

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
CSIS- Korea Chair

Press Call: Unpacking the Second Trump-Kim Summit

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LOCATION
CSIS Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

CSIS EXPERTS
Victor Cha
Senior Adviser and Korea Chair, CSIS

Michael J. Green
Senior Vice President for Asia and Japan Chair, CSIS

Sue Mi Terry
Senior Fellow, Korea Chair, CSIS

MODERATOR
H. Andrew Schwartz
Chief Communications Officer, CSIS

*Transcript By
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H. Andrew Schwartz: Thank you, Beth. And welcome to all of our conference participants. Thanks for calling in. The magic of technology has joined us at 8:30 in the morning Eastern time. And without further ado, I'd like to turn it over to my colleague, Victor Cha, to share some of his thoughts about the Vietnam summit.

Victor Cha: Thanks, Andrew. It's 8:30 in the morning here in New York, and I and Ambassador Wendy Sherman have been covering this summit for NBC since 8:00 p.m. last night. So we were actually there as I started to get panicked texts from different members of the press in Hanoi trying to figure out what was going on because nobody was really told what was going on until the very end.

Victor Cha: So let me just make four quick points. The first is that, you know, there's no denying that this summit was a failure – a total failure in the sense that the expectations prior to this summit was that there should be tangible progress made to build upon the statements that were made after the Singapore summit, but with no real progress after the Singapore summit. So there were high expectations that there should be progress here. And in fact, we didn't just get a little bit of progress, we got zero progress.

Victor Cha: And, you know, part of that is this is the – this is what can happen when a president is eager for doing summits quickly, there's not enough spadework that's done at the working level, or the hope that the two leaders can overcome any obstacles at the working level, you get a situation like this. So, you know, this is – you know, frankly, it's a disaster, and it's a disaster of the president's own making.

Victor Cha: Second, having said that, I also think it's a good thing that the president didn't take a bad deal. My own read of this – and this is just my own hunch – is that I think that there was probably a smaller deal to be had that was on the table, but that the North Koreans – you know, I think the North Koreans really wanted all sanctions lifted.

Victor Cha: And, you know, the president, to his credit, wasn't going to take that, you know, for a few sites, a few sites and maybe some other small things. He wasn't going to take that. And he said, well, all right, well, if you want a bigger deal, then let's get a bigger deal. And, you know, I think the U.S. side then pressed for more sites on the North Korean side, and the North Koreans just balked and that was the end of it.

Victor Cha: You know, I think, contrary to what the president said, I think probably the North Koreans walked before the United States did. But nevertheless, you know, in some instances I think everybody was concerned that the president would take a bad deal. My guess is he was offered a bad deal. He didn't take it. He tried to turn it into something bigger, and the North then balked. So that's the second point.

Victor Cha: The third point is it's really not clear where we go from here. I mean, when diplomacy at the leadership level fails, there's not really a whole lot of rope after that. I think there are a lot of open and unanswered questions. Do we increase the level of economic sanctioning? Do we increase the military pressure in terms of resuming exercises? Do the North Koreans resume testing after 15 months? You know, I don't think any of that is clear at this point, although the president in his speech statement, press conference, seemed to indicate he wasn't interested in increasing economic and military pressure.

Victor Cha: And then, finally, you know, I don't think that there's going to be any appetite for another summit any time soon after this one. And there will be probably a lot of frantic work that will be done by the South Koreans to try to salvage, you know, what pieces of diplomacy are left. I expect there'll be a flurry of diplomacy going forward. The South Koreans will probably want to come to Washington and meet with the president. They're certainly going to want to meet the North Koreans to see if there's a way forward.

Victor Cha: The North Koreans already – there's envoys from the North Koreans already on their way to China as we speak. So I think there'll be efforts to try to pick up the pieces, but it's really not clear at this point where this is all – where this is all going.

Victor Cha: So, Andrew, I'll leave it at that.

H. Andrew Schwartz: Great. Thank you, Victor.

H. Andrew Schwartz: And I'd like to then turn to my colleague, Dr. Mike Green, for –

Michael J. Green: Thanks, Andrew. Yeah, thank you.

Michael J. Green: Can you all hear me OK, Victor and company?

Victor Cha: Yeah, yeah.

Michael J. Green: Let me add three points to Victor's. The first is that the North Korean proposal, or what we've heard of it from the president, was entirely predictable. They offered in some form to freeze and perhaps shut down, we are told, the Yongbyon facility. That is one piece of their overall nuclear missile capabilities. They were clearly not willing to give up their nuclear weapons or allow the kind of declaration of facilities and capabilities that would have led to real denuclearization; I think entirely predictable and, in fact, a play we've seen before.

Michael J. Green: In the mid-'90s we did Agreed Framework. The North Koreans agreed to freeze the Yongbyon facilities they had, because we could see them from satellites. And they began cheating immediately by developing uranium enrichment as a path to nuclear weapons, which they now have turned into actual weapons, while, you know, delaying and prevaricating on inspections and verification and actual dismantlement of Yongbyon. And then, at the end of the Bush administration, in a smaller way, they agreed to begin some modest steps at Yongbyon and then balked at any further steps of denuclearization.

Michael J. Green: So in many respects this is a third-time repeat of a 25-year-old North Korean playbook of offering vague assurances, some access, perhaps some freezing of the Yongbyon facility while they continue working on their nuclear arsenal and possibly break out again in the future. So very predictable.

Michael J. Green: Somewhat less predictable, frankly, was that the president would walk, and that's my second point. I took some reassurance from that. You know, when the president met Kim Jong-un in Singapore he unilaterally announced a cessation, a freeze, of our regularly scheduled, totally legal and legitimate military exercises with South Korea – and called them "wargames," which is the term that the North Koreans use – and he never consulted with his own Pentagon or the allies, Japan

and Korea. And he also announced a huge success based on nothing more than Kim Jong-un's comments to, quote/unquote, "denuclearize the Korean Peninsula," which is essentially meaningless because it's in shorthand a North Korean pledge to give up nuclear weapons when we do. It's more complicated than that, but that's essentially it. So the second point I make is that, you know, it's interesting with Secretary Mattis gone, a lot of commentators worrying that there's no, quote/unquote, "adults in the room," that the president would really go off in dangerous directions, it didn't happen. And I think it certainly suggests that Secretary Pompeo; Steve Biegun, the negotiator; senior officials at the Defense Department and at the White House convinced the president that it was not a good deal. I'd take some reassurance from that.

Michael J. Green: The third point I'd make is in some ways we are worse off than we were before because what we're left with now, essentially, is – and by the president's own admission – a situation where the North Koreans have stopped nuclear missile and nuclear weapons testing, a freeze; and we, the United States, have frozen our military exercises. In 2017 China and Putin personally to Trump proposed this as the way forward with North Korea. It was called the freeze-for-freeze proposal – freeze North Korea's further nuclear missile testing, the U.S. would freeze military exercises. Very self-serving for the Chinese and Russians, who want to see U.S. alliances wither/weaken. And at the time U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley called it insulting as a proposal. And Heather Nauert, the State Department spokesman, said it was not acceptable – that there was no parallel between the lawful and regular military exercises and North Korea's nuclear missile tests, which violates multiple Security Council sanctions. So in a way we are now stuck with a freeze-for-freeze, the very proposal that the most senior Trump officials in 2017 said was absolutely unacceptable and was insulting.

Michael J. Green: So Victor asked a very important question: Do we resume military exercises? If we don't we're in a freeze-for-freeze, and with the passage of time our readiness – Korea's readiness, our jointness – will degrade. So I think that's a big topic to watch now, is the military exercises and whether or not we just accept de facto a freeze-for-freeze.

Michael J. Green: And I'll turn it over to Sue next.

H. Andrew Schwartz: Dr. Sue Terry, would like to hear some of your thoughts.

Sue Mi Terry: Sure. I was with Victor and Wendy Sherman yesterday at MSNBC studios until about 8:00, and then I went home around one-something just to take, you know, a few hours of sleep. And I wake up to this news, which was – I have to admit I was a little bit surprised because I really thought there was going to be an interim deal along the lines that we talked about last week, you know, basically for a freeze we give some sanctions relief, letting South Koreans basically get the exemption they need to reopen Kaesong and a peace declaration. So I have to admit that I was a little bit surprised by this.

Sue Mi Terry: There are two competing narratives, I think, coming out of Hanoi. I've been talking to some folks on the ground, and what I can't yet see – I'm not sure what happened first. On one hand, it looks like Kim Jong-un did overplay his hand and ask for a full sanctions relief, which is quite a surprise to me that he would do that just because I thought he would know that that's a nonstarter even for President Trump because

President Trump has always said he's not going to give sanctions relief until he sees some denuclearization. Even though we might have been prepared to let South Korea get the exemption they need, I didn't think we were prepared to do that. So I'm surprised that Kim Jong-un, if he asked for full sanctions relief, that he did that.

Sue Mi Terry: And if he did that, it's probably because he just underestimated President Trump, or in some – on some level it's probably President Trump's own fault in the sense that he did lower the bar, he did praise Kim, he did say, you know, all kinds of things that might have given Kim a wrong impression. Also, from the Singapore summit, Trump did cancel joint exercises with South Korea without informing South Korea. So Kim might have got a wrong impression that he could – he could get this out of Trump.

Sue Mi Terry: But what I'm also hearing is the other narrative, that it was the United States that asked more sites – or put more sites on the table, you know, in addition to Yongbyon, including this covert uranium enrichment site. I'm not sure if you were talking about – (inaudible) – but there two covert uranium enrichment sites, and President Trump reportedly brought that up, catching the North Koreans off guard. And so I'm already hearing some South Korean spin on this, saying that it's really President Trump that really raised the bar all of a sudden during the negotiation. And then Kim Jong-un said, well, if you're going to do that then I need full sanctions relief. So I'm not sure exactly what happened there, but that's the two competing narratives.

Sue Mi Terry: And I think, as Victor said, it is truly unclear where we go from here, since now we still don't have agreed upon definition on denuclearization, we don't have an agreement on timeline, we don't have a roadmap. It's hard to repeat now this kind of summit level again. So it's kind of – it will be interesting to see. Good news, I think that it's not so catastrophic in that I think for both President Trump – I think Trump did say that it's over for – he didn't say it's over for good, right? He just said, the deal is not there for now. So I think there's an incentive on both sides to not escalate tensions for a while. But, again, as also Mike pointed out, how long will that continue if, for example, North Korea also doesn't get any sanctions relief.

Sue Mi Terry: And even if they hold off for the time being or for, you know, a few months, how long can they maintain that? Which in that case, you know, it will be – we'll have to reconsider what would happen. And particularly if we resumed exercises, let's say, in the August, in the summer, what would North Korea do then? So then – I guess that's sort of the – what we will have to watch out for.

Sue Mi Terry: One – I do think that no deal is better than bad deal. And I do think there's one – on some level, for North Koreans to see Trump as unpredictable is not such a bad thing. If you remember when President Trump first cancelled the initial summit proposal before Singapore before he resumed it, that did catch the North Koreans off guard. And overall, I feel like, you know, if President Trump agreed to this kind of very bad deal now, we would have had really no hope.

Sue Mi Terry: So for me, while this looks bad on a lot of levels, I still there is something that got – you know, some good that came out of it, including North Koreans having to sort of go back to the drawing board. I mean, how long did it take for Kim Jong-un to come out to Hanoi, right? Thirty hours train ride. Now it's a 60 hours round trip. I'm

sure this is not what he expected. So I do think some level of unpredictability is not a bad thing in terms of overall picture.

Sue Mi Terry: The last thing I would say is I'm just kind of – you know, I wonder about – just internally, and I will never know this – how much the Cohen testimony and the coverage of the Cohen testimony and all the domestic stuff that's going on distracted President Trump. Is there a possibility that he just didn't have the – you know, the patience to sort of sit there and try to figure this out, and just better to leave.

Sue Mi Terry: And in that sense, I also wonder if we ran out of time. Now President Trump is coming back here, and more – you know, with the Cohen testimony, and more domestic turmoil, with Mueller investigation coming out, the result coming out, I'm just not sure if he will be continually interested in North Korean issue as long as North Korea does not conduct provocations in the form of missiles – missile and nuclear testing. So I think that's the – the time for making progress I think might have – might have already come and gone. I don't know.

Sue Mi Terry: But why don't I just leave it there and take your questions?

H. Andrew Schwartz: Great. I think we can take some questions from our callers right now.

Operator: (Gives queuing instructions.)

Operator: And our first question comes from the line of Noah Bierman with the Los Angeles Times. Your line is open.

Q: Hi. I'm sorry, I was on mute. Can you hear me now?

Victor Cha: Mmm hmm.

Q: Hi. I just had a question, and it dovetails with some of what you have already said. But the overall sense of – that I get from most of you is that this was probably a good thing to have pulled back; you know, as Sue said, better no deal than a bad deal. But the sense of Trump being willing to take things to this high level, to this brink here in the North Korea negotiations and in other things, how does that – I guess I'm wondering, you know, with – does that leave him with fewer good options than he might have otherwise had?

H. Andrew Schwartz: Victor, do you want to take that to start?

Victor Cha: Well, yeah. So – yeah. So this is Victor.

Victor Cha: I mean, so again, you know, I think that you can do this high-level summit to get a statement of principles once, but if you're actually trying to make a detailed agreement of some sort a second high-level summit with not enough prep work is just not going to work, right? And that was kind of what we worked ourselves into. It may be part of it was for domestic reasons; you know, Trump needed a foreign policy win because of stuff happening at home. But for whatever reason, you know, this was a breakdown, and it was a breakdown that probably didn't need to happen the way – the way that it did.

Victor Cha: And, you know, I mean, I guess going forward they could say, all right, let's empower Biegun and Kim Yong-chol to really try to negotiate this. But, you know, I just think it gets a lot harder when the two leaders couldn't overcome barriers to try to reach some sort of quid pro quo, that somehow we're going to then delegate this down and that the detail work is going to be easier to do when the general concept can't even be agreed upon. Like we were saying earlier, they didn't even come out of this with agreed-upon definition of denuclearization, so how are we going to – how are we going to move this ball – move this ball forward? Yeah, if leaders can't agree, then there's not much diplomatic rope left. So it is a bit concerning.

Victor Cha: Yes, I think – I think the reason we all sound positive on no deal is because all of us were concerned that Trump would really take a bad deal. But, you know, probably to the credit of Pompeo and Bolton and Biegun and Pottinger and others, you know, he probably was briefed up as to what were the negotiation traps, and he clearly didn't fall into them.

Michael J. Green: Yeah, it's Mike.

Michael J. Green: I think in – one way to look at this is we've wasted nine to 12 months and we're back, possibly, where we should have been, which is the president has learned that, you know, Dan Coats, his DNI director, all the experts were right North Korea is very unlikely to denuclearize, and that the president himself does not have the ability to his own, you know, negotiating skills to change that. And part of the dynamic here was that it appears, certainly, that Kim Jong-un was holding out to see what he could get from Donald Trump. So I think one outcome is likely to be that the president empowers Biegun and the negotiators more. And that will possibly yield some small progress because it's an extremely hard problem. That's probably where we would have been nine months ago without all of this summitry, with the one additional factor where he is boxed in, which is our military exercises. Because if he now restarts the military exercises, China, Russia, and South Korea to some extent will blame the U.S. for escalating when, in fact, he should never have suspended them in the first place because they are regular, legitimate, scheduled exercises, absolutely necessary to maintain deterrence at a time when North Korea was violating multiple Security Council sanctions and developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, in violation of international law and Security Council resolutions.

Michael J. Green: So that's the box he's stuck in, I think, is the military exercises. He now has put himself in a position here, if he resumes them, which the Pentagon will want and need to do to keep the forces ready, if he does that, he'll be blamed. And that's – that is one area where he has put himself in a box. And I don't know how he gets out of it.

H. Andrew Schwartz: I think we'll take our next question.

Operator: Thank you. Our next question comes from the line of Shirish Date with HuffPost. Please go ahead.

Operator: Is your line in mute? We cannot hear you.

Q: Can you hear me now?

Operator: Yes.

H. Andrew Schwartz: Yes.

Q: OK. Sorry about that.

Q: OK, quick question here. The – how closely does North Korea monitor American media? I mean, do they watch his rallies, his political rallies, where he says peace in our time, I brought peace, everything's fine? And were they just trying to see what they could get away with here? And second, how much did Bolton's presence at the table have – do you think have to do with what happened? Thank you.

Victor Cha: So on the first question, you know, they do monitor U.S. media. They – particularly their North American – their Division of North American Affairs people in the Foreign Ministry monitor U.S. media about North Korea pretty regularly. They do watch CNN. And so I think they do monitor it.

Victor Cha: And I think it's – you know, a very plausible theory is that Kim and the North Koreans heard Trump speaking in such superlatives about economic assistance and general enthusiasm for these negotiations and how well they will go that maybe they thought they could roll him. You know, maybe they really thought that they could roll him. And, you know, and clearly he wasn't going to be rolled.

Victor Cha: And then, on the second point, on Bolton, you know, he was there, of course, for both the bilateral – the Vietnamese, I think, and as well as the meetings with the North Koreans. But in – but – and I don't know if this was by choice or how it happened, but in the small dinner that took place, the principals-plus-two dinner that took place, on the North Korean side it was the North Korean leader and Kim Yong-chol and Ri Yong-ho, the foreign minister and the former spy chief. And I think the right counterparts then would have been Pompeo and Bolton, but Bolton was not at the dinner. Mulvaney went instead.

Victor Cha: So, you know, I don't know. I imagine that Bolton's happy with the outcome, you know, that we didn't give ground. But it's really hard to say how much of a role he played in the actual negotiations.

Michael J. Green: Let me add – it's Mike – two concrete examples of how the North Koreans read the U.S. media. And the punchline up front is they don't, I think, read it very well. I remember in negotiations in Pyongyang in 2002, when I was there with the Bush administration, I met their top expert on the United States. And he had gotten his degree in American literature at Kim Il-sung University, and he'd written his graduate thesis on John Grisham, the novelist. And I asked him, well, what about Eudora Welty? What about other novelists? And he'd never heard of them.

Michael J. Green: Now, that's some time ago, but they pay very close attention especially to The New York Times and CNN. When Bob Gallucci was negotiating in the 1994 period, the North Koreans told him that he would have to compromise because of the midterm elections. And they read too much into that. And in 2004, when we were negotiating with the North Koreans in the six-party talks, The New York Times was writing editorials accusing the Bush administration of being too hardline and wanting regime change. And when we put on the table an actual proposal for aid

and assistance in exchange for denuclearization, the North Koreans were completely surprised – it was obvious – because they had read too much into the New York Times and CNN spin.

Michael J. Green: So you can imagine – we don't know, but you can imagine that they heard and read that the president's in desperate trouble at home politically and that all the experts and editorial writers were worried he was going to give away too much. So I would guess Kim Il-sung – excuse me – Kim Jong-un came into this meeting of a complete misunderstanding of where things were going to go because of the narrow window the North Koreans have and the way they interpret media.

H. Andrew Schwartz: Great. I think we'll take a next question.

Operator: Thank you.

Operator: (Gives queuing instructions.)

Operator: Our next question comes from the line of Howard LaFranchi with Christian Science. Please go ahead, your line is open.

Q: Hi. Thanks for doing this. Can you hear me?

H. Andrew Schwartz: Yes.

Q: Yeah, great. Just a short question, maybe for Victor. But anyway, is this – you know, when we get a year or so down the road, is this going to be remembered as the summit where basically we accepted – or the world was introduced to North Korean nuclear power that's not going to change, that's not going to give up its nukes?

Victor Cha: Well, I mean, I certainly hope that that's not the case. I mean – I mean, there's no denying that, you know, we're at a pretty serious impasse right now, that in the past the theory was always that if we could actually push it up to the leadership level and have a direct conversation with the North Korean leader about what the benefits of giving up their weapons would be, that would be our best shot at trying to change – you know, create the so-called strategic decision by North Korea to make that shift.

Victor Cha: So we've had that, right? And we've had it with two – with two meetings, and many letters back and forth, and many emissaries going back and forth. And we have not succeeded in that regard. So it very well could be – could be remembered that way. I think, you know, all of us wanted the president to succeed – whether, you know, we liked the way he was doing things, we wanted him to succeed in this meeting. He still seems to be committed to the diplomacy – at least listening to him in the press conference and watching his body language. He was clearly exhausted, but still seemed quite committed to it.

Victor Cha: But I – frankly, I do worry that once he gets back home, with all that's going on with regard to his domestic situation and other issues – like China trade, what's happening between India and Pakistan, Venezuela – and the fact that he may feel like he gave it a shot and it wasn't successful, that he may just put this on the back burner for a while. And, you know, he's pretty – he's been pretty clear about what

his metric is for action, which is as long as they don't test everything's OK. But in the meantime, you know, I think as Mike said earlier, in the meantime even if they don't test they are amassing weapons capability and fissile material. And they did it between Singapore and Hanoi, and they will continue to do it going forward.

H. Andrew Schwartz: Any further questions?

Operator: (Gives queuing instructions.)

H. Andrew Schwartz: Beth, if we don't have any further questions, I think we'll wrap it up.

Operator: Thank you, sir. And there are no further questions at this time.

H. Andrew Schwartz: Great. Well, thanks to everybody for joining the call. We'll have a transcript of this out shortly. You can also check out our podcast Impossible State which we'll be taping later today with Mike, Victor, myself and Sue. Thanks very much for joining us this morning.

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