TRANSCRIPT

The Impossible State

“The View from Europe”

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SPEAKERS

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Andrew Schwartz: North Korea is The Impossible State. It’s a place that stumped leaders and policymakers for more than three decades.

[Al Jazeera news clip]: That first historic meeting in Singapore all now look set for round two.

[CNN news clip]: In the wake of that first summit though in Singapore, why does North Korea deserve a second summit?

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

President Trump: Kim Jong-Un is looking very forward to it, and so am I. We’ve made a lot of progress as far as denuclearization’s concerned.

Andrew Schwartz: Each week on this show, we’ll talk with the people who know the most about North Korea. On this episode of The Impossible State, we welcome a special guest who joins us by phone all the way from across the pond. Dr. Ramon Pardo is a KF-VUB Korea Chair at the Institute for European Studies and Reader in International Relations at King’s College London. Dr. Ramon offers a European perspective of U.S. North Korea relations and what’s happening in the Koreas. He joins me and CSIS’s top Korea expert, Victor Cha to discuss the hubbub ahead of the next Trump Kim summit.

Andrew Schwartz: Dr. Ramon Pardo, Dr. Victor Cha, we now know a location at a time for the second Trump Kim summit, February 27th-28th in Hanoi. What should we expect and what’s changed since the Singapore summit? Victor?

Victor Cha: This is a highly anticipated meeting of course, the second summit between the two leaders. I think there are a lot of expectations on this meeting because the Singapore Summit gave us a statement of principles were both leaders would like the negotiation to end up, which is a nuclear free Korean Peninsula, a peace treaty, and a declaration ending the Korean War. We know what the principles are. We even know what the agreed upon outcome is. Then we’ve had like six or seven months of some movement but not movement enough that at least people in Washington would consider considerable progress. There’s a lot of expectations at this meeting in Hanoi will create actual tangible steps forward in implementing this Singapore Declaration.

Andrew Schwartz: Ramon, what do you think about it from your perspective on the other side of the pond?

Ramon Pardo: Well, I think I would agree that there hasn’t been much progress since the Singapore Summit. I think that unless U.S. And North Korea think they can get something tangible it wouldn’t make sense for the summit to take place. It might even be postponed. I’m expecting an actual agreement where you see concessions or actions from both sides. Probably North Korea being a little bit clearer about what it wants in the short-term, not in the long-term, but in the short term from the US. The same from the US side, what do they
want North Korea to do in the next few months to demonstrate that at least they're willing to concede their denuclearization. Whether they do it or not is a different matter, but at least they're willing to take steps in that direction.

Andrew Schwartz: Guys, is this meaningful or is this just more posturing?

Victor Cha: I think the real challenge of this summit is they have to get something that is tangible enough so that you can credibly say the diplomatic process is meaningful. It's actually leading somewhere.

Andrew Schwartz: Moving forward?

Victor Cha: Moving forward. I'm pretty certain as Ramon said, they wouldn't have announced this unless they think they're going to have some tangible outcomes. It could be pieces of the program and maybe a commitment to a fuller declaration, so that would be meaningful. There's that aspect of it. Then the other aspect is, at least from a U.S. perspective, what are we going to give up to get all that and is the President going to give up too much to get all that? I think that's a big concern in Washington, lots of concerns about whether he will pull a rabbit out of his hat like he did in Singapore, where he all of a sudden decided to suspend exercises without telling the South Koreans, or in fact without even telling his Defense Secretary.

Andrew Schwartz: Our training exercises with South Korea?

Victor Cha: That's right, yeah.

Andrew Schwartz: Lots of talk about whether we're going to give up too much and are we going to get anything that we really want in return?

Victor Cha: Well, I think the hope is that there may be small pieces that they'll give up in terms of certain sites, but the real question is whether they will make the commitment to do a declaration because a real denuclearization process can't take place without a declaration. Frankly, we tried to do it 10 years ago with a partial declaration, and it clearly didn't work, because it's really the second program, the uranium enrichment program that I think the United States is after. We can't denuclearize it if they don't admit having it. That's the really important piece for the United States. Then again, the challenge is how do you get the things that you want and what are you willing to give up in return that is meaningful to the North Koreans, but not something that really undercuts our alliance equities in the region?

Andrew Schwartz: You're thinking, they're going to actually admit the Uranium Enrichment Program?

Victor Cha: I don't know. I mean, I think that's what we want, but I just don't know.
Andrew Schwartz: Okay. Ramon, we in Washington often see North Korea from a U.S. perspective. Whether it’s the strange relationship between Trump and Kim where they’re calling each other names, ‘Little Rocket Man’ and so forth, to the North Korean threat to the homeland, which we feel is very real. In Europe, how do people in different countries see North Korea, and what do they think about U.S.-DPRK relations?

Ramon Pardo: Well I think we have to begin by saying that I think European much around would agree that the crisis is a result of the behavior of North Korea. No one would blame the U.S., or South Korea, or anybody else for the nuclear crisis, the ongoing nuclear crisis with North Korea. No one believes that the North Korean regime, is anything but one of the biggest abusers of human rights, for example. But having said that, I think there is more sympathy towards what Kim Jong-Un might be trying to achieve, which is economic reform, because we have seen it in Europe. We have former communist countries who were also under basically dictatorial regimes and they had to go through a transition process, and now they’re part of the European community so to speak. From that perspective, when it comes to the opening up process, reconciliation, the view might be different here than you have in Washington where you haven’t gone through that process. I wouldn’t say this brings sympathy towards Kim Jong-Un, but maybe it brings understanding towards what North Korea is trying to achieve.

Ramon Pardo: I would also add a second aspect, is that even though no one in Europe would feel directly threatened by North Korean nuclear program or even weapon construction programs, there is proliferation to the Middle East. That’s a very big concern for the European Union. The fact that you have nuclear technology, missiles which have gone to different countries in the Middle East, maybe even North Africa as well. These would fall in the hands of terrorist groups, and they could be used by the regimes in the area against each other, and this would create instability. There’s a threat perception that maybe a bit different from the one in the U.S., but it actually exists in Europe as well.

Andrew Schwartz: At most, we would have sympathy for the devil here. Ramon brings up a really good point, proliferation. Is that going to be addressed in this?

Victor Cha: Yeah, I mean presumably, I mean that’s certainly one of our big concerns in the long-term on North Korea. The North Korean leader already kind of addressed it in his New Year’s speech when he essentially said that North Korea would not proliferate in the future, would not proliferate nuclear materials or nuclear technology.

Victor Cha: Which I think it’s again, it’s one of these things with North Korea that could be seen as a good thing. It’s meant to be a confidence building measure to assure United States, and the world that North Korea would not proliferate its technology. On the other hand, it could also be seen as saying, ”Yes, and we’re going to keep our nuclear weapons. Thank you very much,” as a responsible nuclear weapon state. This is again, one of these dilemmas. We
can argue about whether we should engage or not. The point is, you know, Trump is going to do this. We're in this diplomatic process. Then the questions become things like this, if they make a no transfer pledge, should we see that as a good thing or should we see that as essentially saying we're going to keep our weapons? Or when they say things like we will cap our fissile material production, which they again said in the New Year's speech, Kim Jong-Un said it. Again, in the context of diplomacy do you say, "Okay, that's a good assurance or is it bad because they're saying accept us as a nuclear weapon state?"

Andrew Schwartz: That they have fissile material at all.

Victor Cha: Yeah, these are the dilemmas. I mean, if the argument is about whether we engage or not than those who don't want to engage will say, "Look, they just want to be accepted as a nuclear weapons state." But, we have to play the cards we're dealt and right now Trump is into this. He's all excited about the second summit. These sorts of questions then come up.

Andrew Schwartz: Well even he doesn't have much sympathy for the devil here, but I think in terms of what he wants, he certainly wants a victory here. He wants to walk away with being known for changing things here. On his end there's pressure to actually deliver something.

Victor Cha: Yeah, I mean if you look around the world, we're committed to this trade conflict with China. We're committed to pulling out of Syria. We're committed to pulling out of Afghanistan, but this is the only place where he's committed to diplomacy.

Andrew Schwartz: He's engaged.

Victor Cha: He's engaged and committed to diplomacy. I find it kind of odd in the broader context of U.S. foreign policy, and probably in Europe it's maybe seen even odder, but again, this is where we are.

Andrew Schwartz: Ramon, from your side. What do you think about all this? I mean, can you tell us a little bit about how North Koreans are actually in Europe? I mean, I've heard that the largest North Korean diaspora outside of Asia is as in the suburbs of London?

Ramon Pardo: Yes, absolutely the interesting thing is I guess from a European perspective, not only we have a canvas of North Koreans in the UK, and South London, and other places across Europe. Obviously for Europeans it's easy to travel to North Korea as well. There are these contacts that to me, they are more difficult for the average American, at least, to get with the North Koreans. What we do see here in Europe is the fact Trump is engaging within North Korea when at the same time we have a trade war with the European Union. He has threatened to withdraw from NATO obviously. Then with all the different products across the world that they U.S. Is having, or keeps having across the world. It is not surprising.
Ramon Pardo: The U.S. party with maximum pressure in 2017. It was asking third countries actually to impose sanctions on North Korea, something that the U.S.'s not always willing to do. Then when the sudden change took place in early 2018, there was support, but also wariness, because we know that there could be a change in position again, taking place in a few months if the summit doesn't go well. There is support for the engagement process, but on the other hand, there's this view that we didn't know what Trump wants to do. Probably Trump or even people in Washington don't know what he's going to be in the next few weeks.

Andrew Schwartz: Do they think he's more likely to negotiate with North Korea than he is with the European Union?

Ramon Pardo: Yes, sure that actually. I mean, the trade war is not gone. I mean, in Brussels the discussion is at some point it could be new tax imposed or a threat of new tariffs may be imposed on the European Union. With NATO, we saw what happened last year. There was a real fear in Brussels that he would announce the US was withdrawing from NATO. Even the U.S. embassy in Brussels couldn't give any reassurance that this was not the case. They didn't know if it was going to happen and they couldn't say, "Well, this is not going to happen." The fact that U.S. foreign policy has become less predictable under the current president, it means that even when he comes to North Korea their support for the process and EU essentially to support any agreement that might be reached, but who knows? Maybe there's no agreement and then we'd have to go back to maximum pressure.

Andrew Schwartz: I never really thought about it in terms that President of United States may be threatening Europe more than he's threatening North Korea.

Victor Cha: Yeah, I mean, unfortunately, that is the situation that we're in. I think that everything that Ramon said about Europe would also apply to many of the countries in Asia. I think they feel the same way. There's so much unpredictability. There's all these costs or greater burden sharing by Asian allies. I mean, they just negotiated only a one-year agreement with South Korea on something called SMA, the Special Measures Agreement, in which South Korea basically had to increase their contribution by $100 million dollars. It's only a one-year agreement, usually it's a five year agreement, which means the poor negotiators have like a month off and then they got to start negotiating again over this agreement.

Andrew Schwartz: It's like when Lebron James signs a one-year contract. Every year you've got to re-up.

Victor Cha: That's right. You sign a contract, then you take a month off, and then you have to start negotiating the rest of it. That I think creates concern among countries, not just in Europe but also in Asia about whether the United States is really committed in the longterm to staying. Because if you look at Trump's statements, and we have looked at Trump's statements, he has a very clear record of saying that he believes U.S. military deployments abroad
are a waste of money. They allow our allies to free ride off us for security, and meanwhile they fleece us on trade. Now, obviously I don't agree with that and I'm sure Ramon doesn't agree with that, but that is very clearly in his thinking going back for decades now.

Andrew Schwartz: Let's talk about that in the context of South Korea and President Moon, what’s the EU-ROK relations like at this time, Ramon?

Ramon Pardo: Well, it is interesting because his policy over reconciliation, trying to improve inter-Korean relations have held off support across Europe. I go back to something we discussed before that in Europe we have found reconciliation processes, we are seeing in Germany, Northern Ireland, between Eastern Europe and Western Europe. There’s this understanding that reconciliation takes time. It’s not going to happen in one year or two years. It’s going to take, if it continues down the current path, at least a decade for North Korea and South Korea to improve their relation substantially. There’s this willingness to wait and to understand the peace policy is going to take time if it’s going to be successful. Having said that, when President Moon visited the European Union, had the summit in October of last year, there was a wariness towards his push towards removing sanctions on North Korea. In that sense, we are waiting to see whether the U.S. and North Korea reach any sort of agreement.

Ramon Pardo: There was this feeling that maybe he was trying to push too hard to remove sanctions. Now if there’s an agreement in a couple of weeks and we have the summit in Vietnam, then I think the European Union would very publicly become even more supportive of South Korean policy, including for example, the potential for South Korean economy progress in North Korea. It is something that European countries have tried in the past. It has been successful here in Europe, economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, then leading eventually to a political reconciliation. There’s an understanding of what he really was trying to do here.

Andrew Schwartz: Victor, what do you see as the EU's role in what's happening on the Korean Peninsula?

Victor Cha: I mean, a couple of things, the first is, again, I agree with Ramon that the EU was one of the stalwart supporters of the maximum pressure campaign. I think that was very important. They have, in the past, been supportive of the agreements, and have contributed particularly in this first deal to economic cooperation, energy assistance, interim energy assistance to North Korea in return for freezing their facilities, which I think is a given in any sort of deal, even one that Trump will do in the future. The EU will probably become more important in this regard in the future, because if we do get a deal that requires interim energy assistance for North Korea, Trump's not going to pay for it. He's not going to want to pay for any of this, so it's going to mean the allies and partners are going to have to probably play a larger role in that regard.
Then of course, as Ramon said, Kim Dae Jung did the Sunshine Policy 20 years ago. The EU countries were the countries, except for France, the EU countries all normalized relations with North Korea. Some of them are dual-hatted their embassies in Seoul. Some of them dual-hatted their embassies in Beijing, but a number of them went into North Korea and set up their own embassy, including the British, the Germans and others. When those people come out, and they do come through Washington, the German ambassador to Kim Jong, as well as the British one, they give a very, hands on, on the ground view of what’s going on in the country. The EU, I think, actually plays quite an important role both on the pressure side and on the engagement side. They actually have contact. They have much more contact. The United States, we don’t have anything in North Korea. Sweden is our protecting power, so they play an important role.

Are there any differences between what the EU and the U.S. wants out of North Korea?

I think, not in terms of denuclearization or complete denuclearization, or however you want to call it. I think, the position is very similar. But, I would say that maybe in the area of reconciliation, my view not being Washington, is that the European Union has been more supportive of South Korean policy. There has been some criticism, as I mentioned before, of maybe President Moon trying to go too fast. There’s a lot of understanding that sometimes the perception is that maybe in Washington the understanding is not as deep as it is here because we went through that process. I would say the ultimate goal of denuclearization and even when it comes to human rights, which we haven’t talked much about today, I think that the goal is the same, an improvement in the human rights of the average North Korean, of the North Korean population.

One difference, and maybe you could argue, that maybe when it comes to potential political reform, if it happens in North Korea, there are many EU member states that feel strongly that it should be an opening up process because they went through that process. They understand how it is to live in a country that is more free. This might be on top of the agenda for the European Union, but there are countries within the European Union, especially central Eastern Europe, that would like to see an opening up taking place if not tomorrow, but at least in the not too distant future if the human rights process continues. Maybe that’s something that in the U.S. is not top of agenda right now.

Well, let’s talk more about human rights. What can the U.S. and the EU do to force North Korea’s hand on human rights that they’re not already doing?

Well, I think from a US perspective, maybe part of the challenge is getting our administration to put it on the agenda in a discussion with North Korea. Right now, it doesn’t seem to be anywhere near on the agenda. I mean, we still don’t have a special envoy for North Korean human rights abuses in the Trump administration.
Andrew Schwartz: That's actually been allotted for by Congress?

Victor Cha: Yeah, it's mandated by Congress. There hasn't been anyone in that slot. Then the UN Security Council last December chose not to have a debate on UN human rights, which was one of the big shining accomplishments of the whole commission of inquiry process that took place over the past five years or so. That was a quiet, but a huge disappointment I think for the human rights community. This is actually where the European Union plays an important role. There isn't a lot of confidence right now that the current composition of the Security Council will allow for a positive vote even in the spring on this human rights issue being discussed again in the Security Council. We don't have anybody there right now because Nikki Haley has left, so there's no U.S. leadership there on the Security Council. Then their members, I think, permanent members like France and the UK, that might play a role. I think Germany's in the chairs that run, right? Ramon?

Ramon Pardo: Yes, yes.

Victor Cha: Then there are countries like Dominican Republic and Ivory Coast that are clearly going to be persuaded by China not to vote in favor. It really is kind of up in the air right now. We're actually going to do a couple of things at CSIS over the next couple of weeks to look at this issue, to dig more deeply down on this issue, to see what can be done. Then there's the humanitarian aspect too. It looks like the administration is starting to reapprove visas for NGO workers going into North Korea. Again, it's all in the wrong context because now it's being looked at as a partial lifting of sanctions, when it shouldn't be looked at that way. I mean, we shouldn't play politics with food. Then the humanitarian issue because there's so much focus on that, that actually takes emphasis off of the human rights issue, which is a different basket of things. It's not an ideal situation now.

Andrew Schwartz: Meanwhile they're just getting a pass.

Victor Cha: Yeah, they're getting a pass on this the whole time. Now NGO workers are just happy if they can get into the country, getting approval from the State Department. It's not a good situation.

Ramon Pardo: Well actually this is one of the areas going back to your point about some EU countries having a presence in Pyongyang where this actually helps. Some countries such as UK, Sweden or Germany that have embassies in Pyongyang and they do discuss issues with North Korea. They discuss human rights issues and they discuss humanitarian concerns as well. In addition to this, you see how EU member states that have embassies have come from central eastern Europe such as a Czech Republic, or Bulgaria, or Poland, for an example. They have gone through the process of their populations been repressed and then having freedom, or going to the democratic system. Their rights are actually being respected. They do raise these issues through their embassies in Pyongyang. The EU North Korea dialogue was less convened in 2015, but until it was being convened, human rights was one of
the issues that the EU put on the table. The European Parliament sent a
delegation to North Korea, late last year. There might be a reciprocal visit in
the coming weeks or months.

Ramon Pardo: This is one of the issues discussed as well. At least the issue can be raised
and is actually actively being raised. This comes from the fact that European
countries have had an engagement process with North Korea. I do think that
on the humanitarian issue, maybe we had the biggest difference last year
between the U.S. and the European Union. That was the only instance in
which across the whole of Europe there was a bit of criticism of the
approach of the Trump administration. Saying, "Well, humanitarian issues
shouldn't be part of any negotiation. They are separate from nuclear issues,
human rights, the reconciliation." Countries such as Sweden, or the UK, or
even France were actually asking the U.S. through UN channels, but also
bilaterally, not to make this part of a political negotiation with North Korea.

Victor Cha: Can I just say, I mean, it is an issue where I think it’s easier to engage the
North Koreans on these issues from Europe than it is from the United States.
From the United States, it looks essentially like a regime change strategy.
Human rights is just sort of the baseball bat of the Hawks and John Bolton
that just want to smash the regime down. I think there’s much more chance
for dialogue for all the reasons that Ramon just mentioned on the European
side. In addition, from the North Korean side, when there was a groundswell
of support for going after North Korea and human rights, what did the North
Koreans do? They went to Europe. The foreign minister went to Europe to
try to talk to all the different European capitals as a way to try to prevent
this wave that was coming at them in the UN.

Victor Cha: There are incentives actually for the North Koreans to talk to the Europeans
about it. I didn’t really think of it this way until I was listening to Ramon, but
I think that, that may be an area where the Europeans can actually gain more
traction, at least than the United States for the time being.

Andrew Schwartz: Because, their diplomacy’s much more active between the two on this?

Victor Cha: It’s more active and again, there’s an incentive for the North Koreans. The
North Koreans need to have an incentive. They have no incentive to talk
human rights with us because, again, it’s just the weapon of the Hawks. I
mean, we should change the way we talk about human rights with North
Korea to try to be more effective. But for the Europeans, they do have an
incentive which is they don’t want these resolutions coming in the UN every
year that keeps putting the issue on the agenda. They need to prove to
European countries that they are trying to address these issues.

Victor Cha: I don’t know, I feel like one of the low pieces of hanging fruit on this is to be
able to do something with the North Koreans on physically disabled, because
it’s an area where, I think, there have been talks in the past. We saw them
during the Obama administration. There’s an opportunity there to do
something in terms of help for the physically disabled that could help to, I
don’t want to say check the human rights box, but could move in the
direction of at least some conversation on human rights.

Andrew Schwartz: But if we really wanted it to be serious about it, we could. It wouldn’t be perceived as just a tool of the Hawks. If we were consistently serious about human rights, and made it a priority, it would be part of the talks just like with Europe, wouldn’t it?

Victor Cha: I think the core way to address the human rights issue with North Korea for the United States is to say, “If we’re going to have a completely different relationship with you, if we’re going to have a peace treaty and normalize relations, if we’re going to do real denuclearization, you need to have a more open society.” There is no other way to do this. It should be framed in a way that’s positive saying we want this to happen, we want to have a new sort of relationship. That can’t happen without a change in sort of the way your society’s ordered. Part of is that diplomacy is not at that point yet. We’re not at the point where we’re on the precipice of talking about normalization, and all these things. Then this might become a more relevant issue.

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah, and under any circumstances, these are all big asks in their view.

Victor Cha: No. Yeah, hugely. Again, there’s not a lot of trust there. We may say it’s about a new relationship, but they may be like, “Oh yeah, sure. We know what it’s really about.”

Andrew Schwartz: Ramon, any final thoughts?

Ramon Pardo: One last point that I think it builds on what Victor was saying before in the issue of trust. If you look at EU sanctions they’re actually autonomous sanctions. I’m not talking about support for UN sanctions. They are not based on the UN sanctions. They are not based on human rights, they are based on the nuclear program, and a weapon restructuring program. I think this is one of the issues that makes maybe the North Koreans more willing to discuss this matter with a European Union as well. The fact that it is not seen as putting as much pressure as others on this issue. What you see in Europe is that there’s this understanding that talks on denuclearization are going to be led by the U.S. That’s obvious. Talks on reconciliation are going to be led by South Korea, as it should be. But, on other matters that would mean a transformation of North Korea, even if gradual, the European can play an important role and its voice can be as important as for other international actors as well.

Victor Cha: When the U.S. administration started to stop approving visas for humanitarian groups that had been long going into North Korea, as part of what it looked like sanctions tightening, I think that certainly created an uproar here in the NGO community. We did a number of stakeholders meetings with, Steve Morrison, our Global Health Security guy here. Produced that film, that video on global health security in North Korea.
Andrew Schwartz: Which you can find on the CSIS website.

Victor Cha: Right, which you can find on the CSIS website. But in Europe, I think it was roundly criticized. It was roundly criticized as being, this is not the way you're supposed to do these things. There's a lot, I think, that the EU-Korea chair and the CSIS Korea chair see similarly, although we'll see what happens after this after the summit in Hanoi. Maybe we can do another one and compare notes between me and Ramon.

Andrew Schwartz: We'd love to have you back, Ramon. Thanks for being with us today.

Ramon Pardo: Thank you.

Andrew Schwartz: If you have a question for one of our experts about The Impossible State, email us at impossible.state@csis.org. If you want to dive deeper into the issue surrounding North Korea, checkout Beyond Parallel. That's our micro website that's dedicated to bring a better understanding of the Korean Peninsula. You can find it at beyondparallel.csis.org. Don't forget to leave us a review on Apple podcasts. That's so more listeners can find us. It's very helpful. We're now also streaming on Spotify, so you can find us there to where you find all your music. How cool is that? Don't forget to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. This is The Impossible State.