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TRANSCRIPT

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The Pursuit of Peace Amidst Changing Regional Dynamics”**

**Keynote Address & Conversation**

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**2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, CSIS Headquarters, Washington, D.C.**

FEATURING

Speaker:

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*Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, House Foreign Affairs Committee; Co-Chair of  
Congressional Study Group on Korea*

CSIS Expert:

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Representative Ami Bera (D-CA): So I thought I would open with a few remarks, and then we would get straight into conversation. (Background noise.) Can you guys hear? Is the mic on? I'll just stand and do what I did as a college professor. (Laughter.)

So one of the dangerous things is when you're in a room of folks that are smarter than you and have more knowledge on the subject matter, you got to be really careful. So I thought I would give you the congressional perspective of how we're looking at the Korean Peninsula and looking at long-term strategic decisions, because when you're talking about Congress you set the bar kind of low, and then we'll exceed it.

So I think a couple things. First off, I do want to thank CSIS and John Hamre and the Korea Foundation for pulling this together, but also for your exceptional work in, you know, creating a body of knowledge that we use on Congress but also being a resource for those of us on the Hill. So thank you for that work and that sustained effort.

Let me touch on a couple areas. One, you know, I do have the privilege of being the co-chair – the Democratic co-chair on the Congressional Study Group for Korea. Now, we have four study groups in Congress – Japan, Germany, Europe, and Korea's the fourth study group. And folks have said, well, why Korea? And the reason why I think we formed this fourth study group is because when we think about the peninsula and we think about that path forward, we know it's going to take a long-term, sustained level of engagement.

And the reason why I think that is so important from the congressional perspective is when you think about a United States president, you're thinking about four years or eight years. When you're thinking about a Korean president, you're thinking about a five-year one term. And if we are to take a realistic view of finding peace on the peninsula, it won't happen in four or eight years, or a single five-year term. It'll require the long-term strategic engagement, the long-term goal.

And the study group – and, again, thank you to the Korean Foundation for being an integral part of helping us form the study group – allows members of Congress in a sustained way to get to know their counterparts in the Korean parliament, in the assembly, and build those long-term relationships, as well as the thought leaders. Because, you know, for me this is my seventh year in Congress, so my fourth term. You know, it is conceivable that I will be there for a while.

And you know, the best piece of advice I received when I first got elected to Congress is you don't – you can't know everything and know every region of the world. But find a few key areas where you can do a deep dive and become expert and build those relationships. And you know, when I think about the peninsula, we are thinking about long term. If the ultimate goal is peace on the peninsula and denuclearization, it won't happen by the end of the Trump administration or the end of the Moon administration. But it's conceivable that a decade from now, a decade and a half from now, you've achieved that goal.

And that's where Congress is really important. That's where the study group, I think, gives us a vehicle by which to take members of Congress to Korea as well as to welcome members of the Korean parliament to the United States and build those deeper relationships. So that's one, long-term sustained engagement.

A second piece is – let's be realistic here – I don't think any of us sees, as an immediate next step, Chairman Kim saying, OK, well, I'm going to get rid of all my nuclear weapons. I also don't see, as an immediate next step, President Trump saying we're going to lift all sanctions. But can we frame a long-term goal of that is the long-term outcome of the long-term goal?

It's going to take multiple steps to get there. What is that first immediate next step that starts to build a little bit of trust, a little bit of good will? Because, you know, if we think about post-Hanoi, I don't believe we can have a third summit dialogue between the United States and North Korea and walk away without some sort of victory. So – and that could be a small victory. That could be a small first step. But failure and having another Hanoi-like collapse, I think, would actually put the dialogue in a deep freeze and really, you know, maybe not permanently damage the relationship, but probably set the relationship and dialogue back for several years, probably until the next administration.

So, you know, that would be the second thing. Let's not focus on the end goal. Let's agree on what that end goal is. And, you know, Victor Cha and I had the privilege of writing an op-ed laying some of this out in the Korean press. But let's think about what that first step is to at least get some forward momentum.

A third piece is when we think about President Trump and Chairman Kim, the dialogue gets complicated, because in most of these dialogues you would have folks at the staff level working out most of the arrangements, getting to 95 percent agreement and having the framework of what that agreement is, and then the principals would enter and they would finalize things at the end.

With Chairman Kim, with President Trump, we have two folks that want to be the negotiators. And, you know, that adds an element. You know, on our side, we have to have that sustained engagement from the staff level, from our special envoy, et cetera. And, you know, that's a level of complexity on the North Korean side. You know, who is empowered to speak for Chairman Kim and lay things out? And you're seeing some of that turnover in their negotiating team. But that probably has to be a prerequisite at the staff level, getting pretty close to a place where, if we go into a third dialogue, there aren't going to be any surprises and both the principals, President Trump and Chairman Kim, can come away with that victory. So that would be the third piece that we're looking at here.

And then the fourth piece pertains not so much just to the North-South dialogue but to the regional politics. And, you know, the fourth piece that we're thinking a lot about is, you know, our two close allies in the region, Korea and Japan. And I was just there five, six weeks ago. I would say that relationship, from my perspective, was at a low point – at one of the low points that I've seen in my time in Congress. And we have to think about how do we get these two key strategic allies on the same page with us so, as we look at this long-term sustained engagement, we're all speaking with one voice.

That's a little bit of how we're thinking about this from the congressional side. You know, we would – we're encouraging the Trump administration to take a bigger role in trying to find a path forward with Japan and Korea. But this is also a place where Congress has a role in trying to figure out how we smooth that relationship or bring it to a better place than it is right now.

So I will stop with that. (Applause.) And Mark's promised to keep it easy for me. And what we might need to do is bring out Grigsby, the basset hound, to help do some basset-hound diplomacy.

Mark Lippert: As everybody knows, Congressman, that basset hounds speak generally in Korean, and in about 150 characters on Twitter. So, anyway, so – well, thanks for the great opening. I can definitely tell you – your college professor roots. You know the – you know the issues well. You have a great lexicon. And thank you also, I would just say, for your engagement and your many, many trips to the region.

You know, you make the point about having worked as a – as a staff member in Congress, you make the point about Congress being there for the long game. But what I would add humbly is it takes strong engagement from Congress, and your leadership there is to be commended. So thank you.

Maybe just one – to start, one follow up on your very good op-ed with Victor Cha entitled “A Small Deal Within a Big Deal,” and you outlined it a little bit at the top. You talked – you say basically Libya-style deal isn't feasible. You then basically say in the first instance we should get a deal on the goal, right –

Rep. Bera: Right.

Mark Lippert: – disarmament for sanctions relief, and then take some tangible steps in terms of trying to generate some momentum. In other words, the North Koreans give up some part of their program and we get into this conversation. That's the crux of it. So just to follow up a little bit about how you are thinking in Congress to get the two sides to start this process that you outlined.

Rep. Bera: I think the next real tangible step – and I've shared this with my counterparts in Korea – I think this is a time for the Republic, President Moon to step in and continue a dialogue and keep that going. You know, outside of the platitudes that President Trump and Chairman Kim have been sharing, my sense is there isn't a conversation taking place right now between the United States and North Korea. And in the short term I think this is where the South Koreans can really step up and try to keep that – some dialogue going.

You know, and I think timing is of the essence because I don't think we can go past the end of this calendar year without having a third dialogue if we're going to have a third dialogue. I think our politics get too complicated going into an election year. But the Republic also will be entering an election cycle fairly shortly as well, so I think the Korean politics also get complicated. So given that timeframe – that's six months – and I think to jumpstart this and start moving it forward, at least to get the conversation started again, I think this is a place where, you know, the Moon administration can really take the lead and be helpful.

Mark Lippert: OK. So let me pick up on a thread you just identified in your last answer, a very interesting one that I get a lot of questions about in terms of U.S. domestic politics. And elections starting kind of heighten and sharpen those questions, right? You get them a lot. You know, how much of a factor is North Korea policy, in your – in your calculation, just either on the presidential race or the congressional side? How many, you know, people ask you in your district, you know, down in constituent politics? And then

just about South Korea and the alliance and all of that, how does – how does the – can you expand a little bit about – on the political side as well?

Rep. Bera: You know, most of the American public probably doesn't spend a lot of time thinking about American foreign policy, and I think that's certainly a shame. I think the time they think about it is when we're on the brink of war or we're engaged in a war. So, you know, two years ago you saw a lot more about the Korean Peninsula when you were having the "fire and fury" rhetoric. You know, that's dropped off a bit.

So it falls to us as members of Congress. And you know, my constituents, when I do my town halls, they're not asking me about that. They're yelling at me about impeachment and other things. (Laughter.) So it falls to me to explain to them why this is so important, why American leadership abroad is essential.

And you know, in the context, if we think about American leadership in the post-World War II environment, I mean, what we accomplished was remarkable, right? I mean, that 70 years is an anomaly when you think about world history of constant conflicts between great powers. The fact that we won the Cold War without really having to engage in a kinetic conflict was pretty remarkable. That is what makes America such a remarkable nation. And we can't withdraw. You know, what we did on the Korean Peninsula, stepping up to protect South Korea, remarkable.

It may be different in the next 70 years, but the world needs American engagement and that American leadership with our values. And people get that. And I think as we go into this presidential cycle, I mean, I don't – this is going to be about domestic political issues, right? If you think about the folks on the Democratic side, I guess the now 24, 25 candidates –

Mark Lippert: You don't have an announcement here today, do you?

Rep. Bera: I'm not – I'm not running for –

Mark Lippert: OK. I just – was just making sure.

Rep. Bera: So it's important, though, that we don't withdraw into ourselves, that we continue to be there. And the world needs us.

Mark Lippert: But let me – let me follow up on that thread in terms of leadership in the world, Congress, Congress' role. And you mentioned values as well. One of the areas in which Congress has led traditionally is in the area of human rights. Started the bureau over at the State Department that covers this and produced the staff member – the great staff member who became ambassador on human rights, Bob King, who's here in the audience today. So how should we be thinking? In your op-ed you talk all about denuclearization. You talk about that process. How should we be thinking about North Korean human rights in that context?

Rep. Bera: You know, if we want to be the world leader on human rights, we have to keep some of the tragic history of human rights on North Korea in mind. I don't think that can be our starting point of negotiation. I'm a believer in if you help economic development, if you help build an economy you then start to address some of those human rights issues.

And, you know, I'm thinking about this from Chairman Kim's perspective and – you know, and the art of dialogue, the art of negotiation, you know, kind of using those principles of Aikido. You have to be able to look at the world from your adversary or your opponent's perspective. And if I'm looking at it from his perspective, he's accomplished his nuclear capabilities right now. And I think he's shifting towards the economic piece of it. And I think that's the carrot that we have if a decade, two decades from now we want to find peace on the peninsula, we're going to have to engage in economic development. And I think the South Koreans get that as well.

While we're doing – and this is a roundabout way of answering your question – while we're doing that we have to make sure that we're not losing sight of the humanitarian piece of this, where it's not that the spoils are just going to a small handful of folks in North Korea, if we are engaging in economic development. But rather, how do we bring these masses along with them? So.

Mark Lippert:

Absolutely. And we are at a think tanks, so roundabout answers are perfectly acceptable here. So the – I think that's an excellent response. And let me ask you just about one thread that you just mentioned. It's the economic development piece, right? And, you know, how should we be thinking about North Korean economic development? You know, you have this kind of classic argument of, hey, if we engage we can reopen some of the inter-Korean projects.

That might, you know, help bring progress to kind of the values debate that you're talking about inside North Korea. Others argue that we really need to maintain sanctions, hold the line firmly, really press the North Koreans on the human rights issue in the multilateral fora, but also bring this into the negotiations. How do we think about economic development as a catalyst for change and/or, you know, an instrument for pushing – going – pushing the North Koreans on the de-nuclear front?

Rep. Bera:

Right. So the sanctions have worked, right? And they've been biting sanctions, certainly some of the secondary sanctions. But the goal of the sanctions are never going to be that North Korea's going to give up their nuclear capabilities. I mean, just from my perspective. And, you know, I think we would be kidding ourselves if we thought, OK, well, at some point they're just going to lay down their nuclear capabilities. But the sanctions have been effective in getting them to the table a little bit.

And, again, if we take Kim at his word, he does want to shift towards addressing the economy in North Korea. And, you know, we know that they've got a lot of natural resources that, you know, we just have to look at the southern part of the peninsula and look at where the Republic of Korea was in 1970 and where they are today to understand what's possible. We also – this is where have to take the long view. So I do think – you know, and I'm speaking for myself here – that, you know, if there was a credible first or second step to destroy some of the nuclear assets, you know, opening some of these joint projects potentially starts to send the right message.

Again, we'd be at a different place if North Korea hadn't already obtained nuclear capabilities, but they already have. And you know, again, you know, I – if we're – if we're taking a decade-, two-decade view here, I think you've got to take those baby steps. And you know, again, this is where the Republic of Korea's going to have a huge role. I mean, we'll certainly have a role if – you know, we want to see that vision of

some sort of economy in North Korea and some sort of engagement with the rest of the world, but a large part of that responsibility is going to fall to South Korea.

Mark Lippert:

And you mentioned sanctions, and this gets to a little bit the news of the day. Just in terms of linkages or global examples of other programs or issues around sanctions and nuclear weapons, Iran, right? The Iran issue, you've dealt with that in Congress. You've got the North Korea issue. You know, what do you say to either constituents or people in Korea or around the world who, one, compare and contrast between the two cases, and/or the messages that we're sending with our actions towards Iran to the North Koreans, and vice versa?

Rep. Bera:

Look, I think we – whether you like the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal, or didn't like it, I think we did irreparable damage to our ability to negotiate by in one administration inking a deal and then a new administration coming in and pulling out of the deal. And if you're Chairman Kim and you're sitting in North Korea, you have to be paying attention to that to say, OK, well, yeah, if we agree to something, well, a new president comes in and they may just toss it out. And you know, that – our word has to mean something, and – you know.

And again, this is where Congress is so important because, again, you know, Congress is going to be here, you know, for the long haul, and why, you know, if I were to give the Trump administration a piece of advice – and I've got lots of advice – but in the – as we're dealing with Iran, involve Congress in this conversation and let's not make this a partisan issue. Let's make it an issue of American interest.

I think – so one is, you know, what happened with the JCPOA. I think that's something that ties into a parallel as we think about how we move forward with North Korea.

You know, a second piece is there's a – we're trying to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons. We know North Korea already has nuclear weapons. And let's learn from decades of negotiations with North Korea and think about how we approach that, because I think all of us agree that a nuclear-armed Iran would be a very dangerous precedent and it would set off a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, in a very unstable region. Are there lessons that we can learn from the history of negotiations with North Korea that we can take into – the hope is that we start a dialogue with Iran as well, or restart a dialogue.

So I think those are – those are two things.

I mean, the third is, when we're thinking about the Middle East – you know, I've already talked about the Korean Peninsula – we have to take a long view – long, sustained engagement. With the Middle East it's going to be a longer, more sustained level of engagement. And this is where, again, what was – the beauty of the Cold War was it, you know, maybe changed a little bit on the margins from one administration to the next, but there was a strategy – there was a bipartisan strategy, Congress was engaged, and it was a long-term level of sustained engagement. I think we have to take both these regions in a very similar way.

And we don't have to do this by ourselves. And I think we would be foolish if we thought we could engage in both these regions by ourselves, and we really should engage our allies in the – in both of these regions. But we also should not be afraid of bringing our adversaries in because there's not a long-term solution on the Korean Peninsula that's

not going to involve the Chinese or the Russians, and we have to think about what that level of engagement looks like.

Mark Lippert: Well, let me – let's use your comments – very, very artful comments – on the long game to pivot to the alliance, the U.S.-ROK alliance, and some of the questions there. I am actually guilty as the moderator of the thing that I hated as ambassador, which was I'd be in my office in Seoul, I'd have guests from out of town, we'd be sitting in Seoul, talk, you know, about South Korea, and I'd get 75 questions about North Korea, right? And I said, you know, there is this other piece in which you are sitting that's a global example of success. It's a great example of the U.S. and Korea playing the long game together.

So talk – you've been in the region relatively recently. What is your sense of where the U.S.-ROK alliance is? Where are some of the challenges? Where are some of the opportunities?

Rep. Bera: You know, the people-to-people side – you know, the fondness of the Koreans toward the United States, I think, is still very strong, I think. You know, when I was there at the end of April, the conversation around Section 232 was very real. And some of the concerns – the Koreans in many ways feeling we renegotiated KORUS. We've tried to meet you with good faith. And, you know, why are you including one of your close allies in the steel and tariff – steel and aluminum tariff conversation?

I think that's still very real. I think that does put a damper on the relationship. And our hope certainly is – as a member of Congress who does think the importance of these trading relationships is hugely beneficial, not just to the Republic of Korea but also to the United States, we have to figure out that path forward.

You know, we were happy to see the administration back off on the 232 with Mexico and Canada. But, you know, I think we would encourage the administration not to – to back off on the Koreans as well. But, you know, these are our friends and, you know, our economies are intertwined. And, you know, and KORUS has been good for both countries.

Mark Lippert: Well, let me ask you, then – you've touched on trade. Another key element that the Congress has oversight on and was intricately involved in is spending, right.

Rep. Bera: Right.

Mark Lippert: And so that leads to the burden-sharing conversation. The SMA, Special Measures Agreement – we had a long negotiation last year. If you believe the press reports, the Korean side was prepared to go up in terms of its burden sharing.

What role do you think Congress has in this, one? And then, two, where do you think we should end up on this burden-sharing agreement? And we'll hear more from General Brooks later today on this. So, you know, we're just really just previewing the later panel here.

Rep. Bera: Look, I don't think the president's wrong to say that we should have some level of burden sharing and partnership. And I think the Koreans have done an admirable job trying to address that.

Without putting an actual number on what that looks like, I also think we can't move the golanposts once – it's like, OK, here's where we are. And I think we have to be conscious of Korean domestic politics as well in the larger realm.

I think this – you know, it is in our interest to maintain this partnership. It's in our interest to maintain our troop levels there. And you touched on an earlier issue of domestic politics. And, you know, you do hear the U.S. voting public sometimes saying why do we have all these troops around the world? And again, it is important for us, as members of Congress, to say, yes, we're there to protect the Korean peninsula, but we're also there to protect United States interests in the region. And if we're not there, it may be a lot worse and a lot more costly.

So that's a scenario where we at times have disagreements with the administration. I think many of us in Congress, we're very worried that, you know, President Trump may have reduced the troop presence on the peninsula, which is why you've seen my colleague, Ruben Gallego, and others put in provisions that try to put a stop if the president drops below a certain number. I think it was 22,000. And I think that is not a Democratic or Republican issue. I think we, Congress, believe it's important for us to maintain that presence.

Mark Lippert: Right. So, notwithstanding some comments here and there from constituents asking legitimate questions about U.S. troop presence overseas not limited to Korea, your point is that in Congress, by and large, broad bipartisan support for troops in Korea and an understanding of the value of the alliance.

Rep. Bera: Very much so. And we think it's beneficial, obviously, to maintain peace on the peninsula, but we have lots of interests in the region. And that troop presence is incredibly important.

Mark Lippert: OK. We're getting down to the end here, maybe just one or two more questions. But one is – this gets to kind of alliance equities and often what you hear from the Korea – the Korean public at times. Is, you know, people talk – Koreans themselves will talk about Korea as the shrimp between the whales, right? Large country – now, I quibble with that from time to time. They have a top-15 economy, one of the world's most capable militaries, I think BTS is on the verge of taking over the world culturally.

You know, so there's maybe some room for argument there. But how should the Koreans, you know, think about this issue? You know, not to – not to put yourself as a Korean, but just if you were getting that question and you said, well, we feel caught. We feel caught on THAAD; we feel caught on the Asian Infrastructure Bank. Now we're feeling caught between the U.S. and China on trade and Huawei. What would your response be?

Rep. Bera: Yeah. So I don't think there's – the republic is the shrimp between two whales, because they are one of the world's leading economies, one of the most innovative economies in the world, and, you know, certainly one of our close friends. Landmass-wise, they may be smaller than America or China, but they certainly are punching above their weight class. And I think we have to think of Korea as a partner in, you know, how we engage not just in the issue of China or regional politics, but also how we – and we've had these conversations – how we partner with the Koreans to help solve some of the world's challenges.

You know, they're starting to become a donor notion. And, you know, their aid and development world around the world and, you know, sending resources to tragedies that happen and disasters around the world. And in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we ought to look for the way we all partner together. Countries that share similar values of democracy, of free markets, of, you know, just the value of human rights and dignities. And, you know, in this century I think it's not the United States going alone.

It's the United States with its partners – and I use that term, partners, because we have to be in this together. It's not the U.S. dictating here's what the – what Korea ought to be doing. It's coming together and having conversations to solve mutual challenges. You know, getting back to the crux of your question, I don't think – Korea's going to have a major trading relationship with China. You know, Korea is going to have a major trading relationship with Japan. And we shouldn't be thinking of Korea as an either/or.

I mean, we saw – you know, in many ways we saw how China responded when we placed the THAAD batteries there. And that, to me, is not what a major nation does if they want that partnership. So, you know, I don't – I think if we think about this 21<sup>st</sup>-century trading relationship when we think about China vis-à-vis Korea, or Japan, or even India, it's not either/or. And for us, it's not either/or either. So the closer we're working with our allies that share similar values, the better off we are and the more likely we will get the outcomes that we want.

Mark Lippert: Right. Thanks, Congressman.

Let me just ask in the few minutes we have left just two pretty quick responses. I've got two last questions. The first is – first, you know, to pick up on your thread about how we work together in a more – in a more open and inclusive relationship, one of the areas that I often proposed was deeper cooperation on science, technology, space, global health. You bring a decades-long experience in science and medicine from your background. You're a medical doctor. You're a vice chair of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology, if I'm not mistaken. Is this an area where we should be working more constructively with the Koreans, and more deeply?

Rep. Bera: Absolutely. Right, on issues of solving – you know, whether that's climate change or, you know, in the realm of space. If our goal is to get human travel to Mars and beyond, we're not going to do this by ourselves. These are things where we're going to have to be working with the best around the world. And, you know, we've seen the remarkable innovations that come out of the – out of the Republic of Korea. And we should have that partnership. And this should be a multilateral type of relationship. Again, you know, climate change doesn't just affect the United States. It affects all of us. If we want to get to Mars, or if we want to solve, you know, food and water insecurity around the world, it'll take a global effort.

Mark Lippert: OK. We are out of time. Thanks for that answer. It was fantastic. Music to my ears, at least. Let me just – to get off the stage here, and you're wanted back in Congress, but I would say this: Now, I know you represent a Northern California district, so – but you have some Southern California roots. So you have some credibility on commenting on Southern California issues. For those who don't know, there's a big split in California – Northern California, Southern – I went to college there. I identified as a Northern

California, so I'm not allowed to talk about anything in Los Angeles. But you have – you have equities in both.

Any thoughts on the season that L.A. Dodger pitcher Hyun-jin Ryu is having, before you get off the stage here? (Laughter.)

Rep. Bera: He's having an amazing season, what nine and one?

Mark Lippert: Unbelievable.

Rep. Bera: And an ERA around one. It is remarkable. I can't say that when I'm back in the district, but my dad's first job was as an usher at Dodger – or, actually at the Coliseum when they first moved down from Brooklyn. So I grew up a Dodger fan.

Mark Lippert: Dodger fan. So Dodger, Korea, it's all coming together for you, exactly.

Rep. Bera: Exactly right, yeah? And that's how we're going to find peace, right? Through baseball, through K-pop, through Korean soap operas.

Mark Lippert: That's very true. Very true. No, big believer in the cultural influence on fomenting peace and security in the world.

And so with that, I just want to thank you for your leadership. Thanks for a great session here today. I won't say go Dodgers, but I will say, you know, here's to any and all good things Koreans do in the state of California, and especially in your congressional district. Thanks, again, Congressman. (Applause.)

(END)