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TRANSCRIPT

The Impossible State

“Countdown to Round II”

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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.

[President Trump via newsclip]: I'd just like to see, ultimately, denuclearization. I have no pressing time schedule. As long as there's no testing, I'm in no rush. If there's testing, that's another deal.

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

[Sarah Sanders via newsclip]: I think that the only one setting high expectations is probably the media because they're looking for reasons to attack this president.

Andrew Schwartz: Each week on this show we'll talk with the people who know the most about North Korea. In this episode, things heat up as negotiators prepare for the second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi. We welcome a special guest, Dr. Stephen Noerper who's the senior director of the Korea Society and a senior advisor to the United Nations Northeast Asia Cooperation Program. Dr. Noerper joins me and CSIS Korea Chair Victor Cha to discuss the fate of the second summit.

Andrew Schwartz: Dr. Cha, Dr. Noerper, why don't we start with the fact that this week, President Trump said that he's in no rush to denuclearize. What did he mean by that, and what do you think he meant in terms of the negotiations that are upcoming in Hanoi? Dr. Noerper, do you want to start?

Stephen Noerper: Sure. Certainly. I think one of the things it does is cause a bit of concern in terms of suggesting to the North Koreans that the expectation on denuclearization has somehow been downsized. What it probably does, more generally, is lower expectations for those watching the summit. Expectations have been quite high. This is one way it seems to have been checked.

Victor Cha: It's interesting because I certainly understand why it's not good in terms of the negotiation because we want to keep the North Korean feet to the fire. But at the same time, it's kind of a dose of reality, right?

Andrew Schwartz: Mm-hm.

Victor Cha: I mean, Trump was saying, "Oh yeah, the threat's gone, and everything's okay." For him to say, "Well, there's no timeline. This can take as long as it needs to, as long as they're not testing," is almost acknowledging what the experts have been saying, which is that this program is so far advanced now, that even if the North Koreans were 100 percent compliant, it would still take 10 years to completely denuclearize the program. But the problem is we don't know if it's because he understands that expert scientific advice or it's because he feels as though he doesn't want people to already negate the importance of his summit by saying, "Oh, you can't get something within the next two years."

Andrew Schwartz: So you're thinking the president hasn't read cover to cover a Sieg Hecker's report?

Victor Cha: Yeah. For some reason, I just don't think that between ... all the hours of executive time are being devoted to either reading Sieg Hecker's report or reading Beyond Parallel reports.

Andrew Schwartz: When *Fox and Friends* is competing.

Victor Cha: Right.

Stephen Noerper: Along the line of what Victor's saying, it also might be a suggestion that he's getting some good advice that the denuclearization process is complex that will take time. This is, as Victor said, a reality check. That's good. It's probably more true to the science of the reality than the other way of going.

Stephen Noerper: But I do think it's a way that they're conveying that we should somehow lower expectations for the final result. I worry about other issues about the nonproliferation regime and the example that it sets internationally, but clearly the president wants to declare it a victory. So by lowering expectations, it means pretty much anything North Korea brings to the table will be deemed a success.

Victor Cha: Yeah. It could very well be that the initial idea was to try to get something within two years, which effectively means really within one year since next year it's going to be crazy time with the election and campaigning. Really within one year, but yet the experts say at least 10 years.

Victor Cha: So even if he came out of Hanoi with a statement saying, "Oh yeah, the North Koreans are going to do this within 24 months." Everybody would know it's fake, right? Everybody would know it's fake because that's not what the experts say. Clearly, he's trying to fit it into an election timeline. Physically it's impossible to do it within 24 months.

Victor Cha: It could be that he's just decided to walk back because there he doesn't see a way to win on this particular ... He's all about winning right? He doesn't see a way to win on this particular point.

Andrew Schwartz: This is not going to be something he can really campaign on. He might be able to say he's had success in bringing Kim to the table, but he's not going to be able to walk away and say he's had success in really getting anywhere far down the process.

Stephen Noerper: Well, what he'll claim is a success is what he claimed in that tweet, which is the missiles aren't flying. As long as there's no testing, that seems to be the benchmark by which he's able to claim success.

Andrew Schwartz: And isn't that a form of success?

Stephen Noerper: It is. I mean, clearly, it is. The testing moratorium is something we shouldn't overlook. It's not the same thing in any way, shape, or form as denuclearization. But a testing moratorium, partial denuclearization, arms control, those have all entered the vernacular in the last few weeks.

Victor Cha: So the thing about, he has tweeted a number of times that, "Hey, the North hasn't tested in 15 months, because of me." They haven't tested in 15 months, no nuclear tests, no missile tests. That is factually accurate. There have not been missile tests or nuclear testing in 15 months, but to take credit for it, I'm not really sure about that. Because again, not to plug our studies, but we did do a study that looked at North Korean testing patterns when the United States is in negotiations with North Korea. There's a clear pattern, which is when we are sitting at the table with them, they do not test.

Victor Cha: It doesn't matter who the president is—they do not test. So yes, they've stopped testing because we're in negotiations with them. And so Trump really can't take credit for that one.

Andrew Schwartz: The only difference here is, is he's talking one-to-one with Kim versus in the past several administrations, we've talked at a working level, right?

Victor Cha: Right. Six-party talks or brief framework talks. But basically, whenever we've been talking to them, they've been careful about that. There's been, I think the data shows, there's been two instances, in again, 30 years. So the two exceptions really prove the rule. He likes to take credit for that. I think Steve and I, we're all happy that they're not testing; but he doesn't deserve credit for that.

Stephen Noerper: Right. The other angle to that is that all roads now have gone through Seoul. So Moon Jae-in clearly sees this as part of a South Korean effort. He has suggested just this week that the economic leveraging is designed to help with the denuclearization process. They're taking a longer view. That's reflected in Trump's comments, which may be aimed more at a domestic audience, especially given the politics next year. But clearly, the South Koreans see it as a leverage point as well.

Andrew Schwartz: Well, what kind of credit does President Moon deserve?

Stephen Noerper: I think quite a bit in the sense that he studied the rudder. The Singapore summit probably wouldn't have happened. Trump was backing off it. The two leaders met and rather swiftly, within 24 hours, Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un. It shows you that there are adept at that.

Stephen Noerper: Then in July, August, there was a real slow down. Moon Jae-in stepped up, and both made an international appeal at the United Nations among experts in New York. He was trying to get that back on track. By the end of the year that had happened. Some credit should be given the South Koreans for having maintained the momentum here.

Stephen Noerper: However, as we've mentioned, political seasons and whatnot, that's something where Moon Jae-in is going to have to see gains. The North Koreans know that. They know as long as they don't test, they give Trump an ability to claim a certain level of victory. And as long as they don't test, they create political space for Moon Jae-in in to navigate a very complicated process where he faces a lot of internal opposition.

Victor Cha: I agree with Steve. I think, look, in 2017, he was sitting there thinking he's going to get entrapped in a war between the United States and North Korea. They worked very hard to try to get the diplomacy going. If not for Moon's efforts and the Winter Olympics, which they used as a vehicle, who knows where we'd be right now. We could be in a very bad place. He certainly deserves credit for that.

Victor Cha: But the terrain that he is navigating now is extremely complicated. Given what he's trying to do with North Korea, how he's trying to bring Trump into this negotiation, the absence of a relationship with Japan, and then the very complex with relationship with China after the THAAD controversy.

Andrew Schwartz: The THAAD missile controversy.

Victor Cha: Yeah, THAAD missile defense controversy. He's playing with a very full and complicated deck of cards and certainly deserves some credit.

Victor Cha: However, at the same time there is moving the process forward because you believe it can get you to a certain place and there's moving the process forward for the sake of the process. Regardless of what happens in the next summit, it goes well, or it goes poorly, there's going to be a fourth North-South summit—Inter Korean summit. If it goes badly, then that's even more pressure on Moon to try to produce results when he meets with Kim that Trump could not produce. Otherwise, it's just process for process's sake.

Stephen Noerper: Right, and if it goes well, you may well see this promise to visit to Seoul or at the very least some sort of summit meeting between Moon and Kim. Then you'll also see movement on other fronts. The speaker of the National Assembly has floated the idea of an inter-parliamentarian meeting, an eventual union or some sort of process of cooperation. So there will be more thrust for the Inter-Korean process.

Andrew Schwartz: Now, some experts would say that President Trump is giving Kim too much by giving him this second summit, could have accomplished just the same with having another working-level summit, something like that. What do you all think? Is he giving them too much here?

Victor Cha: It's a good question. I think that summit's with the American president are very special things.

Andrew Schwartz: Big deal.

Victor Cha: Especially if you're an outcast country, right? It's the ultimate legitimizer.

Andrew Schwartz: This is a country that was ostracized from the whole world until a couple of years ago.

Victor Cha: In that sense, I think these meetings probably mean more to the North Korean leadership than they do to the American leadership. In that sense, some might say we're just sitting at the table with them. But sitting at the table with them is actually a big deal for the North Koreans. It's a huge deal.

Victor Cha: I think that's fine as long as we're making progress, as long as we're actually chipping away at their nuclear program, not with just the same old steps but with new steps. But thus far we haven't seen that. Right. That is a big concern going into Hanoi that if we come out of this, and the North Koreans are basically putting on the table things that they don't need anymore or things that they've sold to us in the past, like IAEA, International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, back in the Yongbyon Plutonium Nuclear Complex. That's really not worth the ticket.

Andrew Schwartz: I mean if I'm betting the over-under, I'm betting the under here—the we get the under.

Victor Cha: Yeah. And the funny thing is that I feel like the administration, I don't know if this is a shrewd communication strategy, but I feel like in the last 48 hours they have been trying to downplay expectations. Maybe they have some surprise coming up. I don't know.

Victor Cha: But the other element of this is if we get very little in Hanoi, it's fine as long as we don't give up too much. Right. And so that is the other equation here is that the North Koreans may give us very little, but Trump may impulsively give too much.

Stephen Noerper: Ultimately for Trump, it's great for ratings. You can say that for Kim too. They like the spectacle of it as Victor's noted, we need to see more substantial progress. They know that in the sense that they can't walk away, the way they did from Singapore, without some form of harder commitments. Even if they declare a success, they know that they face a skeptical international community that wants to see something on the table. I think that with the signaling we've seen from the South Korean foreign minister, from the U.S. secretary of state, and national security adviser, enough has been communicated that there will be, as they've called it, deliverables. They'll deem that enough of a success.

Stephen Noerper: What I think your question also begs is, is the broader specter of concerns that haven't been put on the table, human rights and humanitarian affairs among them.

Andrew Schwartz: That's gone nowhere.

Stephen Noerper: They are going to have to get to a more complex agenda in time, and we shouldn't lose sight that there's a broader agenda beyond missiles and nukes as important as they are.

Andrew Schwartz: You mentioned ratings. I mean, this has the feel of a professional wrestling match. This is like steel cage match two. It's hyped up to, to the extreme. It's in Hanoi. This is really made for TV stuff.

Victor Cha: Yeah. And that's exactly why he wants it.

Stephen Noerper: It's good that Victor has mentioned the Hanoi part because the North Koreans have couched this in the form of a state visit that proceeds the sit down with Trump. There'll be some exchange with Vietnamese and North Korean officials. The North Koreans will be shown industrial zone, and that involves Samsung, among others. There may be some lessons learned on the developmental side, and there's a section that is less attractive for international media to cover. But there may be something there that we need to be thinking about, and Vietnam was clearly selected by both sides for potential as an example for North Korea going forward.

Victor Cha: Right. So this is another feather in his cap, right? Because of these meetings with Trump, he's gotten to go to Singapore. He's done three meetings with the Chinese president, three meetings with the South Korean president, now a state visit, in Vietnam, a state visit. So that's a really good point. I don't know. I haven't looked--

Andrew Schwartz: He's going to eat well in Vietnam.

Victor Cha: He's going to eat well, and I don't know how ... it may be in North Korea, this is being played as a state visit to Vietnam, as Steve said, and then a follow on meeting with Trump by the, it's the state visit to Vietnam that's getting the attention.

Andrew Schwartz: This is a big deal for him. Our guys are downplaying it. There's some talk this week whether there's a common understanding of what denuclearization actually means. Are we going to be able to get to that with the two of them?

Victor Cha: I think of all the week before the trip and all of the briefings that are being done around town now by the administration, that is actually the piece that worries me the most is that they are talking now about approaching an understanding, of a common understanding of denuclearization. That is probably the most ominous sign. Because if you remember, after Singapore, there wasn't a discussion. Trump had said the nuclear threat is over. They're going to give up all their weapons. We and they know exactly what we mean by that. But now we're, at the working level, they're talking about trying to get a common understanding of what denuclearization means.

Victor Cha: That is really not a good sign. It shows that something that we all knew, which is that North Korea isn't really willing to part with their programs. But

I think at some point because of the president's confidence, because of all this talk about secret channels, because there were secret channels, involving the CIA and others. I think maybe there was a hope that there was something in there that we weren't seeing. Trump kept saying "Well, we've got these channels that are not open to the public and you have no idea what's going on inside those things."

Victor Cha: Maybe some of us hoped that there actually might be some there, there. But when they come out a week before the summit and say, "Yeah, we're trying to get a common understanding of what denuclearization means," that's bad. That's not good.

Stephen Noerper: Yeah. I was frankly surprised because I think the most they're going to get to agree to disagree that they're very different definitions. Bridging those is near impossible, but maybe somewhere in there is the intention that they'll move to some level of arms control talks or confidence-building measures or other things over time. But to hope for a common definition on this, at this point, the North Koreans know exactly what the American definition is, and they have expressed opinions to an opposite definition that includes the entire peninsula and impacts the American nuclear umbrella and affects the U.S.-ROK alliance. That's all part of their strategy. We know what one another strategies are there no secrets here, and there'll be differences, but those differences will remain.

Andrew Schwartz: What's the best success that you all think we can hope for coming out of this second cage match? I mean, summit.

Stephen Noerper: I actually think that the North Koreans may well give some sort of partial declaration and maybe suggest in private, if not in public, to a verification regime. We've already seen that there has been talk of easing sanctions. The president has floated that, that there has been talk that there's no rush on denuclearization so that there's no need to ascribe to a timeline. We've seen mention of normalization of relations and the opening of liaison offices.

Stephen Noerper: Those all give the president in his mind reason to declare victory. You may see a lean in on the "end of war" statement, but I suspect that Moon Jae-in would like to keep that for a grander setting with himself, Xi Jinping, Donald Trump, and Kim Jong-un

Victor Cha: Yeah. For me, when you deal with North Korea, it's not what's the best outcome. It's what's the least worst outcome. There, I think all those things that Steve mentioned, they could be in play. If they are, they are whatever they negotiate, they negotiate. The main thing for me is that we do no harm, that the president does no harm in terms of eroding our alliance assets. Talking about troops or talking about indefinitely suspending exercises, or talking about no more military sales to South Korea. Things of that nature. That would be the worst outcome.

- Andrew Schwartz: Speaking about exercises, we haven't done an exercise in over a year now. Right? So are we going to continue not doing exercises?
- Victor Cha: It is problematic because again, one of the objectives of Singapore is peace on the Korean Peninsula. There has been peace on the Korean Peninsula because of deterrence, because of conventional deterrence, because the United States and the ROK ensure, through their exercises, North Korea cannot possibly calculate that they could win a war. But if we continue not to have exercises, there are portions of the exercise they can do in other places. Like they can do portions of it in Cobra Gold, the Southeast Asia. But there are parts of the exercise that you cannot do anywhere but on the peninsula.
- Victor Cha: Everybody that I've talked to has said that basically when you get to a year with no exercising, you're really eroding capability and readiness. This is problematic. If the president again says, "We're suspending the next major exercise," which is supposed to be in this time frame, February to April, then either the Pentagon really has to think of ways to work around this and maintain readiness. Otherwise, we're just eroding deterrents. Again, the problem is that the North Koreans could miscalculate. They could think we're not ready, so maybe they feel more comfortable being tougher.
- Stephen Noerper: There were some very small-scale exercises, among marine divisions. You heard the North Koreans raise their voice but not too loudly. There may be a threshold then allows for some activity. Then this point that Victor has mentioned about taking exercises offshore, that may suffice for some of the larger scale things for now. But former defense secretary Mattis raised that very issue, that after a year period, you begin to have some attrition and efficacy. Both General Brooks and now General Abrams have signaled that clearly there's to be an expected fall off, however slight, in terms of readiness.
- Stephen Noerper: But the bigger strategic calculation is what Victor points out, that North Korea knows the score, and the administration may find at least some partial suspensions over the year to continue as a valuable negotiating tactic. It seems to have worked so far. It also allows the Americans to say, "well, okay, so you have agreed to a testing moratorium on missiles and nukes. You've made these other moves on Sohae, On Punggye-Ri, on the nuclear facility closure. At least this is something that they can point to and say, "Well, we have drawn down a bit." But at some point, it will have to be revisited. And again, not compromising the U.S.-ROK Alliance is a major priority.
- Victor Cha: The other thing we should also mention is that we're talking about suspending U.S.-ROK exercise. We suspended them when we're talking about suspending them again. As far as I know, the North Koreans are not suspending their exercises.
- Andrew Schwartz: Right.

Victor Cha: Their exercises are going, with a winter training exercise, Right, Steve went forward? I think they're not suspending exercises.

Andrew Schwartz: They're not testing anymore, but they are still doing military exercises [crosstalk 00:22:33].

Victor Cha: They're producing weapons, right? They continue to produce weapons capabilities.

Andrew Schwartz: And as you pointed out in your report, Victor, scores of missile bases that are undeclared.

Victor Cha: Yeah. Undeclared missile bases that don't appear to be part of a negotiation. It would be fantastic next week if the administration emerged and said, "Yeah, we're also looking at those bases too." I would be happy to say that I was wrong. But as far as I know, I can tell that these are not part of negotiations. If those remain intact, those are still real threats to Americans in Korea and Japan, Americans potentially in Guam, as far as Hawaii and Alaska, and then, of course, Koreans and Japanese.

Andrew Schwartz: Gentlemen a lot to think about here. Until next time on the Impossible State.

Andrew Schwartz: If you have a question for one of our experts about the Impossible State, email us at impossiblestate@csis.org. If you want to dive deeper into the issues surrounding North Korea, check out 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.

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