Center for Strategic and International Studies

“Beyond Nuclear Diplomacy: A Regime Insider’s Look at North Korea”

Opening Session:
Victor Cha,
Senior Adviser and Korea Chair, CSIS;
Professor and Director, Asian Studies Program, Georgetown University

Carl Gershman,
President,
National Endowment for Democracy

Roberta Cohen,
Co-Chair Emeritus,
The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea

Keynote Address:
Thae, Yong-ho,
Former Deputy Chief of Mission,
Embassy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the United Kingdom

Discussion and Moderated Q&A:
Shannon Green,
Director and Senior Fellow, Human Rights Initiative,
CSIS

Host:
Lisa Collins,
Fellow, Korea Chair,
CSIS

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LISA COLLINS: Good morning. Thank you all for coming to this event, titled “Beyond Nuclear Diplomacy: A Regime Insider’s Look at North Korea.” We would like to thank our partners for this event, the National Endowment for Democracy and the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea. We are very fortunate to have a rare guest speaker with us today, Mr. Thae Yong-ho, who will give a keynote address.

But before the speakers are introduced, I would like to say a few words about safety at CSIS. We feel secure in our building, but we have a duty to prepare for an eventuality. My name is Lisa Collins. I am a fellow in the Korea Chair, and I will be your safety responsibility officer for this event. Please follow my instructions should the need arise. If something should happen, please use the staircases to exit the building, and once outside please make your way to the National Geographic building behind CSIS. Once there, I will give you further instructions. Please follow my lead.

One note about the notecards that you received when you checked in. Those are for questions. Please write your questions down. We will be collecting those in about 10 minutes, so please pass them to the end of the row where you’re sitting.

I would like to first introduce our three speaker who will give some brief remarks before Mr. Thae takes the stage for his speech. First speaker is Dr. Victor Cha. He is the senior adviser and inaugural holder of the Korea Chair at CSIS. He is also director of Asian Studies and holds the D.S. Song-KF Chair in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. From 2004 to 2007, he served as director for Asian affairs at the White House on the National Security Council.

Our next speaker is Mr. Carl Gershman. He is the president of the National Endowment for Democracy. During his tenure at NED, he has overseen the creation of the Journal of Democracy, the International Forum for Democratic Studies, and the establishment of the Democratic Fellows Program and the Center for International Media Assistance. Prior to joining NED, he served in the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, where he was senior counselor to the U.S. representative to the U.N. He also previously was a resident scholar at Freedom House. Mr. Gershman has dedicated his career to fostering and promoting and strengthening democratic institutions around the world.

Lastly, we will have Ms. Roberta Cohen, who is the co-chair emeritus for Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, as a speaker. She was formerly a senior fellow in foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution, and co-founded the Brookings Project on Internal Displacement. She also previously served as a senior adviser to the representative to the United Nations secretary-general on internally displaced persons. She is a human rights and displaced-persons specialist with a long and distinguished career in the field, having worked in the State Department and on the U.S. delegation to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights earlier in her career.

So we will have the speakers speak in the order that I have just mentioned them, and Ms. Roberta Cohen will introduce Mr. Thae Yong-ho. Thank you.

VICTOR CHA: Well, thanks, Lisa. And welcome, all of you, here to CSIS today for this very special event.

This is a very appropriate time to be having today’s discussion, given all that is taking place on North Korea and the activities that are now taking place in terms of the reauthorization of the North Korean Human Rights Act. So we’re very delighted to have Minister Thae Yong-ho with us today.
And on behalf of my colleague Shannon Green of the human rights program, as well as the National Endowment for Democracy and the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, we’re very happy to have you here.

I also want to recognize Ambassador Robert King – Where is Bob? – Ambassador Bob King, who has also joined us today. As you know, he was President Obama’s special envoy on human rights abuses in North Korea for both terms – for two terms.

So, with that, let me turn it over to Carl.

CARL GERSHMAN: Well, good morning. I’m delighted that the National Endowment for Democracy is cosponsoring this important meeting with the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea. Under Victor Cha’s leadership, CSIS has organized some of the most important discussions in this city about North Korea. And just last week, HRNK published a very significant report by David Hawk about the prison-camp system in North Korea, providing new information based on satellite imagery.

It’s great to be here with my – also great to be here with my friend and fellow NRNK board member, Robert Cohen.

And I also want to take this opportunity to recognize Lynn Lee, who manages NED’s extensive North Korea grants program and who was instrumental in facilitating Thae Yong-ho’s first visit to the United States.

This visit is very timely, since the United States is struggling not only with the question of how to deal with – the security question of how to deal with North Korea, which presents this nuclear threat, but also with the question of how to understand North Korea, which may be less urgent but is ultimately a more important question. Thae Yong-ho can help us answer the question of how to understand North Korea, which is a precondition for the development of an effective policy to deal with the security threat.

There have now been some 30,000 defectors who have been able to escape from North Korea. All of them bring their own experience and insights, but none has a more intimate understanding than Thae Yong-ho of the North Korean elite, from which he comes. And none whom I have talked to has done more thinking about how to communicate with the North Korean people, whose complete isolation from the outside world is only now beginning to break down.

No solution to the North Korea problem will be possible, in my view, without ending the isolation of the North Korean people, and bringing both elite North Koreans and the mainstream population into communication with their neighbors in South Korea and with the international community more generally. To the extent that Thae Yong-ho can help us do this, he will be contributing to our own security, and to peace on the Korean Peninsula and in the world. It is in that spirit that I welcome Thae Yong-ho this morning and await his remarks with the greatest interest.

Thank you.

ROBERTA COHEN: Good morning, everyone. On behalf of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, HRNK, it’s not every day that we have the opportunity to hear from a senior North Korean diplomat who declared his break with the pervasive 70-year dictatorship in his country.
Allow me to make three points before introducing Mr. Thae Yong-ho. First, as Carl has mentioned, more than 31,000 North Koreans have managed to escape from the DPRK despite the tremendous risks involved in getting out of the country without permission. Whether it’s crossing the Tumen River at night or arranging a diplomatic defection, the individual and his or her family could be caught, sent to a prison camp, and the relatives and colleagues left behind punished.

Since its founding in 2001, HRNK has worked with numerous North Koreans from a variety of backgrounds who have fled, and has produced more than 30 documented reports on the human rights situation. These have encompassed the traumatic plight of those who escaped, and how North Korea maintains surveillance over those who try to help their countrypersons thereafter. We have been following Thae Yong-ho’s public appearances and statements with great interest.

Second, the importance of increasing the flow of a broad range of information into the country cannot be overemphasized. As Mr. Thae has publicly pointed out, desperately-needed change in North Korea will require a change in thinking. Education and information will expand that thinking. No reign of terror can imprison thoughts.

One of the people in the world I have the highest respect for was former Soviet dissident scientist Andrei Sakharov, who was a member of the Soviet elite. He saw the importance of bringing freedom of information to a closed society, and asked for copies in Russian of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights, agreements his government has ratified and which he wanted known and upheld.

Sometimes it’s argued that overlooking human rights concerns tamps down tensions. But accepting the practices of violating governments only delays the reckoning.

Finally, today’s international preoccupation with the dangers of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program should not be allowed to make us forget the human rights situation in the country or the need to speak out for those abused – especially in political prison camps, which rank among history’s worst. It’s not just nuclear weapons that need to be addressed, but an entire system of political repression which is at the base of the most dangerous policies.

Let me know introduce Mr. Thae Yong-ho, the highest-ranking government official to defect from North Korea since 1997. We all welcome his first visit to Washington. Mr. Thae joined the Foreign Ministry in 1988 after receiving degrees in international politics and English from Pyongyang and Beijing Universities. His specialization in the diplomatic service was Western Europe, having served in the European Department at the Foreign Ministry, and in posts abroad in Denmark and Sweden, and in London, where he was minister and deputy chief of mission from 2013 to 2016. Much earlier, in 2001, in an area close to the work of HRNK, Mr. Thae headed North Korea’s delegation to human rights talks with the European Union.

Many have heard Mr. Thae on the air, but it’s a special treat to meet him in person. He is now an advisory research fellow at the Institute for National Security Strategy in Seoul, Republic of Korea. This week in Washington, in addition to the program here, he will be addressing the House Foreign Affairs Committee. We are going to most assuredly learn a lot from listening to him today.

May I welcome you to the platform, Mr. Thae? (Applause.)
THAE YONG-HO: Thank you very much for, one, your remarks about me; and thank you very much for Dr. Cha to give me this wonderful opportunity to present in front of many prominent experts today.

Actually, I prepared around three hours of long lecture about North Korea. (Laughter.) And I didn’t expect that CSIS give me only one hour here – (laughter) – and I was told that one hour should be divided into two sessions, one is 30 minutes of presentation and another 20 minutes of Q&A. So that’s why I’m thinking how can I present all my talking points which I wrote already.

So originally I decided to – what I planned is that I want to tell four points. The first one is the reason of Kim Jong-un’s obsession with ICBM tipped with nuclear warhead. And secondly, what I planned is to – justification of Byungjin policy for elite internal brainwashing education; I think that could be very helpful. Thirdly, then what is Kim Jong-un’s next step? And fourthly, then, how best to deal with Kim Jong-un regime? But since there is a limit of the time, I’d rather focus the first points, why Kim Jong-un is so much obsessed with the nuclear and ICBM, and what really happened inside North Korea before Kim Jong-un decided to go nuclear and ICBM, and what about his personal characters and aspects. That is what I want to tell from my personal experience this morning.

And before I am going on, my – the talking points, the purpose of my visit and the main focus of my visit in America during my stay is and will be three points. Whenever I meet, wherever I go, I continue to tell American public that North Korea is not the subject for destruction, but it should be the subject for change. That is what I want to tell.

And secondly, everyone agrees with permanent peace on Korean Peninsula. So, since our goal is peace, then the means to achieve that goal should be peaceful – peacefully. That is the second point which I want to deliver.

And thirdly, I support maximum pressure policy, but I strongly believe that maximum pressure should go together with maximum engagement. And maximum engagement, I think, should include not only the Kim Jong-un leadership, but also North Korean population as well. I fully agree with Mr. Carl Gershman’s remarks about we should end the isolation of 24 million of North Korean population. And how can we end that isolation of North Korean population?

So that is the main big points of my visit of U.S. And first of all, I would like to go on the first – the part of my talking. The reason of Kim Jong-un’s obsession with ICBM tipped with nuclear warhead.

So the main focus of this point is I want to tell all those unfavorable environment for Kim Jong-un’s early transitional period, which made him pursue nuclear and ICBM strategies. The first I want to tell about the political challenges he faced at his first years. And in this political element, I will tell about the lack of legitimacy to lead a North Korea for next several decades. Of course, there are many elements that you know. You are all very well read. That’s why that the succession process by Kim Jong-un was down to top. Kim Jong-un spent – Kim Jong-il spent more than 10 years to be officially appointed as the leader of North Korea by Kim Il-sung. But Kim Jong-un’s case was different. It was top down succession process. So why this kind of top-down succession process influenced very much his way of thinking of nuclear ICBM?

Now when Kim Jong-un first became the leader of North Korea in 2012, at his early stages he thought that the absolute authority of the power as the new leader of North Korea will naturally
delegate to him. But what he experienced at his first few years, especially the first years, was not the case, even though he was the official leader of North Korea when he discuss or meet with those senior leaders. First he learned that the body language of the senior leaders were quite different from those body language those leaders took towards his father and towards him, because before Kim Jong-un probably could appear, Kim Jong-un just was nothing but the third son of Kim Jong-il.

That’s why when all that kind of image change, the atmosphere of treating Kim Jong-un was a little bit relaxed, gentle and soft. But now, after five years of his power now, you can see there is significant change of body language of North Korean senior leaders, how they treat. For instance, when even in front of thousands of audience like the party planner meeting, when Kim Jong-un asked some of his – you know, the leaders to come and tell something. Somebody would come, and you can see they’re almost – they’re down in front of Kim Jong-un and speak something. So that kind of body language – we haven’t seen that kind of body language in almost several decades in North Korea. That kind of body language was only seen in Lee Dynasty. Yeah, all right.

And secondly, he learned that even though he is – he was the leader of North Korea, but he learned that he did not have that kind of strong legitimacy. He learned that whenever he watched the senior leaders’ attitudes around him, he thought that there was a little bit, you know, looking down upon by those senior leaders because he’s the third son of Kim Jong-il. And ironically, in North Korea – normal – the population of North Korea don’t know that he’s the third son of Kim Jong-il. Nobody know. And know – you know, normal people know that Kim Jong-un is the first son and Kim Jong-un’s mother, Ko Yong-hui is just one of those many ladies Kim Jong-un lived together.

So if you read North Korea’s medias, whatever, in the past five years, Kim Jong-un continued to delegate that he is the only one in main bloodline of Baekdu, “Baekdu hyultong.” But after five years in power, he even now did not tell North Korean public that the date of his birth. Nobody knows. Even I don’t know when he is born. And the second thing is that – about his mother. And thirdly, and most importantly, he could not show the photo of his young years with the President Kim Il-sung. He didn’t have that photo with his grandfather. He was just a hidden boy in Switzerland.

So all these things gave him a kind of a very strong mistrust, not only on senior leaders but even on his family members. So I call it unnecessary mistrust on his family members and senior leaders. So for instance, his February of 2012, Kim Jong-un made a film about his mother. If you go today to YouTube and type it in, in Korean it’s “Songun Chosun Eomeoni” (ph). But in English, it’s “The Mother of Songun Korea.” And you can see the whole film. But that film is forbidden in North Korea. And I still don’t understand how that film was released in YouTube.

Kim Jong-un in February of 2012 showed this film to very limited number of senior leaders in North Korea. But when they watched this film, they told Kim Jong-un that this film should not be released. Why? That is about his mother. But everybody didn’t agree that Kim Jong-un may release that film, because if that film is released in North Korea it may create great confusion in the society, because until the end of 1980s the official wife of Kim Jong-il – the Kim Young-sook, acted to some level as the official wife of Kim Jong-il.

So, for instance, in New Year’s the Kim Young-sook, you know, presented the flower to Kim Jong-suk, the mother of Kim Jong-il as an official wife of Kim Jong-il. He visit in North Korean – the culture, every New Year’s Day the wife should give official – you know, the New Year greetings to family members, senior family members. So at that time Kim Young-sook did that together with her
daughters. So some people inside the family and in senior leadership know that Kim Young-sook is the official wife of Kim Jong-il.

So if this new film is released, then there could be great confusion. So that’s why the film is stopped. But what happened in March of 2012 was that all of sudden there was an unhidden purge inside North Koreas, because many people actually saw that film secretly. So we had a kind of general party meeting to confess whether we have seen this film or not. And if anyone was detected by circulating this film among his friends or family members, just all of a sudden became the subject of persecution, yes. So even now I know when Kim Jong-un would release the name of his mother and whatever, but I’m not quite sure whether he can do it in the near future or not.

So that kind of – those dilemmas of his – for instance, the background of education. Because Kim Jong-un is the North Korean boy, but he didn’t have any friends in North Korea because he spent all his time in Switzerland. He didn’t have any university friends or middle school friends, kindergarten friends, nobody. He’s just a boy dropped from the sky, I may say.

Another political challenge is – he learned, is that disintegration process of North Korea in his early transitional period. Everyone is very well know about the impact of South Korean cultural content. And he learned that whenever he convened the meeting – like today, if there is a kind of meeting like this in North Korean society, maybe 80 or 90 percent of the audience would sleep. (Laughter.) So he learned that there is no enthusiasm, even in the elite group, in policy discussions or whatever. So he decided, you know, that the former – the minister of defense, Hyon Young-Chol was executed because of he closed his eyes during the meeting. So he learned that there is no enthusiasm in the senior leadership on the future of North Korea, no energetic involvement of discussion. Whenever he put up the topics for discussions, the people do not open their minds easily or no enthusiasm.

Second, economic challenges. Many people kept asking me why Kim Jong-un took the policy of nuclear or ICBM instead of economic reform, like what happened in Vietnam or China. That could be a good opportunity for Kim Jong-un to legitimize his leadership if he introduced economic reform. But was it possible at that time? In this regard, everyone knows that the catalyst element in North Korea is expanding and getting flourishing. But is this the right choice for Kim Jong-un to adopt, or he should avert this current direction?

And today I want to tell something about the failure of currency denomination which happened in 2009. The questionable issue is Kim Jong-un’s involvement in current reform according to the sequence of time in 2009, I think which is very important to me, as I have told you that nobody even in foreign ministry knew about the existence of Kim Jong-un. But in January of 2009, all of sudden, we were instructed to sing a song. The name of that song is, “Song of Footsteps.” And all of sudden, we were told to use at that time comrade general’s remarks. Comrade general, “daejang dongji.” But at that time, even in 2009, there was no name of Kim Jong-un, just comrade general. So that happened in January.

And we were heard that a lot of party instructions came down from the Central Committee of the Worker’s Party of Korea with the name of “daejang dongji,” comrade general. So I strongly believe that from the January of 2009, Kim Jong-un was involved in every process of important decision making. In November 2000, all of sudden North Korean regime announced currency reform. And, you know that the currency reform failed within one month. And Pak Nam-gi, who was the architecture of this currency reform, was executed.
So why? Why this currency reform failed? It is unprecedented. It is the first time in North Korean history that the party officially acknowledged the failure of their policy. So what happened? It’s very interesting. On the first day of the first currency reform, all – everyone in North Korea was instructed and was informed that only 5,000 of new notes can be exchanged – 5,000 of notes. But what is the reality at that time? You know, in North Korea there is not any banking system – I mean, capitalist banking system. So that’s why the family assets are accumulated in currency notes, not in baking account. So the people – most of the people at that time accumulated millions of currency notes, but all of a sudden everyone was instructed to change and only 5,000-note.

So it brought a huge protest, dissatisfaction and complaint. So after – three days later, the amount of exchange increased from 5,000 to 50,000. But what happened after one week, the shops, the free market, were all frozen. Nobody at that time in North Korea wanted to sell, because nobody was sure how the price would rise up. And nobody was sure whether this currency reform would succeed. So all the things are kept in the warehouse, not on sale. So after two weeks of this currency reform, the whole North Korean society was frozen. And Pak Nam-gi was prosecuted in one month, and the currency reform failed within one month.

So the lessons Kim Jong-un learned from this currency reform is there could be no immediate solution through economic reform or it can get too much risky if he goes on economic reform. The second he learned that it could be very dangerous to the society and to the system if he threatens the right of the economic survival of normal population. So that’s why, even now, you know, the numbers of free market in North Korea is increasing and Kim Jong-un so far hasn’t take any decisive measures to stop this process. To some extent, he even allowed the current process of marketization. So that failure of reform gave – left a very strong influence in deciding the ICBMs.

And at last, I may – or, thirdly about the military aspects. You know, when Kim Jong-un came to power in 2012, he toured all the military units along DMZ. He toured every unit all. But what he learned is the lack of preparedness for a possible war and high spirit, corruption, obsolete conventional weapons. So there should be something for him to control huge conventional forces, not only for the wall – not only just for the wall, but to prevent any possibility of military coup. You know, North Korea, there are 1.2 million conventional forces. If these 1.2 (million) conventional forces are idly every day without any immediate purpose of military action, how can it control this huge military forces? He should have something to control. He should have something to insert the energy for continuation. So he should have something.

And I will tell about four reason, the international factor, about the arrival of Arab Spring. We have to focus something on international environment during this process. NATO bombing of Libya, and so-called justification of humanitarian intervention. Now the world politics has changed. In the past, any military action against a sovereign state was regarded as aggression. If you read the charter of U.N. – United Nations, then it is clearly said that no military action could be justified against a sovereign state. But now, things are changed. Now we have to focus on the new international term of humanitarian intervention.

So any government or any leader in current world is engaged in massacring a certain group of people of the society because of the difference of political reasons or ethnic religious, whatever. If there any kind of mass killing, then he could be the subject of humanitarian intervention. And this kind of military action now is justified what we can – we have seen in Libya case. When Gadhafi, you know, tried to stamp out those antigovernment forces and demonstrations, then NATO bombed and neutralized Gadhafi forces. So next day Gadhafi was caught and killed on his way to defection.
So this kind of international factor gave a very strong influence on Kim Jong-un and Kim Jong-il. So, for instance, if that kind of – even a small scale of uprising or people’s – you know, the protest happens in North Korea, there is no doubt that Kim Jong-un would stamp it out mercilessly with his forces, even tanks or whatever. He can do anything. But the question is, when the world learned this kind of open crackdown in the streets or whatever, then United States and the world and South Korean government should take a certain action. And if Kim Jong-un believed that he is equipped with ICBM tipped with nuclear, then he can prevent that kind of humanitarian intervention.

How long I can go? How many left? (Laughter.) Yes. Lynn, I’ll appreciate it if you signal me when I arrive at 30 minutes, OK? Yes, so half Q&A.

And the last, but important what I say, is that sudden and premature death of Kim Jong-il. So you know, that Kim Jong-il fainted out all of sudden in August of 2008. At that time, what happened in foreign ministry is that we – every day we report through documents to Kim Jong-il. There was not any sign on those important documents on the policy line. So we waited. We waited one week. What happened, you know? At that time, the whole North Korean society was frozen for three months before Kim Jong-il reappeared. And Kim Jong-un didn’t expect that his father could die, you know, very that short of span of time. So there was not any proper education for Kim Jong-il for his son’s leadership.

So the conclusion he reached is he needs to prove his ability for his leadership of North Korea. So in March of 2013, the policy of simultaneously developing nuclear and economy was adopted. They call it Byungjin policy. And I want to tell one important fact in this regard. Ironically, at that time, in March of 2013, foreign ministry, I mean, the foreign policy line of North Korea, was excluded from this process of adopting a very important policy. Nobody in foreign ministry – maybe foreign minister, I don’t think even foreign minister – knew about this kind of underneath process of adopting So Byungjin policy actually arrived all of sudden to North Korea, without any notice. All of sudden, one day, I opened up the university. I read the newspaper that yesterday North Korean Worker’s Party convened important meeting, and there was a sudden declaration of Byungjin policy yeah.

It’s 30? Almost? All right, last thing, at last.

I think this is important. In that meeting, first Kim Jong-un read around 20 minutes of so-called his report. He just read some – all these reports. But when he finished reading, he said very important word to the audiences of that meeting – plenary meeting. What he said is that: Forthcoming war – forthcoming war – will not be the war between DPRK and USA, but it will be the war of idea and will among ourselves. And so at that time, nobody really understood what that mean. He said, the future will not be the war with America, but it will be the war of wills among ourselves. And after the March of 2013, the purges, persecutions started in North Korea.

In August of 2013, you know, the first purge of Unhasu Orchestra band happened. Eight very famous, number-one musicians of North Korea were killed because of Ri Sol-ju’s (element ?). You know, Ri Sol-ju was just a normal singer in Unhasu Orchestra. And all of a sudden, she became the first lady of North Korea. So there were a lot of rumors inside that Unhasu Orchestra. And in order to consolidate his power, the first – I mean, the collective purge happened in Unhasu Orchestra. The second one is Jang Song-thaek’s case in December of 2013.
In North Korean history, of course, in the past there were – North Korean history was full of persecutions, purges, whatever. But in our history, there was not something like the total purge of one department of the Central Committee of Workers’ Party of Korea. The total of Jang Song-thaek’s department, more than 300 people working in the department, were all, even the families, sent to prison camps. And 11 members of that department – vice directors and section chiefs, 11 people of that department, were executed. It is really unprecedented in North Korean history.

So I would rather stop at this point in order to open a free Q&A. Thank you. (Applause.)

MS. COLLINS: Thank you, Mr. Thae, for those insightful and interesting remarks.

We will now transition to our Q&A session, if you’ll just take a seat on the stage, Mr. Thae.

MR. THAE: Oh, thank you.

MS. COLLINS: And I’ll introduce our moderator. Ms. Shannon Green is director and senior fellow of the human rights initiative at CSIS. Prior to joining CSIS, she was senior director for global engagement on the National Security Council staff. She also previously worked at the Center for Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance at USAID. She has extensive experience working in U.S. government, academia and the nonprofit sector on issues of human rights, civil society strengthening and international development.

So we’ll go ahead with our Q&A now.

SHANNON GREEN: Great, thank you.

And it’s my honor to moderate this portion of the program. We have lots of questions from the audience and we’ll try to get through as many of them as we can in the next 15 minutes or so.

So I actually want to pick up where you left off, which is drawing this connection between Kim Jong-un’s obsession with the nuclear program and becoming a nuclear power and government repression. Can you help us understand how his obsession has resulted in a deterioration of the human rights situation, and sort of what is the status of human rights in North Korea today?

MR. THAE: As I have told you, those – the persecutions and purges in the past five years is even so unprecedented in North Korean standards. And one of the differences of human rights violations, which happened in the past and in the past five years, is that now the world, for instance, now is able to collect the actual, you know, the evidence of all the human rights persecutions.

For instance, look, I think Kim Jong-un’s case could be very good because now the world has seen how Kim Jong-nam was assassinated in the international airport. And in the past few years, for instance, the important figures who were persecuted, now the world has those photos, the video files. And, for instance, what I said about Unhasu, you know, the purge of Unhasu Orchestra, now the world has all those video files of their performances, even on YouTube. So now the world has accumulated even now all those very good evidences to prove that Kim Jong-un is the head of this whole persecution. That’s why I think it’s the time for the world to do some action. That is my position.

MS. GREEN: That’s a great pivot actually, because we have a lot of questions about solutions and how can external actors help promote change in North Korea. So one of the questions that we have
is about, what are the best ways of ensuring that a diverse array of outside information and sources are able to penetrate North Korea, and whether you have some ideas about what are some of the new tools or mechanisms for getting that information into the country?

MR. THAE: Yeah. What I want to discuss today is that these days, because of the six nuclear tests and ICBM, the general possible approach on North Korea now are switching from soft power to hard power these days. But I’m strongly believing in the use of soft power before taking any military actions and is there any possibility and whether we can have a more effective way for any kind of disseminating outside information inside to North Korea.

The North Korean system can only be in place by reign of terror and the strong prevention of the inflow of outside information. But, you know, we can’t change the policy of reign of terror of the Kim Jong-un regime, but we can do the dissemination of outside information inside North Korea.

For instance, now, because of the recent – the IT development, those devices which North Korean population can reach are also developed. If the size of North’s now – the USB is now even changed into small SD cards. And in North Korea, these kind of small SD cards for the smart phones are called among the young boys, we call it “nose card.” Why do we call it nose card? Well, if somebody wants to search your body whether you have any USBs or whatever, the boys instantly take it out and they put it in their nose. (Laughter.) Yeah, so they call it nose because – in Korean terms, we call it “ko kadeu” card, that is nose card. Then we said, do you have any nose cards? That means, do you have any internet game installed in that small SD card or any film or any English textbook or whatever? So the technology developed dramatically in the past five years.

And another thing is that – what I want to tell is that I – the chairman of reunification cannot achieve that easily without the East Germans watching the West Germans’ TV for several decades. But now actually the world and even South Korea and America has all those technologies and the means to let North Koreans watch South Korean TV and even American.

For instance, if Google – I’m not sure whether it could be Google or not – but if any – the country or any satellite system expanded their wave of transmitting across North Korea and if we smuggle in this size, a small size of almost a similar size of smart phone, they call it a DND-whatever, to receive the satellite, the signal, then that kind of a small device can even enable North Koreans to watch outside TV secretly inside their houses. In the past, of course, the people used radios, but now because of the development of technology, now maybe it’s possible for North Koreans to have access to information.

MS. GREEN: I believe you’re meeting with members of Congress while you’re here in Washington, D.C. And as you know, Congress is considering the reauthorization of the North Korea Human Rights Act. What are you going to tell them in terms of what you would like to see in the renewal of that act?

MR. THAE: In this regard, in the past five years, the world has done a lot of things by raising these human rights issues. For instance, I would like to appreciate a lot of contributions made by Robert King on this regard, and also Michael Kirby’s report. I was surprised to read Michael Kirby’s report because it was the first report written by international – the experts on North Korea.

And we have to see the changes even from the North Korean side on these human rights cases. For instance, in the past, North Korea refused to respond to UPR system. But because of these
successive campaign, now North Korea decided to respond on UPR. Of course, they do not accept all those recommendations, but important change is the beginning of the response to UPR or the system.

And in the past, in those – the human rights U.N. meetings, North Korea delegation will only consist of very junior levels. But these days, for instance, in 2016 and ’15, the former North Korean foreign minister, Ri Su-yong – even foreign minister attended that human rights – the conference in Geneva. So that’s why the human rights case is now even regarded as a kind of very important issues even by North Korean regime.

And I won’t tell very – one significant development is that now, in North Korean embassy worldwide, if there are any North Korean workers of that country, then there is one diplomat in each embassy who should be in charge of reporting the working and life conditions of North Korean workers there. And if there is no – if there is a delay of payment to North Korean workers or if there is a lack of working conditions, then the diplomat who is in charge of overseas – the workers should take actions. So, for instance, if you see those video files of North Korean workers in Russia or China or in the Middle East, in the past, when they work outside, they even do not carry the safety helmet. But these days, everyone is forced. Because in North Korea we are not used to carry that safety helmet, but now there is – every workers are forced to take on that safety helmet. Because the embassy always asks the North Korean workers to carry that helmet in case if some journalists or reporters took pictures working without that helmet, then it could be the subject of criticism by the world.

So in order to protect and also in order to justify the policy of sending North Korean workers abroad, from North Korean side they have to take these kind of actions or policies in order to cope with the criticisms on human rights issues. So we have to continue this process.

MS. GREEN: So we have another question from the audience about the value of technical and scientific engagement, and whether those kinds of activities are a good thing to do – to find these peaceful means of communication and to keep these channels open – or whether it’s just a wasted effort and wasted money, and serves to legitimize the regime.

MR. THAE: Mmm hmm, very good question. It is common knowledge that now North Korean population watch South Korean movies and dramas. But those cultural contents made by South Korean, the cultural industry, were produced for a South Korean audience, not for North Korean population. So that’s why, so far, those cultural contents only served for the entertainment of North Korean population. These contents do not connect the North Koreans, the actual daily life with the future of all these things. So that’s why I think now it’s time we should make tailor-made content for North Korean populations to watch.

For instance, in North Korea – I want to tell a very interesting story. In North Korea, if a girl is physically beautiful, then naturally when you reach at the age of 14, you are registered by the Party and People’s Committee of that region. And if that girl’s physical beauty continues to the age of 16 or 17, then the girl would be sent by the authority to Pyongyang to either work in a special guesthouse or in special hospitals for senior leaders. That kind of thing was common in Lee Dynasty. But what is the general concept of normal people? For instance, in the countryside village, if the girl was sent by the authority to the capital for that kind of purpose, then North Korean – the normal North Korean population accept it as a kind of honor. They do not think that this is a human rights violation or the sexual abuse or sexual exploitation. No, they regard – they accept it as a kind of honor of the family to be sent from countryside to the capital. So we should make that kind of – you know, the cultural contents that is (realistic ?) the culture and thinking, right?
And for instance, in North Korea there is not any concept of payment for the labor you sacrificed, you know? So far North Korean society was going on by mobilizing huge populations for constructions or whatever, so they don’t have this kind of sense of the payment. So that’s why, if we should educate North Korean people that they should be paid for what they sacrificed.

So we should start from these basic concepts of cultural contents. Not like, oh, Kim Jong-un is dictator or North Korea is damned communist society, or whatever. We should start from basic concepts of human rights and freedom. That is my belief, yes.

MS. GREEN: Great. So we have one final question, and this one is of a more personal nature. And the question is about the experience of North Korean defectors, and trying to understand what is life like for you now in South Korea. And also, what is the role or responsibility of defectors in dealing with the human rights challenges and abuses of North Korea?

MR. THAE: It’s a very broad question. (Laughter.)

MS. GREEN: Yeah – (laughs) – question.

MR. THAE: Yes. Why I strongly believe in dissemination of outside information or the educating North Korean population is because my belief is based on my personal experience. As you know, I spent more than 20 years, you know, broad in my past 55 years of my lifetime. So the life was a combination of frequent travel and posting between Pyongyang, Stockholm, Denmark, United Kingdom, or China. But through these – the process of traveling and different posting, actually, of course, I knew the contradictions of all these things, but I always (had a glimmer ?) whether I should continue to pretend my double life of inside North Korean system, because I enjoyed a certain level of privileges, economic benefits, you know, as member of the elite in North Korean society. But when I saw the growth of my children in U.K. – because I was fortunate to have my sons in London, and when my sons arrived to London they saw a quite different world. They started internet – the internet games, Facebooks, emails, you know, of all these, you know, something – they faced a different world. And I saw their happiness of all of these things.

And when they more involved in U.K. system, we have very severe family discussions about North Korean system between me and my sons. And my sons said, oh, the internet is so great, even for study, for fun, for everything; but why North Korean regime does not allow internet? Because, as a young boy, they think internet is very good. Then I have to answer my sons’ questions. And what I told them, that if North Korean regime is open internet, then what could be the result? Because people may read all the stories about Kim family. Yes, then if everyone knows about the story of Kim family, do the people continue to support that leader and that system? I don’t think so. So that’s why North Korea will not allow internet system. It will not allow forever. Then my sons said, oh, what do you mean, no more internet forever? You know, no internet?

So all these very basic questions always put me in very difficult situations, and I have to convince my sons, you know. And at last, I decided as a father – I thought that as a father the biggest legacy which I can leave for my sons is the freedom. I cannot push my sons back to North Korean society. And I learned – of course, if I insist, they will – they would go together with me. But it was absolutely sure that it could be a great sacrifice, and also they would not be happy in their life because there was opportunity for them to live in free world but it is me who, say, cut off that opportunity. So I decided that the best – the gift which I may give to my sons is the freedom, which is so common to
everyone here. So I strongly believe that if we educate North Korean population, then we can change North Korea.

    MS. GREEN: Well, I think that’s a great not to end on.

    Before we get up and go, I want to ask everybody to just stay seated for a minute while we escort our guest out here. I hope you all agree that this has been a really insightful conversation, and we really appreciate Mr. Thae Yong-ho’s candor in talking with us today. So please join me in giving him a round of applause. (Applause.)

    MR. THAE: Thank you. I would like to present my thanks in – (end of available audio).

    (END)