question about one of the risks of allowing the North Korean regime to continue to have this nuclear capability. It is this

proliferation risk. It is that this technology that they have developed and then figured out how to manufacture at something beyond just a museum piece — that is, some form of production level of their capacity — would then be proliferated elsewhere in the world.

And then, secondarily, it doesn't take too much imagination to understand that if they continue to have that nuclear weapon system or if the Iranians make advancements in theirs, that many other countries around the world will decide "me too," right — that I want to have one of those things that that guy has, being very careful not to identify countries. But you can go through the list of those who would feel incredibly threatened and feel that they needed to have a similar capacity in order to defend their own national security interests.

MR. THIESSEN: Sure. Let's talk about Vladimir Putin for a second. So this is a guy who, you know, who shows up a lot with his shirt off, right? There's a famous story where he saw Barney and told President Bush, "This is my dog, bigger, stronger," you know. Are these behaviors of someone who's a strong leader or a weak leader?

MR. POMPEO: You know, our assessment of Vladimir Putin's intentions haven't changed. He continues to view the greatest failure of the last century to have been the dissolution of the Soviet Union. He is bent on returning the former Soviet Union to its greatness and glory. That's what he wakes up thinking about each day. You might add being reelected as the second thing he thinks about each day. Those are related in some ways; that is, I think his — he moves about the world, he is conveying back to his domestic audience the imperial power of the Russian people. He hasn't changed. This administration is deeply aware that we need to continue to push back against the Russians everywhere we find them.

MR. THIESSEN: So let's talk a little bit about the recent news stories about — there was a possible mole within the CIA that resulted in the loss of a lot of Chinese assets in recent years, and it's hearkened back to losses we had — you were stationed on the Iron Curtain. We had losses of agents in the Soviet Union. We've had a dozen or so Iranian recruits — this is public information — in the Middle East who have been lost.

The business of recruiting and running spies is hard, but the record suggests that we might not be as proficient at it as we ought to be. Is this something that needs to get fixed? Are we doing well? How do you assess where we are in terms of that?

MR. POMPEO: We're never where we need to be. I actually saw this as a member of Congress. I came in as the director a year ago intent on improving our capacity to protect our own information. We should make sure that the secrets we steal aren't re-stolen. We have an obligation to the American people to do that.

I've made a number of changes, one of which is to make sure that we're providing the information so that the Department of Justice can do its good work at bringing these traitors to heel in US courts. The second of which is making sure that our organization has the resources it needs to deliver on its counterintelligence mission, which includes ensuring

that we're doing offensive counterintelligence; that is, working against our adversary's services in a way that prevents them from getting inside of our service.

One of the first things I did — the woman who runs out counterintelligence mission center reports directly to me now. That was intentional, sending a signal to two places: one, to our adversaries, that the CIA is going to be serious about protecting our stuff, and second, to my workforce — you know, that the director was personally attentive to a mission that can fall too far down in the priority scheme. To me, there are few things more important than protecting our officers, our assets, and our information.

MR. THIESSEN: It's also really hard to penetrate groups like al Qaeda and ISIS. I mean, your experience serving on the front lines of the Cold War — you had Russian émigrés. It wasn't a tribal culture in the same way. I mean, how hard is it to — before 9/11, we had almost no human assets. I assume we're doing better in that way, but we've got — as al Qaeda was pushed back, then all of a sudden ISIS emerged. How hard is it to get human intelligence on these terrorist networks, the Salafi Jihadi movement?

MR. POMPEO: So they're difficult targets for sure, but as the US government has been successful against them in different places, whether it was a significant set of successes in the previous administration against al Qaeda, as we've had significant success at taking the caliphate away against ISIS, it provides us real opportunities to reach in. There are more people who decide being part of Team America might be better than being part of Team Jihadi. And so we are beneficiaries when those big disruptions occur and they allow us to collect in ways that we can't when their force is united and we don't have any chance to touch them.

MR. THIESSEN: So the success in Syria against ISIS has been remarkable in terms of taking away their physical caliphate, but it's arguably come at a little bit of a price because we did it with Kurdish fighters, which has caused some tension with Turkey. We are perceived, at least by the Sunni population in Syria, as being at least tacitly in an alliance with Russia and Iran in that fight against ISIS, which pushes Sunnis away from us and toward al Qaeda, which is sitting there waiting.

Have we been too focused on ISIS and not focused enough on al Qaeda? And can we defeat the global jihadi movement without bringing Sunnis into our orbit? Can we do this with Kurds and Russians and Iranians, or do we need a Sunni partner on the ground that's going to fight these guys?

MR. POMPEO: We absolutely need Sunni partners. And I think we're working diligently to do that. In Eastern Syria, the Department of Defense has done good work trying to bring the Sunnis in alongside our Kurdish partners there as well. I think they've made real progress there. This administration has broadly reached out to Sunni countries all throughout the Middle East to form coalitions against — not only against ISIS, but against Iran as well. And so I think we have made some substantial progress there. If we're going to be successful at taking down the jihadist threat, we will absolutely need Sunni partners aiding us in that effort.

MR. THIESSEN: What worked in Iraq during the surge was the sons of Iraq.

MR. POMPEO: Right.

MR. THIESSEN: The fact that the Sunni tribes came over. We were a force enabler by sending additional troops, but it was really a Sunni uprising against al Qaeda, which was both a military defeat and an ideological defeat because the Jihadists claim to be the vanguard of the Sunni masses and so when they're rejected by the Sunnis, it sends a signal throughout the region. How are we doing? Are we making any progress in getting a sons of Iraq equivalent in Syria and in some of these other places where we're fighting them?

MR. POMPEO: I'm just going to — I'll let others talk about the progress that we're making there.

MR. THIESSEN: OK.

MR. POMPEO: But you should know that the CIA understands that. Our analytic assessment is much in line with what you describe. It is an absolute imperative that we achieve that if we're going to be successful for the long run.

MR. THIESSEN: OK. One last question, then we're going to turn it to the audience. So this is a question I ask all national security policymakers when they come to AEI. So during the 1988 presidential debates, no one asked either candidate about Iraq. And during the 2000 presidential debates, no one asked either candidate about al Qaeda. Yet in both those cases, those two elements became crises that became to dominate the presidencies of George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush. What is the threat that's out there — and you see these — you see threats none of us see, but what is the thing that worries you the most in the world that none of us are talking about and none of these journalists here are asking anyone about that really could come out and surprise us — that you worry about at night?

MR. POMPEO: The list is long. The list is long. So we have these set of things that would be in the national intelligence priorities framework, and we would all know them. They'd be in the news many days. Then there's a set of other things that one shouldn't characterize as second tier in spite of the fact that they're not in the news each day. Certainly the political risks in South America are one of them — to make sure we get that right and that the United States is watching what's taking place in, frankly, every place south of our border — Mexico, Central America, and South America.

And then the other thing that — frankly, that the Intelligence Committee needs to get right is that some of these threats that are real — one of them you mentioned, al Qaeda, aren't nation-states. So, historically, the threats to the United States, and your — I'm looking around the room to see how old everybody is — your history books would have all reflected threats from countries. What was America doing against the threat from Yugoslavia or some other nation-state? Today, the threats are much more varied than that, whether it's threats from groups like Hezbollah or al Qaeda, threats to our information systems from

groups like Wikileaks. They don't have a flag at the UN, and they present real threats to the United States of America.

And so we need to make sure that our collection — the way we think about attacking our adversaries from an intelligence perspective — matches that. And that means we have to go back and fix some of the rules, some of the laws that are designed to solve the nation-state challenge of history.

Cyber is another vector. It's not a threat of its own, but it is a means by which many non-nation-state actors can inflict incredible costs on the United States of America. We need to make sure that we are watching those actors in the same way we would a threat from a traditional nation-state.

MR. THIESSEN: All right. Let's take some questions from the audience. Ambassador Roger Noriega. There's a microphone coming to you.

Q: Good morning. Happy to see you again.

MR. POMPEO: Hi, Roger. Good to see you, too.

Q: One of the unconventional threats that we're confronting is transnational organized crime. I know I've been talking to you about this for a good long while. In the year that you've been director, have you been — has it been a priority of yours to put more intelligence resources and going after the financial network of drug traffickers and other forms of transnational organized crime, which is now playing an active role in the destruction of Venezuela and looking at influencing elections in Columbia and Mexico, where drug traffickers have a significant interest in sowing mayhem and optimizing supply chain of cocaine to the market here in the United States?

MR. POMPEO: You could probably add others to the list. I would list the Taliban as well, who uses drug revenue to foment so much pain on the world. We have bolstered our capacity there — our collection capacity. We've done that jointly with the Treasury Department, with Secretary Mnuchin and his team, working together to take the tradecraft that we have historically used against networks that look and feel very much like financial networks and applied them against those very same networks.

There's still a long way to go, but what it delivers for policymakers is a set of options. Publicly what you'd see would be sanctions options, but in other spaces it presents other ways that we can disrupt because if we know where the money is, we have a capability to stop that flow. We're probably still not at the level we need to be, but we are certainly in a better place when we were just a short time ago.

Q: I just want to note that one of the challenges will be the recovery of assets. The Maduro regime has looted about \$350 billion from Venezuela. Being able to recover those assets and repurposing and giving them back to the Venezuelan people to reconstruct their country would be a priority, too.

MR. POMPEO: Thank you. There are more than half a dozen places in the world that I can tell you we are watching large amounts of wealth that have been stolen from the people of that country and our effort to identify them, gain the capacity to take them away from the person who has title to them today, and then use them for US foreign policy purposes — frankly, in most cases to try and return them to the people from which they were looted.

MR. THIESSEN: Nick Eberstadt.

Q: Director Pompeo, how satisfied were you with the intelligence capabilities on North Korea that you inherited when you came to Langley? What do you see as the unknowables? What do you see as the things that are knowable, but we don't know about and should?

MR. POMPEO: So when I came in, there was insufficient focus on the problem set. It wasn't the case that it had been ignored. It wasn't the case that we had missed material things, but clearly hadn't received the focus and attention that were going to be needed to deliver for what this administration is going to ask of the intelligence community. So we — within weeks of me coming here, I created a Korean mission center, stood it up with a senior leader who had just retired, brought him back to run the organization that now numbers — I can see my information security people. There's a lot of folks working on it. (Laughter.)

We're in a much better place today than we were 12 months ago. We are still suffering from having gaps. Part of that is not the intelligence community's fault per se. These are the difficult target sets. I'll concede that at the outset.

But it's never — it's completely inadequate for the CIA to say, well, that's a hard problem. Of course it's a hard problem. That's why you pay us. And so we're making real progress at developing a global intelligence picture so that we can get some of those gaps filled in so that we can understand rates of change, so that we can understand what's happening among the various leadership elements inside of North Korea, so we can also see whether the sanctions that have been put in place are actually having an effect or sufficient effect and an effect on whom; that is, which sets of people inside of North Korea are being impacted and who the scofflaws are that are preventing those things from being as effective as they ostensibly ought to be.

There is enormous pressure that has been placed on me. And, in turn, I have placed enormous pressure on our team to solve the riddle, to close each of those gaps to the maximum extent we possibly can.

MR. THIESSEN: Martha.

Q: Hi. I want to go back to — good to see you. I want to go back to what you said in the beginning, that North Korea is a handful of months away. I assume you mean having a nuclear-tipped missile that could possibly reach the United States. And you said you hope we're in the same position a year from now — that they're a few months away. Is that good

enough that in a year from now they might still be a few months away from developing that weapon?

MR. POMPEO: No.

Q: OK. So what did you mean by that, exactly?

MR. POMPEO: The president — that's inconsistent with US policy, right? US policy is that we're going to denuclearize permanently, right, that we're going to foreclose this risk. But it's the case, in the event we haven't gotten there, it is still a secondary mission to ensure that we keep them from having that capability. And I want to say this, too: We often focus on timelines because it's simple. It's not the way we ought to think about it, right? The way we ought to be think about it is reliability.

Can they reliably deliver the pain which Kim Jong Un wants to be able to deliver against the United States of America? It's one thing to be able to say, yes, it's possible. You could — if everything went right, if the missile flew in the right direction and we got lucky, we could do it, as opposed to certainty, right? This is the core of deterrence theory. You have to be certain. In the deterrence model, you have to be certain that what you aim to deliver will actually be successful. At the very least, you need to make sure your adversary believes that — that it is certain.

That's what Kim Jong Un is driving for. He is trying to put in our mind the reality that he can deliver that pain to the United States of America, and our mission is to make the day that he can do that as far off as possible.

Q: And can I just follow up to the intel question, and you said a couple of months away. We know the intelligence before had it far in the future — six months, two years, whatever, and he was much faster than you thought. So do you trust — do you feel you have enough information in saying a couple of months away to be certain? And also on the sanctions, you said that's a gap, essentially, just now —

MR. POMPEO: The impact of sanctions. Yes. Yes, ma'am.

Q: The impact — the impact of sanctions. So do you see any impact now that you trusted also on the missile timeline?

MR. POMPEO: So I can't answer your second question, so I'll do my best to answer your first. It's not that I don't know. I do know. I just can't share with you what we know on the second question.

The first one, your predicate's actually wrong. You said that somehow that the intelligence community got this wrong. We didn't see this coming as fast as — that's just untrue. I've seen the news articles that have written that. By the way, it's not me bragging. This all happened before my time, all of this work. The Intelligence Committee on this one actually understood the capability and the testing capacity. We'll never get the week

or the month right on something that's this complicated. But we can get the direction of travel and the capacity for rate of change right, and we did.

We believe we are continuing to deliver good, solid information on the North Korean missile testing program and all the ancillary pieces around it. We're pretty confident in that.

MR. THIESSEN: Let's take one more question. In the front here. Wait for the microphone please.

Q: Thank you, sir. I'm Janne Kum Pak with the USA Journal. Recently, North Korea and Kim Jong Un wants a dialogue with South Korea. On the other hand, Kim Jong Un's nuclear threat — continues to threaten the United States with nuclear and missiles. What is the US final destination of resolve of the North Korean nuclear issues, and is it possible to preemptive strike to North Korea if necessary?

MR. POMPEO: So I'll leave to others to address the capacity or the wisdom of preemptive strike. From an intelligence perspective, we're trying to ensure that all the various options that the president might want to consider are fully informed and we understand what's really going on and the risks associated with each of those decisions as best we can identify them for him.

Let me just sort of — we're doing that in conjunction too, right? We should remember we have partners there that are working on this diligently as well — the South Koreans themselves, the Japanese. We have partners throughout the region that share our understanding that this is a global threat. We often here in the States talk about the threat here. This is a threat to the whole world.

MR. THIESSEN: OK. Ladies and gentlemen, we have to end it here. I ask everybody to stay seated while the director leaves. And, Director Pompeo, I know you don't do a lot of these things. We're hugely honored that you came here to AEI to spend some time with us, and thank you very much for your service to the country.

MR. POMPEO: Thank you, Marc. (Applause.)

(END)