

Center for Strategic and International Studies

The Impossible State Podcast

“Stunning Our Allies”

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

REPORTER: (From recording.) There's Kim Jong-un right there. Here comes the president of the United States. And just like that, history has been made.

REPORTER: (From recording.) President says he'll halt U.S. military exercises with South Korea while these negotiations continue.

MR. SCHWARTZ: It has a complex history and it has become the United States' top national security priority.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: (From recording.) We're prepared to start a new history. And we're ready to write a new chapter between our nations.

SECRETARY OF STATE MIKE POMPEO: (From recording.) The ultimate objective we seek from diplomacy with North Korea has not changed. The complete and verifiable and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is the only outcome that the United States will accept.

MR. 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 episode of The Impossible State, we're calling it Stunning our Allies. We're talking with CSIS's Victor Cha and Mike Green. Victor is the former deputy head of the U.S. delegation to the six-party talks during the George W. Bush administration. Mike was the senior director for Asia on the National Security Council for George W. Bush. Mike joins us here in the studio and Victor by phone from New York to talk about the outcome of this historic Singapore summit.

Guys, what do we know about this agreement? And what should we look for in this agreement? Victor?

VICTOR CHA: So it's quite vague, as statements go. We've had two previous agreements with North Korea on denuclearization, which is, of course, the key to all this. And I think you can say without question that the statement between the two leaders yesterday is far more vague than anything we've had in the past. So just a – just so everybody knows, you know, we went into this wanting denuclearization by the North Korean leader in a substantive, unambiguous statement, with a clear commitment to a full declaration that could be verifiable along a specified timeline.

And I think it's fair to say we got none of those things. What we got was a reiteration of an old formulation that the North Koreans have used for years now, which is denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula – and I think they were able to get to the word “complete.” Diplomacy is all about language, and so I guess they would point to the word “complete” as being important. But, again, it's a very vague statement.

So in terms of steps forward or backwards, for the two leaders it's a step forward because we've never had a meeting between the two leaders of the two countries. But in terms of the – you know, the

progression of 25 years of diplomacy, trying to move the ball forward on North Korean denuclearization, this particular statement did not take us very far forward.

MICHAEL GREEN: And Kim Jong-un got two things he probably expected out of the summit, and then a third surprise bonus for good behavior. First, the fact of the summit has been a boon for him. He couldn't even get a meeting with Xi Jinping, the leader of China, North Korea's erstwhile ally, because he had been defying the international community with nuclear tests – missile tests. He's now –

MR. SCHWARTZ: This is only his third meeting with a leader of a country, is that right?

MR. GREEN: Yeah. Donald Trump opened the door for everyone to meet with Kim Jong-un. So –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right, because he met with the South Korean leader twice.

MR. GREEN: Twice. Xi Jinping twice. He's going to see Putin, probably Abe, and he will probably be invited to address the General Assembly of the U.N. We know the North Koreans have wanted a summit with the American president, in effect to show the world that their nuclear weapons and missiles are now accepted by the leader of the free world, and they got that big check. The second thing they got going into this was some relief from sanctions. The U.S. isn't going to back off on sanctions, but China is 90 percent of North Korea's trade. And they are already backing off and will back off more because of this. Two big wins.

He probably knew that going – just the summit itself helped get that. The surprise bonus for Kim Jong-un was Donald Trump's unilateral statement that we would end our military exercises with our allies, which he did not clearly tell us first. So Seoul and Tokyo now are reeling from this surprise announcement. Set against a backdrop of an unnecessary statement the president made that he hopes to eventually get troops out of Asia, which, you know, is really unnerving, I think, in the region. So, yeah, three points on the board for Kim Jong-un. Nothing in the statement for us on denuclearization. But everyone kind of knew it would go over to Pompeo next. I think that's where we'll look to see if there's anything more concrete. Hard to see how he gets much when the leverage has dissipated, but that's kind of where we're going to look to see the fine print.

MR. SCHWARTZ: OK. So, Mike, you just mentioned something everybody's now talking about, the Trump promise to end – or to suspend military exercises. This caught our allies, South Korea, Japan, off guard. And it also caught the Pentagon off guard. Tell us what this is all about.

MR. GREEN: Well, the North Koreans have wanted – and the Chinese and Russians – us to freeze or to stop doing military exercises with our allies. The North Korean argument is, well, it creates a hostile environment. The Chinese and Russian view is – for strategic reasons of their own, having nothing to do with North Korea – they want our alliances in Europe and Asia to start, you know, rotting on the vine, withering, going away.

MR. SCHWARTZ: It's in their interest for our alliances to dissipate.

MR. GREEN: It's in their interest. It's in their interest. And so the president appears to have handed them that. And as Henry Kissinger said in testimony in the Senate on this one, exchange a freeze in our military exercise for a freeze in North Korean missile launches is outrageous because their

missile launches and their nuclear tests violate multiple security council resolutions. Our military exercises have been going on for decades and are necessary so that our troops and our allies are ready to respond to North Korean threats at a time when that threat is more serious. And nothing in this agreement has made the threat go away or reduce.

So we've – in a way, it's not an exaggeration to say it's a bit of unilateral disarmament that we didn't talk to our allies about. The fact we didn't coordinate it with our allies is a stunning blow, because it will suggest to China and Russia you can cut deals with Donald Trump that leave the allies out in the cold and get away with it. So I think Mattis and Pompeo probably are going to be desperately trying to put that Humpty Dumpty back together again, because we will be in a very weak position in Asia and globally if the word is out you can cut a deal with the president and undercut American allies.

MR. CHA: I agree with everything Mike said. I mean, to call these exercises provocative – which is what the North Koreans say – is just fundamentally a misnomer. I'm sure they do it intentionally. President Trump probably said it unintentionally in the press conference yesterday. All of our research shows that these exercises do not cause North Korea to be provocative and angry. In, you know, our Beyond Parallel data sets going for 50 years, looking at all of the exercises. At two annual exercises a year, they are fully – they are entirely for defensive purposes.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Beyond Parallel being the micro-website that we have that's BeyondParallel.org, which traces a lot of this.

MR. CHA: Right. We trace all this stuff. And these exercises are purely defensive. The North Koreans have been invited to come and observe the exercises. They have – they have rejected that. And they are what keep the peace on the Peninsula. They are not what create war. I mean, they are what – they are the sort of stable staple of readiness and conventional deterrence on the peninsula. And so that's not a negative thing. That's a positive thing.

The second thing, as Mike said, is if we now go around the region, like Pompeo's going to be on Seoul and Tokyo, then he's going to Beijing. And, you know, the allies, that's going to be the number-one issue they're going to ask about, what is going on with the exercises. And if Pompeo starts walking that back publicly, which he probably will be – you know, asked questions about it while he's in the region – then that sets off, again, the negative spiral in the U.S.-DPRK relationship, because then the North Koreans say, oh, you know, you guys are not keeping your word, so on and so forth. I mean, the fact that this was not written down anywhere and the president just blurted it makes you worried about what else did he agree to that he's not telling us.

But, you know, doing things like that – Mike's absolutely right. It's very bad for the alliances. And it's actually not good for the diplomacy with North Korea, because it can actually send the diplomacy into these self-destructive, negative spirals.

MR. SCHWARTZ: How often do we do exercises with South Korea?

MR. CHA: We do them twice a year. There's one in the late summer, August/September. And there's one in the spring, usually March/April. I mean, because of all of North Korea's provocations in 2017, there were many supplementary exercises that were added to the exercise cycle. But those are the two main – the two main exercises twice a year. So the first real test of whether, you know, the administration is going to get any results from North Korea, and the timeline – although there is no

specified timeline – will be August in that sense, because in August we're going to have to make the decision as to whether we're going to carry out the August exercises or not. And that will put pressure on the negotiations, because the negotiations will have to yield a deliverable before there can be a decision to not do the exercises.

MR. GREEN: So it's possible this all unravels this summer when Pompeo steps up to do the fine print, which doesn't exist now, and gets nothing and recommends we continue our exercises, we do it, and the whole thing falls apart. But actually, the more likely scenario is the North Koreans give some fig leaf, mint leaf, for the president on this one. You know, maybe dismantling a one – there's talk of a rocket testing site, or something they don't need.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah, tell me about that. President Trump said that he threw in something on the way out. He said our technology picks up that you have a rocket testing site. Can you dismantle it? And that Kim Jong agreed to it. What's that?

MR. GREEN: Well, we don't know the details. But the administration's been looking for some made for TV demonstration North Korea might be serious. So reportedly Secretary Pompeo wanted the North Koreans to turn over warheads. They wouldn't do it. So now what's on the table is possibly North Korea shuttering a rocket test site. Victor may know which one they're talking about. If it's Taepodong, their three-staged missile liquid fuel test site, they don't really need it anymore. So you know, Kim Jong-un would be smart to –

MR. CHA: No, I think – I think what they – I think what they agreed to was – what Trump said they agreed to was a rocket engine testing site, not a launch pad. It was a rocket engine testing site, yeah.

MR. GREEN: Right. Right. That's what I'm talking about. Right. So the Taepodong is liquid fueled and that testing site they don't need anymore.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Trump told the media about this concession. He said: I got that after we signed the agreement. Do me a favor, we've got this missile engine testing site. We know where it is because of the heat. It's incredible, the equipment we have, to be honest with you. I mean –

MR. CHA: (Laughs.) He probably wasn't supposed to say that.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right? It doesn't sound like that was something for public consumption.

MR. GREEN: Well, Victor's right. This could fall apart because Pompeo doesn't have anything concrete and we have to decide on the exercises. I think the president is on a roll and is enjoying this and will do what he can to keep it going. And I think Kim Jong-un has a lot of incentive to keep it going because it gets him this U.N. General Assembly speech, it reduces sanctions, gives him prestige.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Like you said, he's going to be – the world's opening up to him.

MR. GREEN: Yeah. He can – he can resume testing when he wants. And he'll keep working on his nuclear weapons in all likelihood. But he may find something that's perhaps at this liquid-fueled rocket engine testing site – and we do know where it is; it's not hard to find – but they may not need that anymore. Just like the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site under the mountain, which they said they

were going to blow up, but, A, the mountain was collapsing from numerous tests. And, B, the explosion, as Barbara Starr of CNN reported accurately, was so small that nobody thinks it actually destroyed the site. But I think they'll try to find some symbolic thing to give the president cover and a bit of TV pictures and stuff to keep this going.

MR. SCHWARTZ: All right. But we gave up something real here. We gave up one of our – at least one, or we said we were going to give up at least one of our two-yearly exercises. What does that do to our readiness on the peninsula?

MR. CHA: It doesn't help it. I mean, you know – I mean, the reason you exercise is for the purpose of readiness. I mean, if you don't exercise, you're eroding your own security because they need to – you know, they need to be able to train. And one of the things that's unique about the Korean theater is that there are not many places where the host government will allow the United States military in exercising to drop live munitions, right? And so this is a very important aspect of training for the U.S. military.

And the president said war games. So I would think – I would imagine that he's referring to the major exercises that happen in the spring, which are these large military maneuver exercises involving both U.S. and ROK forces. But he could have been referring to all of the exercises, which would be – again which would be very bad in terms of our readiness, which keeps the peace on the peninsula. It doesn't create war on the peninsula.

MR. GREEN: I think the readiness issue's real, as Victor points out. It's – you know, the Pentagon could do the tabletop exercises and computer-generated piece and get through to next spring. It will hurt us. It won't necessarily be crippling if we're only postponing for a little while. I think the larger impact is from the fact the president did this over the allies' head.

MR. CHA: Right. He opened the door.

MR. GREEN: With the leader of the guy aiming nuclear weapons at them. I mean, that is really unprecedented in post-war history.

MR. CHA: That's a pretty tough blow. Yeah.

MR. GREEN: Yeah. The closest thing would be Nixon going to China and not telling the Japanese until two hours beforehand, or something like that. But ultimately that was in Japan's interests.

MR. SCHWARTZ: That's a big deal.

MR. GREEN: This is a big deal. And if you're an ally staring at a rising China, using its military and economic power to try to crowd the U.S. out of the region, and if you're looking at a North Korea that is building, you know, nuclear weapons, missiles aimed at you if you're Japan or South Korea, or even Australia, the fact the president of the U.S. would just cut a deal on something that you're involved in – these are joint exercises – man, that is – they're going to have to walk that back, because that will really linger and raise doubts and embolden our adversaries.

MR. SCHWARTZ: So if you're keeping score, and our allies definitely seem to be keeping score, in the last week President Trump's cut a pretty broad swath. And we've dealt two blows to our allies, starting with the trade summit last weekend.

MR. GREEN: So the question I think they're probably asking in London and Tokyo and Seoul and Canberra, and Bonn is: You know, is this a president who is – just loves the limelight, loves the theater, and is a little goofy, and maybe it works, but if it doesn't that, you know, we've got the Mattis, Pompeo, you know, grownups who will maintain our alliances? Or if there an actual intent here? Is this a guy who really meant it when he started saying 30 years ago: Our allies are ripping us off, we don't – we shouldn't be protecting them? And that the actual through-line here, the actual theme is retrenchment, and that maybe – and I think these – this last week has been a stunner for allies.

And they're – I'm sure they're debating this. They will not count us out, because they know that the U.S. is a big country, we have a divided system of government, we have a lot of institutions that are very internationalist. But this last week has got to have them wondering, which – are we seeing a performer who's just, you know, done something a little weird, but might work, that won't hurt us too much? Or is this an actual – is this the real Donald Trump, the one that we worried about, who wants to retrench from the world and really means it? You could read the Quebec G-7 and this summit and see either scenario. And if you're an ally, it's a bit unnerving.

MR. CHA: The perplexing thing about all this is he's doing it all under the veil of diplomacy, right, in the sense that this is – you know, this is the single major diplomatic initiative of the Trump administration, you know, in their year and a half in office. You cannot point to another issue in which they are doing diplomacy – diplomacy defined as taking a conflictual situation and trying to turn it into something that's more peaceful. We're walking away from trade agreements. You know, we're bashing our allies, things like that. But in terms of diplomacy, this is the main thing that we're focused on.

And we're – it's under the guise of that diplomatic project that all these issues about stopping exercises, talking about why should we have troops in the region? It's really expensive. You know, it's really expensive to fly a bomber from Guam to the Asian mainland. You know, all this sort of stuff is coming out in the discussion of diplomacy. So, you know, for people like Mike and I, who care about the alliance and think alliances are good for U.S. security, they're important instruments of power accretion for the United States, you know, you're put in this awkward position of saying, you know, why am I against peace? I'm not against peace, but I want to make sure that our alliances are strong.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, you both talk to our allies on a regular basis. Victor, I know you've been in communication with the South Koreans. What's their early take on this?

MR. CHA: So, I mean, on the first – so, first, they were very worried. They had no idea who this summit was going to go. The South Korean president tried desperately to try to script both the North Korean leader and President Trump. He initially wanted to come to Singapore and be a part of these meetings, but I think the United States, and Trump was in particular, was against that.

So I think there's a sense of relief that the optics were good, the atmospherics were good. You know, they got some agreement, which is better than no agreement. But at the same time, they were taken aback by this announcement that exercises would be suspended. That was not, I think, something that they expected to see. And then in addition to that, you know, for the South Koreans, they have

elections. They had elections the day after the summit. So they were partially distracted, even as they were paying attention to this meeting.

I mean, overall I think the meeting is a positive for South Koreans. It's probably helpful to the incumbent government, because they will – you know, I think it will go positively in terms of their elections – their local elections of mayors and governors. But you have to still wonder that they're still a little bit concerned that this president is quite unpredictable. And if he – you know, in that one-on-one with Kim or in any of the other bilats, if he talked about suspending exercises, who knows what else he talked about with the North Korean leader with regard to troop levels of nuclear umbrellas, or any of these other things.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Mike, you talk to Japan all the time. What are the Japanese saying?

MR. GREEN: Well, Prime Minister Abe is going to put a brave face on this. It doesn't help him to fight with Trump. It shows weakness in the face of the North Koreans. It shows weakness in the face of the Chinese. And the Japanese public is not punishing him yet for basically standing with President Trump. But you scratch a little below the surface and you get Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. The Japanese government, and public, and media are just sort of outraged. They might get a little bit of compensation if the president raised the fate of Japanese abductees with Kim Jong-un. He said he would. Even if he did, and it's not at all clear that the North Koreans are actually going to return any of them, that was the only real upside.

The Japanese public, the government's even more skeptical than we are about North Korean intentions. And they'll be very, very worried, as will other allies, about this – not the sort of weakness of the joint statement, not the kind of respect shown to Kim Jong-un, but the president unilaterally announced things affecting their security without talking to them, to the North Korean leader and the world. That part is deeply unnerving. I think the Japanese government is going to put a brave face on it. I think they're going to start looking at their own weapon systems and things for hedging for offensive capabilities.

MR. SCHWARTZ: You mean looking –

MR. GREEN: Not nuclear weapons, but they've already announced they're interested in – they've leaked that they're looking at attack weapons, which they've not had since World War II. You know, surface-to-surface, ground-to-surface missiles that could hit North Korea from Japan. They're going to start looking at that. I think Trump will welcome that. It's more arms sales. But they're not going to distance from the U.S. They're going to double down. They're going to try to get us to commit to do more joint training, as much as possible. The Japanese have, in John Bolton and in Mattis, likeminded people within the administration.

I think I would venture that there is more common – more common view between Mattis, Pompeo, Bolton, and Abe, than between all of them and Donald Trump on some of these issues. And so behind the scenes, if you look for it, you'll see that. You'll see the allies, particularly the Japanese, working with the national security team to try to get things back in the box a little bit after the president's statements today.

MR. SCHWARTZ: All right. So let's talk about that in terms of the – President Trump's staff, his Cabinet members – Secretary of State Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Mattis, National Security

Advisor John Bolton. But before we even talk about that, how about the other leadership in this town, Capitol Hill? The – both sides of the aisle seem skeptical of this deal.

MR. GREEN: Well, this is – this is when we need John McCain. There are a lot of little John McCains. There are a lot of future John McCains. Good friends of CSIS – Senator Dan Sullivan, Joni Ernst, Cory Gardner, Democrats like Jack Reed who would be concerned about this. Would want the diplomacy to work, would want to support the president on the diplomacy, but not shoot balls at our own goal while we're doing it. But without McCain there, their voice is just not as powerful. And I think the Democrats are trying to discipline the president. They're trying to demand results. But as Victor was saying, the president's saying it's all about diplomacy. And the Democrats are finding it difficult to get their voice out when it seems like they're opposing diplomacy.

So politically the president actually has put himself in a pretty good spot domestically. It'll be hard for people to slow him down. Everyone's playing catchup. I think you'll see the Congress call hearings. I think you'll see some movement. But without John McCain and with, you know, Paul Ryan on the way out, the president has a little bit of a free field.

MR. CHA: Well, and the other thing is that Congress – they actually have a very important role to play, because if we ever start to lift sanctions the, you know, Congress has passed legislation that puts these sanctions into U.S. law. So the burden will be on the administration to certify, to prove that North Korea has undertaken the actions that remove the reason for the imposition of sanctions and treasury designations in the first place. The second thing is that if we ever actually move to progress in which they will – the North Koreans will do a full declaration, they'll suspend their activities at their nuclear facilities, they will undeniably be seeking some form of compensation, whether it's interim energy assistance or other forms of assistance, because they're stopping their nuclear operations. That, again, will require Congress to approve of anything that the United States wants to do.

Now, I testified at the Senate the week before the summit. And clearly there was a lot of concern among Democrats and most but not all Republicans that the administration was not consulting at all about what their game plan was going into Singapore. And so that can be – you know, that can be very problematic. And it's not – it doesn't give you a lot –

MR. SCHWARTZ: It doesn't seem that he's consulting his own staff either.

MR. GREEN: No.

MR. CHA: Right, yeah. But the other thing is that – I mean, the administration looks at that like Congress is sort of a nuisance and it's just – you know, it's just constraint on what we can do. Where in actuality, if you can get Congress to buy on or if you can use Congress's opposition as bargaining leverage at the negotiating table with the North Koreans, because you can say, like, we consulted with Congress. There's no way they're going to accept, you know, giving you 3 million tons of heavy fuel oil every year while you have frozen your operations. So that's just a non-starter. I mean, so there's more proactive and positive way of looking at consultations with Congress, which has not been taking place.

MR. GREEN: And this peace declaration, if it's going to be translated into a peace treaty, is going to require Senate confirmation. So this doesn't – somewhere down the road, the Congress has a big role. But for now, they're finding trouble exerting it. For example the NDAA, the National Defense Authorization Act, members of the Senate who were worried, who could tell the president was

going to say something about withdrawing troops. This was in the air before the summit. People could sense it. Members on the Republican side, more junior members, who tried to introduce language saying the president has consult Congress before he withdraws troops, were told no by their leadership, because they don't want to openly fight with the president on anything before the midterms.

So I think we're not going to have a peace treaty before the midterms. And so I think, you know, in a way, politically, the president will have – there will be hearings. There will be questions. But I think he feels like he can run with this ball, well – you know, for the rest of the year.

MR. SCHWARTZ: President Trump said that he was honored to meet with who he called Chairman Kim. I can't imagine that John Bolton or General Mattis – Secretary Mattis or Secretary Pompeo would have used that language.

MR. GREEN: Or John Kelly, or –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Or many of the people that are around Trump. Is President Trump not – you both just said he's not talking to his own staff. How are they going to carry out the work if they're not even being consulted in the first place, and if they don't really agree with the president's approach?

MR. CHA: I mean, they're going to have to. I mean, if the president – if this is what the president wants to do, they're going to have to go along. They can provide advice along the way, but they're going to have to go along. I mean, the treatment by Donald Trump of the North Korean leader, you know, really breaks every possible convention that we can think of in terms of past interaction. When Mike and I would try to get President Bush to write a letter to the North Korean leader when we were implementing the six-party talks, you know, there was a big discussion of how to address him. Do you address him as Mr. Kim, chairman? I mean, how do you address him?

Trump has thrown out all those conventions. And, you know, he's given a lot of respect to the North Korean leader. He thinks those things are important and that they will – you know, they will provide dividends in the future. If you treat him nicely, then he'll be nice to you. I think that's true in one sense, and that is when Donald Trump eventually makes a trip to Pyongyang, Kim Il-sung – Kim Jong-un will treat him nicely. But that does not necessarily translate into handing over all of their nuclear weapons.

MR. GREEN: You know, the open letter the president sent to Kim Jong-un pulling out the summit, whenever that was – it seems like years ago, but it was only a few weeks – was really striking because, A, he clearly dictated it. That was not written by staff. And, B, it had almost nothing to do with missiles, or nuclear weapons, or human rights, or any of the problems we face with North Korea. It was all about how North Korea was treating him. And Victor's, you know, right about this. The president seems focused on the relationship, how they're treating him, the dynamics. The details about denuclearization, about missiles, the president hasn't talked about them with any precision at all.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Human rights didn't even really come up.

MR. GREEN: He said that the big winners were the prison camps because of the summit, which is a little hard to justify.

MR. SCHWARTZ: So what does that even mean? Why are they the big winners?

MR. GREEN: Well, let me quickly finish on this earlier question you have before pivoting to that, because, you know, you asked about the staff and what do they do. Right now, they are in the caboose of a runaway train going downhill. And eventually the hill will end, and there will be tracks, they hope, and then they're going to have to keep it on the tracks.

And my sense of it is that, precisely because the president isn't precise, that they're going to now, in the details of things like the military exercises, like how we define denuclearization, try to get some, you know, concrete steps that are credible. They'll have a harder time because we've lost leverage in this summit. But I think they are preparing for the follow up, because the president's less focused on the details. He's more focused on the – you know, the pageantry and the television production quality, and things like that. So I think you'll see the staff try to move this in a better place in the coming weeks, if they – if they can.

Now, what do we think about Kim Jong-un's 100,000-plus people in camps – the Yodok camps, mining uranium until they drop dead, starvation levels, their family's outside the wire. Are they winners, as the president said? No. Unless the president decides he means it. I mean, he was saying in response to a question about human rights and these people suffering in the prison camps, what would they think, he was saying they're the biggest winners. If he means that, he does have a relationship with Kim Jong-un.

He could press this issue, and he could press it hard. And I hope he does. I don't know that he will, but if he really did want to follow up on his answer to that question, he would press Kim Jong-un to let people out of those camps, or to let refugees out. He would push hard on that. I don't think he will, but if there's an upside to this summit it's that there's a bit of a bromance going on. It's bizarre. It's with the cruelest leader on the face of the Earth and the leader of the free world. It's uncomfortable. It's morally offensive in some ways.

But, look, it's – it is what it is. And if the president wants to do something with it, he can. And it's not that Kim Jong-un is going to open his system or reform his system, but at the margins Trump could push him to let people out, to let people go, to ease up. That would be in some ways something that makes this all worthwhile. As it was, when he said they're the biggest winners, he was just congratulating himself in response to a question from a journalist that he thought was hostile. But if he meant it, he could actually probably use this summit to do something about it.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Victor, what do you think about this?

MR. CHA: I – you know, the image that came to mind were prisoners sitting in a cell applauding for President Trump. (Laughter.) It was just hard for me to rationalize it. It could be what Mike – it could be what Mike said. And I could imagine things that the North Korean leader could do, you know, short of opening up the camps, in terms of, you know, being open to more help with public health infrastructure or vaccination campaigns, or other forms of humanitarian assistance that could help the people of North Korea. Those people in the camps are probably the ones that will be the last people they let go, because they put them all in there because they're political prisoners or somebody has a vendetta against somebody in the party or the military hierarchy.

But the notion – I mean, it's – first, it's extraordinary that these two leaders meet. You know, Trump's embracing him. You know, he's having small talk with him. They're giggling together. You know, a 34-year-old man and a 72-year-old man. You know, it's almost like Trump was acting like an elder uncle to the young nephew, although –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah, he tried to play the paternal role, for sure.

MR. CHA: – yeah, that’s probably not a good place to be. (Laughs.)

MR. GREEN: Kept thinking of Billy Bush.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Billy Bush. (Laughter.)

MR. CHA: Yeah. (Laughs.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, what about the television production quality of all this? I mean, President Trump, other than the actual summit, stayed behind closed doors. Kim was painting the town. Why was he painting the town because a lot of people say he’s a good-time Charlie? And, you know, was he trying – was there some greater motive? Was he trying to send a message back to his people that he was enjoying this?

MR. CHA: Well, I mean, for one, he doesn’t get out much, right? I mean, before April – before April, as far as we knew, he has not traveled outside of North Korea. And this was really his first – you know, big trip. I mean, his half-brother, who he murdered, loved Southeast Asia and used to hang out there all the time. And Singapore’s a fun city. But I think, like you said, it’s partly about the domestic narrative too. I mean, of course, he’s young and he wants to go out. He didn’t have jet lag, while Trump had 13-hour jet lag. He wants – he wants to go out.

But it’s also for a domestic narrative where they are trying to portray a North Korean leader who, on the platform of his nuclear weapons, is now sitting on the global stage where everybody around him is trying to be his friend. And so the images of him walking through the streets of Singapore with – you know, with a security cordon and with foreign dignitaries all sort of by his side – I mean, that’s exactly the sort of image they want to portray at home. You know, as our colleague, Sue Terry says, this was a big image makeover for North Korea. And the walkabout in Singapore was just a very good – you know, it’s an integral piece of that.

MR. GREEN: Bread and circuses for the North Koreans, and a leader who – unlike his father and grandfather – remember, went to school in the West, he went to school in Switzerland. He knows how to play to audiences who watch TV abroad, clearly. And this was masterful and impressive, except for – as Victor said – except for the fact that this is a guy who tortured and murdered his own uncle, killed his half-brother with VX nerve agent, executed something like 100 senior generals. He’s not exactly a nice guy. He may be a bit of a party animal, but –

MR. SCHWARTZ: He seems to be trying to look like it, though. He has a big smile. He seems to be working on his personal brand for the world stage.

MR. GREEN: Yeah. And the president has given him the stage to do it.

MR. CHA: Yeah. And the other thing is that when you look at the pictures – I mean, we’re all watching the footage. You forget how young he is. I mean, he really is young, right? I mean, he’s in his – in his early 30s. And at points there, he looked kind of lost in terms of all the pageantry and all this stuff. So it is – you know, it is interesting in that respect.

I mean, one thing I just want to say for the record, and I know Mike feels the same way about this too, is, you know, we're being quite analytically critical of different aspects of this agreement and the relationship with the allies. But, I mean, nobody's against peace. I mean, this was a historic meeting between a sitting U.S. president, the North Korean leader, opening the door to peace – potential peace for the first time since 1953, when these – you know, because these two countries never talk to each other.

And so in that sense, you know, there is a positive. I mean, if we weren't doing this, we would be back where we were in 2017 talking about potential military conflicts. So in that sense it's an unconventional step, but it's one step that the president was willing to take that no other previous president was willing to take. And so – and it's, for the most part, supported in the region. So in that sense, you know, we have to give credit where credit is due.

The thing that we worry about, though, is when you're not – you know, the purpose of these meetings is to give something to get something. And what it sounds like now is we're giving things for vague promises in the future about denuclearization, which is not the space that we want to be in right now. And I think that – you know, for listeners, it's not that we're against peace. It's just that you enter these sorts of agreements and you enter these sorts of negotiations for a purpose. You're trying to get something. It's not just a feel-good moment. And the concern is when you're giving too much and not getting enough.

MR. GREEN: If the president went there, declared peace, I still would find, and do find, as I think many do, the praise for Kim Jong-un a bit hard to stomach. But if he made the gesture but held firm with our allies in deterrence, that'd be done thing. The worrisome picture today is that the president offered peace and a platform for Kim Jong-un. And in exchange, what the president wants is for us to pull out of Asia. That's the dynamic that we got a little bit of a hint of today. It might be wrong, but it's certainly what the president's saying. He'd like to get out of Asia. That's what he said. He didn't say I'd like to bring democracy to the North Korean people. He didn't say I'd like to strengthen our alliances. He didn't say, I'd like to have an Asia built on rules. He didn't say any of that stuff. He said, I'd like to get our troops out of Asia.

So if it's a trade of peace declaration and, you know, congratulations for Kim Jong-un in exchange for us pulling out, boy, that's – that runs against the grain of not only post-war American history in Asia but, as I write in my last book, "By More Than Providence," American history in Asia since Thomas Jefferson. As Theodore Roosevelt said in the Pacific, we don't cut and run. As it has a little bit of that flavor. And I'm – like I said, I think Mattis, Pompeo and others, they didn't see that coming. Or, if they did, they're going to be trying to put it back in a box, because that's not a trade that was worth having.

If it's peace but strength – and that means our allies – this is – we're at a point where, and maybe this is a good subject for a podcast, we maybe need to remind people why we have alliances. It's not that we're doing favors for these other countries. It's that we learned after Pearl Harbor and then again with the North Korean sneak attack on South Korea, we learned that if we're not forward, if we're not with likeminded states holding the line out there, then we're going to have to do it back here. It's a pretty basic formula that the president doesn't seem to believe. And may be something we have to pay more attention to, because it hasn't been questioned in a while.

And now that the president is seemingly questioning it, his own generals, members of Congress are forgetting why we're there. Because it's worked well for so long we kind of forget why we're out

there. And it's to keep us safe, because we pay less when our allies are there with us in a network of alliances that keeps the bad guys from coming this way. It's a pretty simple formula, and one that we probably have to revisit.

(Music plays.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: If you have a question for one of our experts about The Impossible State, email us at impossiblestate@csis.org.

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(Music plays.)

This is The Impossible State.

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