TRANSCRIPT
“ROK-U.S. Strategic Forum 2019
The Pursuit of Peace Amidst Changing Regional Dynamics”

Session I: The ROK-U.S. Alliance for Peace and Denuclearization

EVENT DATE
Monday, June 24, 2019

TIME
12:30 p.m. EDT

LOCATION
2nd Floor, CSIS Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

FEATURING
Panelists:
Joy Yamamoto,
Director, Office of Korean Affairs, U.S. Department of State

Victor Cha,
Senior Adviser and Korea Chair, CSIS; D.S. Song-KF Professor of Government, Georgetown University; Former National Security Council

Sang Hyun Lee,
Senior Research Fellow, Sejong Institute

Joseph Yun,
Senior Advisor to the Asia Center, United States Institute of Peace; Former Special Representative for North Korea Policy and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Korea and Japan, U.S. Department of State

Moderator:
David Nakamura,
White House Correspondent, The Washington Post

Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
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David Nakamura: Can you hear me OK? Terrific. Well, thank, everybody, for joining with this auspicious occasion. Thanks to CSIS for inviting me and the panel to participate.

I wanted to give a special, of course, congratulations to the Korea chair and Victor for all the job that you’ve done over the past decade. It probably seems like it went quickly, but for us journalists – I’m a reporter at The Washington Post – Victor and the Korea chair have been a valuable, valuable resource both obviously in the past two years, but even before that. I was bugging Victor and others in the program quiet often. Maybe many times you didn’t necessarily want to be bugged. But for terrific analysis and to help sort of walk me through what’s happening. And so I wanted to take a time-out to thanks the Korea chair for that, and to congratulate your for such a successful 10 years.

I am a reporter with The Washington Post, and I cover the White House. And I’ve been doing that for about seven or eight years, first under the Obama administration and now the past two and a half with President Trump. It has been quite an experience shifting between the two. But one thing I focused on the entire time, that’s kind of a through-line, is Asia policy, because it’s so important, starting with President Obama’s pivot to Asia. So it’s my great honor to be hosting this panel.

I wanted to say that we’ll be discussing – I know there’s three panels today, so we’ll be discussing the U.S.-ROK alliance. And, you know, as a journalist I like to be very topical. But let me introduce the panel, and then we’ll have sort of a healthy discussion about where we are. It’s auspicious week, of course, because President Trump is headed to the region – first to Osaka for the G-20, as we know, and then to Seoul for an important summit with Moon Jae-in. And we’ll sort of ask the panelists quite a bit about that. I’ll be on the trip, along with several of my colleagues. And I leave tomorrow. So I’m very much looking forward to that.

Of course, we have Victor Cha, hardly needs an introduction, here to my left. Victor founded the Korea chair in 2009. As we mentioned has served – after having served as the director of Asian affairs in the National Security Council in the Bush administration from 2004 to 2007. In that role, of course, Victor was very involved with the six-party talks and other negotiations with North Korea that have predated where we are today. He’s the author of five books, including The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future. And I believe Victor, you’ll see him quite a bit on NBC and MSNBC as an analyst.

We have – of course, right next to Victor is Ambassador Joseph Yun. Thank you for joining. He probably needs also very little introduction. Joe is currently a senior advisor of the Asia Program at the U.S. Institute of Peace. Before that, he served 33 years as a diplomat. And for two years, you well know, was – from 2016 to 2018 – was the U.S. special envoy to North Korea. And he was a key player, of course, in reestablishing communication with Pyongyang through the New York channel, and then of course traveling to North Korea to help secure the release and ultimately secure the release of Otto Warmbier. And so thank
you, Joe, for all your service. I think Joe is also a regular contributor to CNN, if I’m not mistaken. A competitor, so we’ll have a little face off here. (Laughter.)

I think next to Ambassador Yun we have Dr. Joon Yung Kim, who’s a professor at Handong University’s Department of International Studies. Has conducted extensive research on the U.S.-ROK alliance, as well as the inter-Korea relationship on the peninsula. He’s previously served as the director of Security and Diplomacy Center, an independent think tank. And he spent time prior to that as a visiting Fulbright scholar at George Mason University, not far from where I grew up in Northern Virginia. So thank you, Dr. Kim.

We have next, of course, another diplomat, Joy Yamamoto, who last fall took over as the director of the Korea desk at the State Department, a job she assumed after serving as the minister councilor for economic affairs at the U.S. embassy in Seoul. So Joy is obviously very much involved in all of the things that we’ll be talking about today. Very happy to have Joy with us. Before that, she had previously also served as a diplomat in Indonesia, in China, and other locations around the world. And also, close to my heart, was a former newspaper reporter. So she knows all my tricks. And Joy, you’re on the record today – (laughs) – since this is a big crowd and being broadcast.

And finally we have Dr. Sang Hyun Lee, senior research fellow at Sejong Institute in Korea, who also serves as the president of the Korean Nuclear Policy Society. Dr. Lee served as the director general for policy planning, the minister of foreign affairs from 2011 to 2013. He’s also authored numerous papers and analyses, including a summary of the U.S.-DPRK summit in Hanoi.

So thank you to our panelists.

We’re just going to jump right into a dialogue rather than have opening presentations, which I think sometimes slows things down. And, you know, as a journalist, I mentioned we’re interested right now in what’s happening; and no better time to have this panel than the president’s trip. And I wanted to sort of just get right at it. I think there’s a lot of interest now, after what seemed to a dark period in our diplomacy, in our dialogue, after the collapse of the Hanoi summit, which I was at, about what’s going to happen, how to get the talks back on track.

And now we’ve seen what tends to be the path of this president and this administration, which is sort of a direct, leader-to-leader engagement. If you’ve seen the exchange of the so-called love letters that President Trump might call them, you know, first Kim Jong-un apparently sent a letter to the president, and then you saw – around his birthday – and then you saw a reciprocal letter just being reported over the weekend, which Kim Jong-un received apparently from President Trump. The White House has confirmed that letter was sent. And that letter contained, according to the state news agency, excellent content that the chairman is considering.
And so that raises a lot of intriguing possibilities. I know there’s been a lot of discussion about what to make of the summit between Moon and President Trump coming up. But maybe I could just start with Victor and we’ll just go down the line a little bit about what we think about a third summit.

Do we see now that these exchanges have sort of renewed that idea and that President Trump – we don’t know a lot about what was in the letter, but do we see a third summit? And what does that mean? And what would it take for us to get to that place?

Victor Cha: Sure. Well, thanks for the question.

The other thing you should all know before we get started, David didn’t properly introduce himself, because what he is most known for in the Korea policy expert community is he is the only journalist that we know that has asked a question of Kim Jung-un at a press conference and gotten an answer. (Laughter.)

David Nakamura: I joke now –

Victor Cha: And maybe he’ll explain –

David Nakamura: I joke now on my tombstone it’ll say he shouted a question at the most ruthless dictator – (laughter) – and lived, for a while, to tell about it.

I did write a story about that moment. I was in the press pool in Hanoi. I’d been in Singapore for the first summit. I was not in the pool, which is the small group of 13 reporters who were allowed in to the photo-ops. Everybody cannot get in. So that pool then, both television and radio and print – me – writes a summary and sends it out of what happens, of course.

So that’s – I was very disappointed not to be in the pool for the Singapore summit. I had to sort of remain in the hotel and hope for some briefings. I actually went to Kim Jong-un’s hotel when he first arrived just so I could – I waited, like, about four hours with ordinary folks on the streets, right off the shopping corridor in the hot sun just to get a glimpse of the motorcade and the running bodyguards and wrote sort of a scene piece about why we – you know, why we wait on the street corner with our kids playing iPad to see this ruthless dictator and get a glimpse. But I didn’t – that was as close as I came to seeing him then.

And so I was very thrilled that we were – The Washington Post was the pool reporter for Hanoi. And so when we went in, we had sort of as a group said we need to try to shout something to Kim. And President Trump engages so much that, after sort of the quick photo op, reporters immediately shouted to President Trump and he answered. And then I sort of positioned myself closer to Kim and was just sort of keeping an eye on him to try to make some eye contact.

And when, when I heard Trump stop talking, I finally shouted, Chairman Kim, do you feel good about a deal? And he kind of looked at me and I did one of
these feel-good. And as I wrote in a subsequent piece, you know, now, you know, you get taken to task if you write something about being, you know, too chummy with a dictator or why are you normalizing this guy. But my point was, this is a universal sign of feel good. Do you feel good? And I didn’t know what would happen, but it was sort of like time slows down and you’re in the moment.

And then I saw, if you look at the replay, Trump’s interpreter leans over. They both have an interpreter, and Trump’s interpreter leans over and, I guess, interprets my question or indicates it’s for him, and then he responds. And so I was thrilled. And in the moment, as I – at the end of the piece, I didn’t realize sort of that no one had ever done that or had gotten a response.

But, you know, we were quickly ushered out, as they didn’t want to keep letting us have a chance, and then rushed back to send the pool report out. And that’s when I, you know, then saw Twitter and so on that this had made some big news. And, you know, what he said was I feel – you know, I feel hopeful. But, you know, we feel hopeful but we’re not there yet.

And so at the time we were assuming there’d be some sort of interim deal, that – all signs had sort of led to that. But, you know, in reality he wasn’t there yet. They may be hopeful. And I think my colleague Anna Fifield used the quote at the end of her book on Kim Jong-un, you know, that hopeful feeling. We’ll see. But that was the experience.

But I’d love to see if my colleague, you know, Seung Min Kim on this trip or subsequent may have another chance because it seems certainly that another summit – doesn’t seem like we’re close to that or we should be close to that, but since the president does things differently, and we’re coming up on a campaign, so I’d love to may go down the line briefly about –

Victor Cha: So I feel like there’s – and I want to echo what Rich Armitage said in the beginning. There is something in the air, right? I think there is something in the air. After the Hanoi Summit there was basically no dialogue taking place. All the efforts at the working level to make contact were just going into a black hole.

And then all of a sudden this birthday card, letter comes Chairman Kim to Trump which he then responded to. And then Xi Jinping goes to Pyongyang, right, and so whenever you see high-level letter and then the Chinese and the North Koreans meeting, that’s kind of like the setup for a third meeting. Now I have no inside information on this, but those pieces are pieces that we generally see before there is another high-level meeting.

In addition to that, based on my experience as a staffer, setting up trips by the president, it’s quite unusual I feel this time for President Trump to be spending two nights in Korea off of the G20 Summit in Osaka. Usually when we do these trips – and there are many in the audience who know this well – usually it’s an RON in Japan, and then early in the morning there is a trip to Korea, you do the troops, you do whatever, and then you move on.
So this is a lot of time in Korea. I think there is no doubt that the president will go to the DMZ because he has never been there, and the last time he went, he couldn’t go. General Brooks was there at the time, and there was a lot of – it was like really bad weather that day, really bad fog that day, so he couldn’t make that trip. I think every U.S. president that’s going to say anything about Korea has to visit the DMZ to see, you know, the actual division and how armed it is. So I’m pretty certain he’s going to do that. And then the question is, is he going to make a big statement at the DMZ? Is he going to do it himself? Is he going to do it with President Moon? Are there going to be other surprises?

This president likes surprises, and so there’s something – you know, I feel like there is something going on. We’re not really sure what, but it looks like there’s an effort really to reset after Hanoi, and maybe not a third summit immediately, but at least a reset that will allow the working level to reengage.

The problem is, is that as long as both sides don’t put a lot of – or don’t empower the working level to make agreements, we’re going to fall into the same trap that we fell in in Hanoi, which is working level meetings on everything but the most important issue. That is left to the two leaders, and the two leaders can’t make a deal.

And I feel like – right now it looks like we’re headed down that road, and what the president did on Iran in terms of pulling back at the very last minute with regard to our retaliatory military strike for the downing of the drone only reinforces the view in North Korea that you’ve got to talk to the leader. And so that means that the working level are not going to be able to make agreements that can then set up a successful summit. So that’s what I worry about.

David Nakamura: Joe, what do you think would put us on a path to a summit that makes more sense than maybe a rushed meeting – certainly this trip – and what kind of time frame do you see as more sensible?

Joseph Yun: Right. I think fundamentally there is something to the relationship between Donald Trump and Kim Jung-un, and it’s kind of a mixture of both admiration for each other, but the information set is quite asymmetric. Kim Jung-un knows everything there is to know about Donald Trump. He knows exactly how the U.S. government operates, what his key staffers – whether it’s Pompeo or Bolton – are like.

Now Donald Trump doesn’t know anything about what is going on in Pyongyang. There is the mismatch. And so I think – you know, in my experience, North Koreans study Washington like anything.

I remember back when I was in government – I think it was in November of 2016 – I was talking with the North Korea and I was trying to set up a meeting for my then-boss, Tillerson, to go to Pyongyang. And they said, no, we really don’t want Tillerson. We think he’s going to get fired, you know? (Laughter.)
And you know, of course, they were completely right. He did get fired about four months later.

But the underlying – the underlying rationale is, of course, we all know historically it’s true that North Korean side have been wanting summit. Now the difference is the U.S. side, or Donald Trump, wants summit. So I have no doubt there will be a third summit. There will be a third summit probably sooner rather than later. And I mean, you know, it’s – what will make it a success – of course, Victor is right; there has to be work done at a working level so that there are no surprises.

But I’m, you know, relatively optimistic. If you look at what was on the table in Hanoi, there was quite a bit on the table, you know. For North Korean side, giving up Yongbyon. They both had agreed, essentially, to open liaison offices. And so the key issues like definition of denuclearization, how much denuclearization for how much sanctions, were left out, but I do think you can reach a next level of a deal relatively quickly. So in that sense, it’s in both their interests to have a summit, put this to a place where it is sustainable, at least for a while.

And Donald Trump’s main goal is, of course, to win the 2020 November election, so get through that. I mean, you know, fortunately for Kim Jong-un he doesn’t face an election, so I think he – you’re looking at a short-term or medium-term path that puts on – puts on stable route.

David Nakamura: Dr. Kim, can you give us a sense of how the Blue House, how the South Korean government, has been trying to work with both sides to try to reengage them? Because we know that there had been very little communication after Hanoi between Washington and Pyongyang. And then what is the view in Seoul about moving forward with that leader-to-leader dialogue and how important that is?

Joon Hyung Kim: Yeah. South Korean government has no choice but to be part of it, yeah. (Laughter.) That’s true. And actually, you know, as you said, after four months of, like, no move and animosity – the exchange of animosities, and something is going on. It smells like something is going on. Like, Xi’s state visit to North Korea and Kim Yo-jong’s, you know, funeral visit in Panmunjom, and happen to be one-year anniversary of Singapore.

But to me it’s not really – any of these is not a game-changer. It’s like a building up because – and of course South Korea’s hopeful that North Korea is coming out to meet South Korean president just like happened in last May. So actually 20 hours before the second, you know, (one shop ?) meeting – actually, they could meet, I think, May 26th. So South Korea going to hope that happen again.

But the thinking of – the situation right now from the North Korean perspective, they’re still angry. They’re devastated. Pretty much they recoup themselves, but they’re not ready to come out. And their perception is like this: This is not our turn to give away. This is the turn that either, you know, U.S. changed the calculation or South Korea is try to persuade America to their perspective.
Definitely, they are going to be, I think, third summit. But to me it’s not in, like, sooner. So I think it’s more like a second half, because they think even if they are – decided to come out to negotiating table they need to rebuild the position to have a better, you know, deal, in the sense –

David Nakamura: They don’t want a repeat of what we had in Hanoi.

Joon Hyung Kim: Yeah, exactly.

And regarding these love letters, or you know, beautiful letter and excellent letter, actually, this is – this is actually what I heard from a very reliable source. You know, during the eight month of – no, six months of deadlock last year, there was – there were five unknown secret personal letters between these – actually from Kim Jong-un to Trump. That means I think this is in a way special communication method. So I don’t think there is really a game-changing – some kind of proposal, even though they think it’s interesting. They try to maintain this whole table. Now, in this kind of letter that puts us in a special – you know, some kind of concession or a deal.

David Nakamura: I want to skip Joy briefly, but only because she – as you can understand – is in a very sensitive position, here right in the middle of all this – (laughter) – and might have some limitations on what she can say about North Korea. We’re going to get right back, though – come right back to her about the U.S.-ROK alliance. But I want to just skip to Dr. Lee, just to build off of that, to say: What do we think about these letters? Usually I think – and Victor may know – give us a better sense of it – but these letters are pretty formulaic, maybe have a lot of – traditionally – a diplomatic letter may have a lot of flowery language. We know that President Trump released one letter last summer that he got from Kim Jong-un. It was very flowery, but didn’t say a whole lot, as you say. We doubt that there is a lot of detailed, you know, information, necessarily.

But wanted to see if Dr. Lee had some thoughts about, you know, what we think about what could be accomplished with this kind of letters between the leaders. And, you know, President Trump so proud of these. He brings reporters into the Oval Office. And he’ll have staff bring – they’re on hand – often bring them out and let reporters read them, which we saw in the Time Magazine interview late last week, in which I think the reported attempted to take a photo – I don’t know if you saw that in the transcript – take a photo of one of the letters. The president got so upset he said, you know, you can read it but you can’t take a picture of it. And at one point sort of suggested the reporter could be put in prison if he violated that rule, which the reporter said: Are you threatening me with prison time? So these letters are very important to the president. He seems to want them to get out, but clearly not violate Kim Jong-un’s confidence, I guess.

But I wonder if you could tell us more – a little bit more about what you think is trying to be accomplished, other than just praise to each other. Unless that’s it.
Sang Hyun Lee: Well, I will say that – and this is a good sign, that – because both sides want to contribute the mode of dialogue between the two governments. And here’s one thing, but I don’t know what’s the actual content inside these letters. But at the same time, since Hanoi summit, contrary to many people’s concern whether this dialogue totally collapsed, but instead we see many signs that at least we have some momentum to continue this dialogue. So I think that’s a really good sign. But it’s one thing.

And perhaps if actual, visible progress is not made in the coming days or months, then perhaps it may be that it doesn’t mean much actual result. It will be another disappointing round of a – just a symbol or a gesture that both sides want to continue dialogue. But eventually the actual progress for actual, visible steps – what kind of step – actually step those will take in the coming days, that will tell us the truth about whether or not success in seeking denuclearization talks with North Korea.

David Nakamura: And I want to come back in a minute to what we know about – what we can infer about some of the changes that have been reported about North Korea’s negotiating team, President Trump sort of contradicting John Bolton at times on North Korea, what that tells us about where this might be headed.

But first, Joy, I’m wondering since we’re on the precipice of this trip, I know it’s tricky to talk – or, not talk about direct dealings with North Korea. I’m wondering if you could just set the stage a little bit about this trip, in terms of just the relationship between President Trump and President Moon. I think we’ve seen a lot of work by Prime Minister Abe through the whole two and a half years, but certainly recently with the state visit and now as the host of this big G-20 summit. He’s in the spotlight, and has, you know, continued this diplomacy with President Trump to try to flatter him and work his relationship, and try to stay as, you know, his sort of bestie in Asia. And, you know, certainly has a different view about, you know, how they should proceed with this dialogue with North Korea, and more skeptical of it.

I’m wondering if you could just give us a sense of what this trip entails for President Moon and President Trump’s relationship. Get a little bit beyond even just talking about North Korea. Are there other things they’re going to talk about, and maybe a little bit about why he is maybe spending more than one night on the agenda?

Joy Yamamoto: So he’s spending one night.

David Nakamura: Is it still one night? OK.

Joy Yamamoto: It’s one night.

So there’s no question that the priority is the negotiated denuclearization in North Korea. There’s no question that this is the most important issue that’s facing both the ROK and the United States, and there’s no question that this will be the number-one topic for President Moon’s meetings with President Trump.
But what we should also remember is that what they will do is and what they will commit to is the enduring, strong bilateral relationship, the alliance. And that alliance is more than just the DPRK issues; it is about showing the world that together these two countries, these two governments can do extraordinary things, whatever they want.

And you know, North Korea is, of course, one great example, the fact that we’re working together to engage North Korea. But beyond that we’ve also shown that we can work on economic issues together. We negotiated changes to the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement that were difficult, but we managed to come out with amendments that are mutually beneficial to both countries. And we’ve also made a deep commitment to work together in the Indo-Pacific region, both under President Moon’s New Southern Policy and under President Trump’s Indo-Pacific Strategy. We’re finding that there are synergies between these two efforts. And based on the fact that we have very common values and a common approach to development assistance in South Asia and Southeast Asia, based on wanting a free and open Indo-Pacific region that’s based on the notion that we want to allow countries and enable countries to preserve their sovereignty, to develop in ways that they want to and not because they’re being coerced into doing so.

So I guess what I’m trying to emphasize is that this relationship is, yes, about the DPRK, but please don’t forget that this relationship is much more. And we should make a commitment to improve that – the alliance in so many ways across the board. And Ambassador Lippert and Congressman Bera also mentioned this, that we cooperate on health, science and technology, energy. So I full expect that this commitment to the bilateral alliance, to these kinds of aspects of our alliance will be very much part of the conversation.

David Nakamura: Are there – anything you can tell us about efforts to, you know – I don’t think President Moon plays golf. You know, we saw – (laughter) – well, you know, this is a president, Trump, who puts a lot of faith in sort of the interpersonal relationship, it seems like, whether it’s with our allies or other leaders, and even Xi Jinping. Is there any – I mean, on a trip like this it’s fairly quick. There’s not a lot of time. I just don’t know if there’s any kind of relationship-building beyond the sort of bilateral meetings, even the one on one, that you build into something like this, even if you can’t fully tell us what it is. I mean, do they have efforts to try to do that with President Moon?

Joy Yamamoto: So the trip isn’t fully set in terms of – (laughter) – I know it’s – it feels like it’s only a few days away, but believe me, they haven’t fully settled on the schedule for this trip.

There’s no question that there will be bilateral meetings, but there will be other activities, hopefully something related to business/economics, something related to the alliance so to speak. Again, nothing’s set, but the intent is – President Moon’s intent is to be with President Trump virtually every minute of this trip.

David Nakamura: Of the visit.
I wanted to – I sort of hinted at this a little bit, but since Dr. Lee talked a little bit about the limits of leader-to-leader negotiating, and I think we’ve seen the limits over this time, I’m wondering – like I said, there’s been plenty of reports about what happened with the uncertain fate of Kim Jong-un’s negotiating team. I think some of it may have been overblown, but some may certainly have been authentic in that he seems to maybe have wanted to start anew. And I’m wondering, even though we don’t know exactly what those things are or what the ultimate result is, I think there’s been a sense that some of the reporting is probably accurate that he’s made some changes. And I wanted to know – you know, people say, well, there’s only one decision-maker in North Korea and it’s Kim Jong-un, and so you have to sort of deal with the leader. But I wonder, if he’s changing his team, what that could mean for potential changes to their position or, as some of our analysts have said, whether it’s the U.S. turn to make some sort of significant concession, I guess, or what looks like some sort of movement, and what that could be. And maybe we can just start with Victor here and go down the – down the line again.

Victor Cha: So I think there has been – you know, there clearly has been a change. I mean, Kim Yong-chul and Kim Hyok-chul were sort of the key people for the chairman in the run-up to Hanoi. And, you know, clearly it was the first time that anybody had probably, in his life, ever said no to Chairman Kim Jong-un. And then these poor guys had to ride on the train for 60 hours with Kim Jong-un back from Hanoi, Vietnam to North Korea. They were probably in the last car in the bathroom for the entire 60 hours. (Laughter.) It couldn’t have been an easy train ride back.

And Kim Hyok-chul, the second in command, was actually – I knew him, because he was on the six-party delegation. He was one – you know, he was one of the junior members of the six-party delegation; speaks very good English and everything.

You know, the papers are saying at least it’s shifting back to the foreign ministry, Ri Yong-ho and Choe Son-hui, as sort of the key interlocutors. And I think that’s a good thing, I mean, if that’s the case. It will certainly lend to much more fluid conversations between Pompeo and Biegun and their counterparts. Ri Yong-ho, as many of you know, was formerly the DPRK ambassador in London, and he gave the best exposition in English I have ever heard by a North Korean about why North Korea needs nuclear weapons. It was almost persuasive.

And Choe Son-hui has – and, you know, Joe knows well – Choe Son-hui probably has the most experience as a working-level person on this, because she’s been involved in the negotiations and very intimately involved in the six-party negotiations. So if there’s anybody who understands somewhat the technical details – because at some point we have to get to the technical details of this – she is probably the best equipped.

But even – I would say even in her case, she is not fully equipped to manage that sort of – that sort of conversation. And the North Koreans have not yet brought
to the table, you know, their – our, like, DOE counterparts. They have not brought those sorts of people back to the table. So I think, overall, the change is probably for the better.

What was the second part of your question?

David Nakamura: No, I’m just – and what – I mean, just how is it better in that – you know, it sounds like, from what I understood, is that the U.S. team would say something, even in the lead-up to Hanoi, with a very short timetable – you’ve got to get stuff done – and then everything would have to be sent back to Pyongyang and get some sort of clearance or guidance up to the chairman. Everything was coming from Kim Jong-un. I mean, is that going to continue or –

Victor Cha: So I think that will probably still continue. But at least with people like Ri Yong-ho and Choe Son-hui, it can at least sound a little bit more fluid in terms of the negotiation. I think it’ll be much easier to have side conversations, because – again, because both of them are fluent in English. And I think it’ll just give our negotiators a better feel of the situation.

And, you know, that – I think that’s important. I think it was – I mean, I don’t know, but my guess it was very stilted with Kim Yong-chul and Kim Hyok-chul, just because, you know, they are – you know, they’re not really – they’re not foreign – they’re not diplomats. They’re not foreign ministry people. They don’t – they have not spent a lot of time outside the country.

David Nakamura: Given what we know about the ultimate positions of both sides in Hanoi that led to sort of the stalemate and the quick collapse of the talks – and I was the pool reporter there. We were waiting in the lunch. They were going to have lunch. We could see the placards laid out and everything. All of a sudden the thing was 30 minutes delayed, and we knew it was on the rocks. And we didn’t know how quickly it would be over. But we got the surprise news.

But, I mean, Joe, what would be – with what Dr. Lee was saying, that Kim felt, you know, still upset and angry about where that ended and doesn’t want a repeat of this, I mean, which Dr. Kim was saying as well, what is the step that the U.S. could take to restore some sort of confidence that this thing can move forward? It’s an open question, but I wonder if you have thoughts about where the U.S. might move to just sort of offer them enough to get them back to some sort of serious dialogue.

Joseph Yun: I think at this point really the North Korean insistence is for sanctions relief. And so the question has to be, were U.S. to offer sanctions relief, what is it that North Korea can offer? This is what Hanoi – what’s on the table plus means. Plus for the U.S. means some kind of sanctions relief. Plus for North Korea means something on denuclearization.

But going to your earlier question about – I mean, if you think, you know, interagency fights in Washington are bad, it’s a lot worse. At least here, if you lose, you end up in a nice place like CSIS. (Laughter.)
David Nakamura: Victor never lost, though. (Laughter.)

Joseph Yun: There you’re going to end up in a minimally reeducation camp. (Laughter.) And that’s not very pleasant. I believe that – and I believe that Victor that the whole negotiation team was discredited. This is the UFT, United Front Department Team, was discredited. And now it’s moving back, you know, with essentially, you know, what – you know, (a foreign-handing ?) MFA. I mean, that’s bad news and good news because they know the history. They know what U.S. will and will not do. And so the negotiations, I believe, are going to be more civil, but tougher, you know? They’ll be a lot tougher, because Ri Yong-ho and Choe Son-hui know exactly how far they can go without really angering the leader.

I mean, to me, it’s very interesting that there is in North Korea now a fairly open debate in media, places like Rodong Sinmun and KCNA, on whether Kim Jong-un or North Korea should be negotiating this role or rely on more traditional build our own defense. And so to me, it indicates that there isn’t the complete control that you would expect from the – from the leader. And so that has some legs, I think. And so it’s critically important for them – for Kim Jong-un right now that he save face. And whether U.S. can do anything to save that face, I don’t know what it’s going to take at this point. And that’s why they need to have working group level meetings to probe each other, what – so that they get at least a minimum package that satisfies both sides.

David Nakamura: Dr. Kim and Dr. Lee, I’m wondering if you could address a little bit of – I think we saw from President Moon ahead of Hanoi, he was hopeful that the U.S. was moving towards some sort of interim step or step by step sort of process. We saw the Stanford speech by Steve Biegun that seemed to suggest the U.S. was, you know, entertaining the idea of some sort of middle ground. Reports of, you know, smaller steps on sanctions, you know, that will allow the South to kind of engage the North on some joint projects, some tourism. I’m wondering if you could give us a sense from Seoul about how, you know, Moon Jae-in hopes to maybe convince Trump to sort of move in that direction, offer something in the form of sanctions relief. Is that still a viable plan? How might Moon try to make that case?

Joon Hyung Kim: Yes. I think it’s actually in South Korean government if not in the – well, not entire government. But the feeling that President Moon has is, like, there was some kind of twist if – without it, it couldn’t have been made because actually when one hour after Trump walked away from Hanoi, and on the plane calling President Moon eight times – eight times, you know, please talk to the Chairman Kim and find out what he thinks. So he felt there some kind of regret or, you know, things like that. So I think his thinking framework is if he makes the two meet again, that this time will, you know, work. That’s the pretty much basic thing. But as Ambassador Joe said, it’s because all the cards are revealed, so many things are on the menu. So probably better if we have third.

But I have a little different opinion, because now is more like a pride fight. And if go to the small deal, that means North Korea is winning and U.S. is losing. If
we go back to – go to the big deal, that means North Korea is losing. So I think we need to add up a little bit more, maybe Yongbyon plus alpha or, you know, sanctions relief plus, some kind of regime security issues. But anyways, I think this is like North Koreans’, like, process of moving on.

And I want to have – you know, pay attention to, and I want you to pay attention to these. You know, after no deal at Hanoi, three arguments especially in Washington among hardliners are getting louder. Number one is sanction is working, so this is the time – it is time for push more, not to stop. The second one is finally – we finally found out that the genuineness of denuclearization, you know, Chairman Kim, so that means he has no intention to denuclearize. Third, actually limitation of top-down approach; that we have to go back to, you know, working-level negotiation.

And, actually, North Korea is well aware of this. And actually, they are building up in these three area. Number one, for sanction issues, they said, especially April, you know, speech by Kim Jong-un, saying: We are ready to tighten our belt and survive. Regarding two, genuineness, actually he tried to appeal his genuineness toward Russia and China, and international organization. I think number three is most important part. That’s why he tried to re-, you know, confirm the top-down approach is still usable, because he believes – some people – people who support this working-level negotiation is – actually don’t want this top-down approach is successful.

And same thing happened to President Trump and President Moon when they met in Washington April 11th. They reconfirmed that this top-down approach – of course, it has to be somehow negotiated in a working-level negotiation, but it has to be led by this top-down approach.

David Nakamura: Right. Dr. –

Victor Cha: Can I just – can I just say this idea that there’s a zero-sum tradeoff between a small deal and a big deal – I mean, I think some may frame it that way. But I think in reality looking at this next – I don’t know why they can’t do both, right? I mean, a small deal is only a problem if it’s not in the context of an agreement between the leaders on the big deal, right? The big deal being everything for everything – all the weapons for all the sanctions. And so if they can agreement on the big deal, at least in principle and in writing, that opens space for taking the same first step. Small deal, you know, Yongbyon plus alpha for some sanctions suspension. I mean, I think there’s a lot of room there.

So I think there’s a deal that could be made, right? But the working level’s important, because somebody’s got to set up leaders so that they can say in advance: That looks good to me, right? So that when they meet – and that’s why working – and we’re not just saying this because we’re all working-level stiffs. (Laughs.) It’s just for – it practically is the only way. It’s not just – in any field. In business, in any place, you know, leaders need that working-level people to set up the success for the meeting.
David Nakamura: I think that would be an interesting dynamic of how the White House would cast some sort of double deal, I guess you might call – or, that’s the wrong way to term it – but because that you’re – I think there is the truth that the media reporters would be sort of judging this against the complete collapse in Hanoi, with the idea that any kind of move to some smaller deal would be some concession by the U.S. And even if there was some bigger deal on the table or agreed upon, then the outer – you know, longer frame, unless it was very specific, it would be hard to know – or have confidence that they’d reached that.

But, Dr. Lee, I wondered if you had a thought on this.

Sang Hyun Lee: Well, looking back about the time of Hanoi summit, I would say the general mood of the South Korean government was quite festive, or too optimistic about the outcome. But actually, it turned out that no deal/agreement. So given that – actually, I – there was many report that President Moon Jae-in was preparing a big announcement on March 1st. You know that March 1st is a big day in Korea, is quite an important national day. And according to the report, the announcement contained a very ambitious plan to engage North Korea both politically and economically. But in a sense that – the no deal at Hanoi functioned as a kind of an obstacle to announce that ambitious plan.

So, nevertheless, after Hanoi summit, as far as I understand Korean government is still optimistic, still preparing a lot of big, ambitious plan to engage North Korea. And perhaps that engagement of the plan include, for example, Kaesong Industrial Complex, resuming Kumgang tourism project, and also many inter-Korean joint economic ventures. Eventually, these – how much South Korean government can implement these will depend on the actual progress of denuclearization.

And about the Hanoi summit, I – for the future of the talk between the U.S. and DPRK, I would say we need to focus on two things that I think important.

One is the – at least Hanoi summit very clearly indicated what’s the bottom line that both sides demands. The U.S. point of effort, really, was the one thing, and North Korea also clearly meant that lifting sanctions features quite important for their economic survival.

And second point is that some kind of a review is necessary for top-down approach that both U.S. and DPRK have adopted so far. You know, since top-down approach may be a good way to open the trilateral dialogue, but at the same time it seems to me it turned out in Hanoi that that lack of political coordination within each level was quite the important factor that we must think about. So if there – if there is a third summit between the U.S. and DPRK possible, then perhaps working-level preparation and working-level agenda-setting, et cetera, it should be much more important than previous summits.

So if – and particularly you know that North Korea has a very – (inaudible) – political system, that the only person that can decide a policy and the only person that can answer authoritatively about the nuclear issue in North Korea is Kim
Jong-un. And even though there were many working-level contacts between U.S. and North Korean officials before the summit, the only – the final decision about how to denuclearize and also how to offer some kind of a give and take, it was dependent on Kim Jong-un himself. So given that, perhaps, you know, for the summit to be successful I would say top-down plus a kind of working-level preparation must be quite an important factor to think about.

David Nakamura: Joy, I wanted to come to you with a little – step back a little broader for the G-20. Not to weigh in on all the things the president’s going to do there, but he’s got a pretty quick trip to the G-20 as well. It’s, I think, two nights; it originally was going to be one, but I think the president was going to arrive and just hit the ground running. I think he’s going to now come a night earlier and sort of get maybe some – you know, get adjusted to the time difference and so on. But it struck me – and this is a difficult sort of question, but – you know, having covered the Obama administration, I know there was significant sort of work done to try to have the United States sort of broker a little bit better working relationship between Seoul and Tokyo, and there was a trilateral meeting – at least one, I believe, maybe two – between the three leaders I think in The Hague, if I remember, at a time when relationships were really, really struggling. I think at the G-20 the president’s going to have a trilateral, if I’m not mistaken, with Japan and India as part of the sort of broader alliance or broader framework of the administration’s Asia policy. Has there been any thought to sort of doing some sort of trilateral with Tokyo and Seoul, not necessarily on this trip but in general? If not, you know, can you talk at all about, you know, how important it is to have the three allies on the same page? Because we do get a lot of sense that there is still, you know, quite a bit of friction between Japan and South Korea generally, but certainly you see the two leaders, you know, working their relationships with President Trump to sort of get across different messages.

Joy Yamamoto: Yeah, so these are extremely important allies for the United States, and having – and getting these alliances right and having the ROK and Japan cooperate with each other is essential. We’re not going to be successful in negotiating with North Korea unless those alliances are strong and unless, frankly, that relationship between Japan and ROK are – is good.

Unfortunately, at this particular moment it’s not good between those two countries. And I think the U.S. government would love to be involved in bringing them together. But I think – but recognize – we recognize that the risk of doing anything, frankly, can be interpreted by one side as favoring the other. There’s no question that we – every chance we get we encourage both sides to work out these historical issues, these sensitivities, the current cases – forced-labor cases that they’re now disputing. And if anyone has a suggestion on where the U.S. government could be useful and helpful, I think we’re really open because, yeah, these are important relationships. And if there’s something we could do to help Japan and Korea resolve them, we would.

David Nakamura: I wondered also on G-20 if the – the president made quite a bit of effort in 2017, especially on a trip to Asia, to talk about North Korea and the importance. I wondered if the president in Osaka has any – if you have a sense – I know that
your role in that is limited, but if you have any sense of how he might — you know, how much the Korea issue will be part of the discussions with other world leaders and, you know, how that might come up.

He’s meeting, of course, with Xi Jinping. That mostly seems to be focused on trade, trying to nail down that trade deal. But certainly given what we’ve seen just in recent days with Xi Jinping’s visit, you know, will and how will the president try to sort of get that message across in Osaka, if you have any sense of that?

Joy Yamamoto: Yeah, so I don’t make predictions, and so I won’t make predictions. But I think you could assume that it — it would be natural that, considering Xi Jinping’s visit to Pyongyang, that there will be great curiosity about what messages were there and what — any ideas that Xi Jinping has on engagement with North Korea. This is a priority for the United States, North Korea’s denuclearization. So I would not be surprised if that’s on the agenda for almost all of his bilateral meetings.

David Nakamura: Victor, on Xi Jinping’s visit, I think I may have talked to you for this story; I did a piece about — a few — maybe a month or two ago about whether Trump’s escalating trade fight with Beijing could bleed over into his efforts to keep China onboard with the sanctions and pressure on Pyongyang on the nuclear question. And at the time I sort of — analysts told me at that time they didn’t see evidence that the two issues were necessarily affecting one another. I’m wondering now what you read into Xi’s visit to Pyongyang. You know, was he sending Trump any signals? Do you have any sense of whether that connects to the trade issue and puts more pressure on Trump to resolve that at all?

Victor Cha: I don’t think so. I think that — I certainly don’t think that Xi went to Pyongyang to try to help broker a deal for the United States. I just don’t see the Chinese doing that for the United States.

You know, for me the significance of that visit, what it means more broadly for China’s long-term strategy on the Korean Peninsula vis-à-vis the United States. Today China has twice as many railroads connecting northern Korea to China than the South has with the North. They have for over a decade extracted all the mineral resources out of North Korea. And it’s only a matter of time before they start financing One Belt, One Road energy infrastructure and highway projects in North Korea. So China is slowly growing its influence in North Korea.

And so when Xi goes to Pyongyang and says, look, let me — I know you want to reform, let me tell you about the latest face-recognition technology that we use for internal security, that is something I think the North Koreans would be very interested in in terms of reform and development. So you know, that I think is where the — where that — what that trip means and where that relationship is going, aside from the U.S.-China trade friction.

And so, you know, I think — I mean, it is — it is one of the big questions about engagement with North Korea. And we were talking about this at dinner last night, that you know — you know, particularly from the South Korean viewpoint,
the argument to Americans about engagement has always been about, you know, North Korea’s insecure, it’s weak, it wants attention, incentives work better than pressure. But if you want to make the argument to American hawks about engagement with North Korea, it should really be in the context of if we don’t engage China’s going to take over the northern part of the peninsula, and then unification – if it ever happens – is going to be much more complicated. And that’s from the South Korean-U.S. perspective.

And I think, you know, for the Washington swamp, you know, that is a more persuasive argument for engagement than to say, you know, let’s buy the horse for the fourth time, right? So –

David Nakamura: Let me jump to our panelists from Korea quickly. I want to do a little bit of a lightning round. Are we OK to have questions from the audience?


David Nakamura: Yeah, we’ll do that in one second. Just quick lightning round here. I think we’re going to 1:45?

Victor Cha: Yeah.

David Nakamura: Yeah. For our two panelists from Korea, I was interested in this. I was trying to think where – you know, maybe we should do a story at some point – we’re maybe not there yet – of which countries are looking and hoping for a Donald Trump reelection – (laughter) – in 2020, and one of the ones that came to mind and that people sort of signaled to me was South Korea because the president has done this engagement with the North. And I’m wondering if you can give a sense politically how the Moon government – how invested they are in campaign 2020 as they – are they hoping, do you think, for a Donald Trump – (laughter) – reelection? And I say they at the Blue House. And then I don’t know if the broader – a broader South Korean public, how they view it.

And then is there, you know, a thought about the Democratic field? We know a lot about Vice President Biden’s foreign policy, but is there a contingency plan in case – in case it goes that way?

Sang Hyun Lee: Well, there – if Trump is reelected, it will be controversial. If he fails, is also controversial from a Korean perspective. (Laughter.)

Well, you know, since some people – the opinion in Korea, as far as I understand, is quite mixed. Some people say that, ah, Trump, even though he is a very – (inaudible) – president, he is doing a very good job in handling with, like, China and North Korea with the tweets and everything he can do. But at the same time, he is kind of uncertainty himself because of his policy leadership style. And also because of that, there a lot of uncertainty arising from – that overcomes the typical policymaking processes.
So, you know, in one sense it may be good if he’s reelected, which would be – (inaudible). He can do some creative job in handling North Korean issue.

And if he fails, what happens? Perhaps a Democrat will take a more vigorous and a more complicated approach to handling North Korea. So in a sense there are both – (inaudible) – whether or not Trump really will be reelected or not.

So, well – (laughs) – of course it is a purely personal judgment, but if you ask many Koreans perhaps you – (inaudible).

David Nakamura: Dr. Kim, I don’t know if you have any thoughts on this.

Joon Hyung Kim: OK. And actually, as a liberal, as a progressive, actually I don’t agree with him in any sense except – (laughter) – his peace process and negotiation process with Kim Jong-un. So, having said that, actually, if he does some irreversible denuclearization somehow, partially – that’s why early harvest is important – then it doesn’t matter whether he is elected or not. But if he cannot do anything, then, you know, a Democratic, you know, government will, you know, reverse everything, so we will be more in trouble.

Victor Cha: So this is where I feel like – and I said this recently at Kathy’s (sp) forum – I feel like we are now in the post-engagement versus containment phase of the debate on North Korea, because we’ve just heard one of the most prominent progressives – (laughter) – in South Korea saying that Donald Trump would be good for the North Korea problem.

But my question then is, is Donald Trump good for the alliance? And unfortunately, I would say he’s not good for the alliance, right? And so, you know, I think there are – we are now in a completely new area – (laughs) – of conversation that don’t fit with any of sort of the standard established guidelines of where people fall on certain issues.

Joe, I don’t know if you feel – if you feel that way, so.

Joseph Yun: You want him to be elected? (Laughter.)

David Nakamura: How are we voting, everybody? (Laughter.)

Joseph Yun: This is a very tough question because, I mean, for American voters, even if you want to look at foreign policy, you have to look at totality: Iran, Venezuela, trade, immigration, Mexico – and so all those things, and you have to weigh them. To me there’s no question. You look at both Europe, U.S., and Korea, there is a kind of a – I would say, you know, conventional wisdom no longer holds, you know? And in that sense, we’re looking at really shaken-up political spectrum.

And what, you know, my friend, Professor Kim said, you know, it does make sense if you’re Korean; that is, that’s the only thing that matters. But for Americans, there’s going to be many other issues that are there. So it’s –
David Nakamura: Yeah, complicated.

Joseph Yun: It’s a complicated question. It’s –

David Nakamura: That sounds like a – I have one more wild card for Joe, but let’s – maybe we can open up to questions. I don’t want to lose much time. Should I go in house here? Sue? Yeah. Does everybody have a mic?

Victor Cha: We have the mics.

Q: Just following on Victor’s comments, since the panel is on alliance, what are the biggest risks to the alliance? We know alliance is strong, but what is the risk? Is there potential daylight on North Korea? Is it Trump’s America-first orientation and protectionist policy? What should we be worried about? And since Joy cannot answer that question, perhaps a comment on where we are on burden sharing or OPCON transfer.

Victor Cha: Do you want to go first, Joy?

Joy Yamamoto: Also – (inaudible) – yeah. So I’m sorry, I can’t answer your broader question. But on burden sharing, the administration is reviewing its policy on burden sharing worldwide. I think the president has made it very clear that he wants our allies and partners to pay a fairer share, a greater share of the cost of protecting themselves. And so Korea comes under that. Once this review is over, we’re hoping that soon we will begin again negotiating the next Special Measures Agreement with Korea. And we will be asking for more of Korea’s contribution to the stationing of forces in Korea.

David Nakamura: Risks to the alliance? One of our guests from Seoul? Either Dr. Kim or Dr. Lee have any –

Joon Hyung Kim: As you said, I think it’s – you know, alliance in crisis is, like, a frequent menu for, you know, conservatives to criticize President Moon. But as you said, it’s strong as ever. And if he has no choice – you know, exclusive choice between the alliance and the North Korea, he probably make sure he pick the alliance.

So biggest risk is Trump, again. You know, Trump actually, his rhetorics – actually, people, in a way – because we are in, like, 2017; you know, friends, allies, we are in trouble. But Trump is kind of – was taking advantage of our situation to sell weapons and things like that.

But for me, in the future, I think it’s a good chance for – as a progressive, good chance for, because Koreans – South Koreans think this alliance is almost like a religion or a myth. I think in a way – in a way it is a good way to secularize this myth, because from – if progressive is making alliance trouble, then it’s going to be a problem. But on the other side, if Trump kind of, you know, secularize this
alliance, it is good chance for South Koreans more realistically and pragmatically.

Sang Hyun Lee: Well, I’ll say that still fundamental between alliance-to-alliance relationship, like government to government or people to people, is quite solid and good. But just below the surface, we have many uncertainties. That’s obvious, right? Burden sharing is one issue. And if peace regime discussion is (in full sway ?), perhaps the future – what’s the role of USFK? And what about the future fate of United Nations Command on Korean Peninsula? That is one thing.

And also, what’s happening – look at what’s happening these days. Chinese communications company Huawei is a big issue for Korean companies as well. Just a few years ago, we have suffered from further deployment and China that subtly bends the Korean economy. So in Huawei case, perhaps impact may be much more significant for Korean economy and Korean economy – or Korean telecommunication companies like LG Uplus and something like that.

And also, think about what about Korea’s position in Indo-Pacific Strategy? U.S. and Japan is enhancing that discussion, but largely Korea look like a blind spot in that discussion. So those issues – each of those issues may be quite a significant challenge for Korean-U.S. relations in the coming days.

David Nakamura: Victor, I think you –

Victor Cha: Yeah. I mean, what I would like to see in terms of – in answer to Sue’s question in terms of the alliance is really – sure, North Korea is the number one issue, but really a focus on all the other things that the United States and Korea are doing. So, like, when I think back to when – you know, when we were doing this in the Bush administration, of course we had a progressive government. We had to talk a lot about North Korea. But at the same time, the South Koreans were sending troops to Iraq. They had a PRT in Afghanistan. We had a Green Growth Alliance. We did Visa Waiver. We had the Work, English, Study program. You know, we had a whole variety of things.

And also, I would direct you to a speech that Mark Lippert gave when he was ambassador where he talked about all the future areas of cooperation in the – it was a rich menu, you know, everything from development assistance to work in outer space together. So, you know, this is the proactive agenda of the alliance that I would like to see more of in the public narrative of the alliance. Right now it’s all about North Korea or it’s about 232 or it’s about burden-sharing, and then coming is OPCON transition, right? So these are all very difficult issues, but there’s a very positive, proactive agenda to the alliance.

It was either our morning speaker, Rich Nye – or Richard Armitage or Joseph Nye that said, you know, alliances are like tending a garden; if you – if you don’t take care of it, weeds are going to grow. And so we have to continue to tend to the alliance. And you know, I’m sure that Joy and her team are doing a lot of these things. I just would like to see it much more in the public narrative of the alliance, especially, you know, since the president is going to see Moon.
Joy Yamamoto: If I could just add, so – thank you, Dr. Cha. I think maybe we aren’t doing a good enough job of actually talking about, publicizing some of the things we are doing. So, in fact, under the New Southern Policy of South Korea and under the Indo-Pacific Strategy, we have projects that we are working on, including a water project, the Lower Mekong Initiative; women’s economic empowerment in Laos; cybersecurity throughout ASEAN. So, again, I think we just haven’t done enough on talking about the things that we are doing and that we are planning to work on together.

Victor Cha: Yeah. I would love to see President Trump talking about U.S.-South Korea cooperation on women’s empowerment – (laughter) – but for some reason I don’t see that happening.

David Nakamura: We had a couple more questions. How about back here? Back there.

Q: Yeah. Thank you. Mike Billington with the Executive Intelligence Review and the Schiller Institute.

Ambassador, you referenced the – on the Trump question, the – Venezuela, Iran, North Korea, so forth. But I think really that all of those should be subsumed under the question of whether Trump is going to be successful in his fundamental commitment, which he repeats over and over again, that he wants to establish close relations with Russia and China. And this next week is absolutely crucial in that, obviously, because of these two extremely important personal operations in which he has a chance to get out from under the anti-China, anti-Russia hysteria from the British, from the Congress, from the press, from his own Cabinet. And I would like you to comment on that, the question of that personal diplomacy which we’re going to see with Xi and with Putin next week – this week.

David Nakamura: So who – was that for Ambassador Yun?

Joseph Yun: For me? (Laughter.) Yes and no. (Laughter.)

My own assessment is that in any of these areas he has yet to hit a homerun. You know, maybe the exception of Mexico. You know, I think there he got some result, and then Mexicans were coming round to it.

The problem – the area that we’re all intimately familiar with with North Korea is that tensions are down, but the underlying reason for tensions – which is nuclear weapons in North Korea – have not been addressed. Rather, they have been stockpiling more and more. So you can see that, I mean, if you were to, you know – you know, blow the final whistle now, obviously, in North Korea it’s been a failure. But final whistle has not been blown yet.

David Nakamura: I think I saw a hand up way back there. That woman back there, maybe.

Q: Hi. I’m So-yong Kim (ph) with RFA, Radio Free Asia.
So recently Steve Biegun, the special envoy for North Korea, expressed a biggest frustration and challenge when he had a negotiation with his counterparts. He said that because – I think David mentioned briefly about because their counterparts don’t have any authorization to make a decision, so he couldn’t really move forward with the negotiation. And we don’t really see that that nature – natural structure going to change any soon. So what’s the – so my question is, so even – we all know that – the importance of having that working-level negotiation talks, but what’s the – what can be practical, best outcome from those working-level negotiations if they don’t really have any power to make a decision? Thank you.

David Nakamura: Dr. Kim or Victor?

Joon Hyung Kim: I think that’s a common question from people who really, you know, worry about the limitation of top-down approach. And before I answer that directly, I want to, you know, raise the arguments that raised by two panelists. One is that by Victor. We talked about we shouldn’t have this dichotomous in the category of – and relations between the small and the big. And actually – another one is actually the working level in negotiating you talked about, because right now even if we think it’s realistically, yes, we need to kind of bend a little bit so to accommodate an interim agreement. But the official position right now that Trump is holding is the deal, and Mr. Bolton’s proposal, at least for now. And it is – for them, it actually is bringing this time clock to a pre-Singapore era. Because they think Singapore is a turning point. So new kind of relation of trust.

So before – somehow the U.S., you make them sure about the change of – this change of positions. So they think it’s talking about the working-level solutions and talking about this big deal. They’re not going to come to the table. So the purpose of our, you know, alliance is to bring him to come to the table. So right now talking about this working level is not going to help at this moment. I’m sure – I’m totally with Victor it is important. And directly to your question, actually, Ri Yong-ho and Choe Son-hui is much better person and people, and they know the – they know the failure now – experienced pure failure. No, I think they will come in different position if they can be sure about the trust.

Sang Hyun Lee: Well, let me add one point. In past two summits between – summits between Trump and Kim Jong-un, what we see is the deliverables. So you know to understand – better understand what should be done through working-level preparation, we must think about what’s the eventual deliverable in the future summit, meaning that there should be some fixed basket – gift basket, for example. Ideally, North Korea should come up with a little bit of progress declaration about their nuclear capabilities. I understand Trump may prepare some sort of a gift to Kim Jong-un, like partially lifting sanctions and so forth.

David Nakamura: OK. One more question, I think, right here.

So when I was on active duty in working in Panmunjom as the secretary of the United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission. One of my jobs was to actually communicate with my North Korean counterpart there in the Joint Security Area. And we were always looking for creative ways to actually try to engage. OK, always trying to deescalate situations. So we know that right now the engagement is at the top between the two. So if that sort of bogs down, can you see other ways of trying to move things forward? Any creative ways? Any thoughts that you might have about that?

Victor Cha: So, you know, the fourth tracking coming out of Singapore, as you know well, was the POW/MIA remains returns. That is essentially a way to directly engage the KPA. You know, so that may be certainty something. And President Trump likes that. And so that may be something. But I think, you know, at this point it’s not about creativity, about new tracks. It is, you know, as we get closer to a third summit – I think everybody agrees there’s going to be a third summit – what this really comes down to is the internal battles in both – in both governments, right? And within the North Korean government, it’s going to be about what do we do beyond Yongbyon. That’s what it’s going to be about. And, you know, clearly they know the United States wants the uranium program. So what are we going to do beyond Yongbyon?

And on the U.S. side, it’s going to be a knock-down, drag-out, interagency – we’ve been there. It is ugly. You know, all of us – some of have been – it’s ugly as anything – about how much sanction suspension – you know, sanctions lifting versus sanctions suspension. How – you know, how many sanctions should we suspend, and what’s the snapback, right? That’s – in the end, the brass tacks, that’s what it’s going to come down to facilitate, you know, a successful third meeting. I mean, the one thing good about a third meeting is that both leaders know that it can fail. Both leaders this time really are going to direct their lower people that we have to get an agreement. You know, we want an agreement this time. So maybe that’s perhaps the best way to connect the leadership with the working level.

David Nakamura: Right. It strikes me – I was going to say, if you have a third summit, I can’t imagine it – not going into it with them thinking they’re going to get some sort of deal. You see John Bolton a little bit on the ropes on Iran and other issues. (Laughter.) We’ll see how – but he certainly played a strong role, it appears, in Hanoi. So maybe to some surprise.

So I’ll just final – I’ll quick I think – maybe I sort of answered it myself. But do we think, the panelists, that we’re going to see some sort of deal before the end of the year, heading into Donald Trump’s reelection year, some sort of deal? I won’t say exactly what it is, obviously. But some sort of deal struck in some sort of big third summit? Do we think – does everybody think that’s what happens, or we think not so soon?

Victor Cha: I think – so the – so the Donald Trump who has president would probably want a deal, the Donald Trump campaigning in 2020 may prefer not to have a deal
because it becomes a big target for Biden and for everybody else. So – and I don’t know which Donald Trump is going to show up.

David Nakamura: I’ve heard the same thing about China trade.

Victor Cha: Yeah, exactly.

Sang Hyun Lee: Yeah, we’re going to have a deal, whether it’s a big deal, small deal, or medium deal. But there will be a deal.

Joon Hyung Kim: Yes, the moment of truth will come. The question is, can we make the best of it?

David Nakamura: Dr. Lee? I’ll skip Joy. (Laughs.)

Joy Yamamoto: Let’s say I hope there will be.

David Nakamura: You hope? (Laughter.)

Sang Hyun Lee: I hope agreement should be big; implementation may be small. So that’s what I expect.

David Nakamura: And, Joy, if you had any final thoughts, since I did skip you there. I don’t know if you have any final thoughts?

Joy Yamamoto: It’s OK. I would say that I hope that there’s a deal. I just –

David Nakamura: A lot of optimism that hopefully that we have a good – some sort of good deal.

But thank you all and thank you to the panelists. And, again, thank you to the Korea chair for a wonderful 10 years. Thank you all.

Victor Cha: Thanks. (Applause.)

(END)