

Andrew Schwartz: North Korea is the impossible state. It's a place that's stumped leaders and policymakers for more than three decades.

News Program: President Trump has canceled the planned summit.

Donald Trump: We're going to see what happens. We're talking to them now.

Andrew Schwartz: It has a complex history, and it has become the United States' top national security priority.

Donald Trump: North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States.

Speaker: President Trump made it clear that this time, in this administration, it would be different.

Andrew Schwartz: Each week on this show, we'll talk with the people who know the most about North Korea. CSIS's Victor Cha, Mike Green and Sue Mi Terry. In this first episode of The Impossible State, I spoke with Victor Cha. Victor was responsible for North Korea on the National Security Council staff of President George W. Bush, and he was one of the last United States officials to have negotiated directly with the North Koreans. He brings a rare perspective on North Korea's past and its present.

Victor Cha: This is Victor.

Andrew Schwartz: Victor, we had to urgently call you on the phone, because President Trump has canceled this much anticipated meeting, the summit with Kim Jong-un. So what's going on here?

Victor Cha: I think it does show that President Trump saw too much uncertainty in the Singapore Summit being so close, and even for someone who likes to operate on his gut instincts, and self-avowedly without much preparation. I think even for him, there was too much uncertainty, therefore the cancellation.

Victor Cha: The glass half-full is that there is a dialogue channel that has been established. I mean, he referenced it in, President Trump did, in his letter. Pompeo talked about it in his testimony, and so that may still be a challenge through which they can do pre-negotiations for an eventual summit in the future.

Victor Cha: Which, by the way, would be the normal way of doing these sorts of things.

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah, no, what is the normal way of doing these things?

Victor Cha: So the normal way is you do. You have a long, sometimes even eight month-long pre-negotiation to prepare the deliverables for a summit when the two leaders meet, and you use the meeting of the two leaders as both the endpoint

and the action-forcing event that pushes the negotiations along for eight months.

Victor Cha: So if that's what we fall back into, as a result of this cancellation, that's not necessarily a bad thing. The primary danger is if the North Koreans start testing more missiles, more long-range missiles, and they start choosing to test them at-range, rather than on a lofted trajectory.

Victor Cha: What that means is instead of testing them straight up into the air to see how far they can go, and measuring the height of the trajectory, they actually test them in the direction out into the western Pacific in the direction of US Territories like Guam or even Hawaii. That would be a very dangerous situation, because, I think, the US military is not going to stand for that, and there would be some sort of response.

Victor Cha: So if we head down that direction, then clearly the cancellation of this summit does not make us more secure. In the short term, it'll make things more dangerous.

Andrew Schwartz: Alright, so let's talk about the letter that President Trump wrote directly to Kim Jong-un announcing that he was gonna cancel the meeting.

Victor Cha: Usually, I mean, I used to do this. These things are usually crafted by the NSC staff and then polished by the National Security Advisor, and the president may make a few small changes. But this looks like it came directly from his mouth. The way it was written, the personal way in which it was written.

Victor Cha: It was quite interesting, and so Trump likes to do things personally, and if he wants to make these sorts of personal contacts with the North Korean leader and thinks that's gonna be effective in terms of pushing diplomacy forward, that's his style of doing business.

Andrew Schwartz: So you think this was Trump sitting in the Oval Office, calls in an aid and says, "Take a letter," and dictates it out old-school style, and that's it.

Victor Cha: I mean, certainly looks like it to me. I mean, when I read the letter, I just, this doesn't look like a regular, presidential letter. And so in that sense, it was quite personal, actually.

Andrew Schwartz: So then why did the preparations for this summit not work out?

Victor Cha: At least what we gathered from Pompeo's testimony is that the US team, logistics team, preparing for this summit, was sending messages to the North Koreans and were not receiving any responses. And that was one of the reasons why they chose to cancel, and that's perfectly good reason.

Victor Cha: Having said that, and having negotiated with the North Koreans, you should never expect that they're gonna respond right away. I mean, that's just not the way they do business. When I had to go to North Korea for official business, when I worked at the White House, we had very little information about what our itinerary would be, or anything once we landed in the country.

Victor Cha: We found out once we got to the country. So in that sense, while I do understand why they felt it was appropriate to cancel at that point, on the other hand, that's not the way the North Koreans do business. And this could be another way of the Trump administration saying, "We're not gonna do business the way the North Koreans do it, and therefore we're gonna step away from this meeting for now."

Andrew Schwartz: Well, and this is really different, when you were working in the White House, you were working directly for George W. Bush on his National Security Council. And President Bush didn't meet with the North Korean leader directly. That was his strategy, right?

Victor Cha: He didn't think it was appropriate doing a meeting with the North Korean leader, but we still managed to get a three, four-year-long negotiating process that was able to cap and demolish, dismantle, some of their programs. So there is something to be said for having the professionals negotiate, and holding up the prospect of a summit for later on.

Andrew Schwartz: And when you were negotiating with the Koreans, and you were one of the lead negotiators, you were the deputy head of the six-party talks, for President Bush. What was it like negotiating with the North Koreans? It was pretty unusual, wasn't it?

Victor Cha: I mean, it was in a sense that they were sometimes unpredictable. They might show up late for meetings. They might not show up for meetings. They had a pretty dogmatic viewpoint with very little room for compromise.

Victor Cha: [crosstalk 00:06:36]

Andrew Schwartz: Unlike this one, this is bilateral. This is the US and North Korea. The six-party talks was something different. What were the six-party talks? Who was in the six-party talks?

Victor Cha: So the six-party talks were the two Koreas, the United States and China, Japan, and Russia. And they were created by President Bush, because he wanted this not to just be a US-North Korea negotiation, because North Korea's nuclear weapons were a threat to all the countries in the region, not just the United States. And then, they were hosted by China.

Andrew Schwartz: It's interesting. I mean, and it's interesting how there was some structure to your negotiation, but this negotiation seems like day-to-day, hour-to-hour, so what's going on here?

Victor Cha: We have to remember that the way this issue came to the Trump administration was in 2017, they were the recipients of 20 ballistic missile tests and one hydrogen bomb test, with no negotiation at all. No diplomacy, no negotiation at all.

Victor Cha: And then, out of nowhere, President Trump decides, "I'm just gonna meet with them. I'm just gonna meet with the North Korean leader." So right then and there, you have two data points that show a high degree of unconventionality, whether you're talking about on the policy side, or even on the escalation side. Just two very unconventional starting points.

Victor Cha: And so from the very beginning, this started off on a very irregular path to the extent that we can talk about North Korea interaction as being regular, on a very irregular path.

Andrew Schwartz: As we speak, the leadership in South Korea, President Moon, called an emergency meeting at the Blue House, and he said that they were attempting to figure out what Trump means. And what do you think the South Koreans are thinking?

Victor Cha: The South Korean president was just here. My guess is that it wasn't clear to him at that time that he was gonna cancel the meeting. That's why you have this emergency meeting taking place in Seoul. I think the South Koreans are probably extremely concerned about the situation right now.

Victor Cha: They're probably worried that the North Koreans may start testing again, because they said they were not gonna test while the US and DPRK were in dialogue. And if dialogue completely breaks down, we might witness more ballistic missile tests.

Victor Cha: From the very beginning, this whole story, when it started, was very irregular, very unconventional, and if this is the end of one phase, it is the end of this very irregular process. But like we discussed earlier, if it gives way to lower level dialogue channels that had been established, all the way up through to Secretary Pompeo, and they continue to have negotiations on what the parameters of a summit will be, and what the deliverables, the policy-

Andrew Schwartz: I think that would make the South Koreans and the Japanese and others in the region feel a little bit better, because as of yesterday, we were talking about pulling our troops out. We were talking about demilitarizing the peninsula, and if they're gonna start testing weapons again, we certainly can't pull our troops out.

Andrew Schwartz: People are worried about us pulling our troops out as President Trump said might be part of the deal.

Victor Cha: I mean I think if we go around the region, so ... South Koreans I think very concerned. Japanese, probably happy, happy that this thing is not going forward, that there might be a little bit more policy rationality built-in before the United States puts its president forward.

Victor Cha: China probably is somewhat content with this outcome, too, as long as it goes back to a dialogue tract, because I think they were quite concerned that the United States was moving to quickly and might cut China out of a deal.

Victor Cha: The Russians, hard to say. I mean, I think the Russians certainly support stability and dialogue on the peninsula, but given the state of US-Russia relations today, they probably don't see diplomatic projects taking place around the world right now.

Andrew Schwartz: Even with all the other things going on in the world, this is what most of our focus, if not all of our focus is on. Is that right?

Victor Cha: Yeah, I think so. I mean, if we count walking away from trade agreements and other things as diplomacy, I guess, and we're busy in other parts of the world. But in terms of actually building something, trying to build, move, build, use diplomacy to move from a position of conflict to a position of negotiation. I mean, this is primarily the place where the State Department and the White House have been preoccupied with their time.

Andrew Schwartz: Well let's talk about the stakes here. I mean, we all know about nuclear, but if we were to pull our troops out, if there was to be a denuclearization process that was verifiable, doesn't this open up a whole new set of foreign policy issues for us to deal with?

Victor Cha: Yeah. I mean, if we did as people were concerned President Trump might play fast and loose with the US troop presence on Korea, that would've had all sorts of ripple effects in the region, if it had happened. I think many people are, I mean that's probably one of the things that most people are thankful for, that there isn't ... because this summit doesn't look like it's happening just next month, that there isn't going to be those sorts of discussions or those sorts of negotiations.

Victor Cha: But we can't rule it out, because clearly the president at least, according to newspapers, has expressed a preference for trying to see if there is a way to draw down troops in Korea as part of a negotiation. And that is gonna be something, I think, that worries many allies, not just the South Koreans.

Andrew Schwartz: Does it worry you that whether we have deal, or there's no deal, that we can't prevent the North Koreans from sell WMD, proliferating it, nuclear ballistic

chemical, biological weapons to unfriendly regimes, or even non-state actors, like ISIS?

Victor Cha: Unfortunately, it is a very long history of them selling almost every weapon system they've ever developed to outside partners. They tried to sell the five megawatt reactor, nuclear reactor designed, to Syria, which was probably the most blatant case of trying to proliferate any part of their nuclear program, as opposed to conventional weapons, or even ballistic missiles.

Victor Cha: So yes, it's a very big concern. In the current issue of Foreign Affairs that I wrote with a co-author of mine, we looked at this very carefully and tried to come up with a scheme for how you can try to prevent proliferation by North Korea in the future.

Andrew Schwartz: How do you do that?

Victor Cha: So I think the most important thing is just to really try to prevent proliferation by sea, and then that would be with Japan and Korea. And then, on the land, by China and Russia. None of those countries have an interest in seeing North Korea proliferating materials or weapons through the land borders to China or Russia, or outwards from the sea to other actors in the Middle East or other places.

Andrew Schwartz: I suspect that's gonna be an issue we keep talking about on this podcast.

Victor Cha: Yeah, I certainly think so. Yes.

Andrew Schwartz: And in the meantime, as of now, the summit's off, but I have to ask you, what's gonna happen with the commemorative coin that the White House made up for the summit?

Victor Cha: Oh, that's definitely a collector's item. It's definitely a collector's item. The coin did, apparently the coin mentions the year 2018, but not the date. So it may still be relevant. We just don't know.

Andrew Schwartz: And before you go, Victor, you're the one who coined the term the impossible state to describe North Korea. Why do you call it the impossible state?

Victor Cha: The impossible state, to me, refers to a unique country, which is North Korea in the sense that, by today's metrics of a nation state, this country should have fallen apart a long time ago. And for 30-40 years, people including myself, had been predicting that it would not be able to last.

Victor Cha: And yet in spite of all the odds against it, it still is there. So in that sense, it truly is an impossible state, despite all of the factors that weight against their ability to sustain themselves.

Andrew Schwartz: If you have a question for one of our experts about The Impossible State, email us at [impossiblestate@csis.org](mailto:impossiblestate@csis.org). If you want to dive deeper into the issues surrounding North Korea, checkout Beyond Parallel. That's our micro-website that's dedicated to bringing a better understanding of the Korean Peninsula. You can find it at [beyondparallel.csis.org](http://beyondparallel.csis.org).

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