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TRANSCRIPT

The Asia Chessboard Podcast

"Perfect Partners or a Perfect Storm? Discussing Korea with Victor Cha and Sue Terry"

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SPEAKERS

Victor Cha

Senior Adviser for Asia and Korea Chair, CSIS

Sue Mi Terry

Senior Fellow, Korea Chair, CSIS

HOST

Mike Green

Senior Vice President for Asia and Japan Chair, CSIS

Andrew Schwartz: Welcome to the Asia Chessboard. The podcast that examines geopolitical dynamics in Asia and takes an inside look at the making of grand strategy. I'm Andrew Schwartz at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Ben Rimland: The United States may be facing a perfect storm with an end of year deadline for North Korea diplomacy. In this episode, Mike sits down with former National Security Council official, Victor Cha, CSIS Korea chair and professor of government at Georgetown. Mike is also joined by former senior CIA analyst Sue Mi Terry, senior fellow at the CSIS Korea chair. The conversation begins with a discussion of how Sue's background in intelligence analysis and Victor's background in academia prepared them for a career in Korea policy. The trio then take a comprehensive look at the Korean Peninsula, from a big picture analysis of the Peninsula's place in American grand strategy to an examination of the present day perfect storm of possible Alliance decoupling between the United States and South Korea.

Mike Green: Welcome back to the Asia Chessboard. I'm Mike Green. I'm joined by my friends and colleagues, Dr. Victor Cha, a colleague at both CSIS and Georgetown and formerly a colleague at the NSC and Dr. Sue Mi Terry, a colleague at CSIS, a lecturer at Georgetown and my former briefer when I was at NSC. We're going to talk about the geopolitics of the Korean Peninsula and the risks of a perfect storm that our presence and our alliance at Korea may be at risk for domestic political reasons in both countries perhaps but at a time of tectonic shifting plates in Asia, maybe we shouldn't worry, maybe we should, we'll get into that. But I always like to start, Victor and Sue, by how you got here. Let's start with Victor. We've known each other, gosh, 25 years. You were a banker. How'd you get into the Asian security business?

Victor Cha: So, Yeah. When I graduated from college I was an economics major and so I was interested in the finance world. This is the 80s, everybody was interested in that. And I really didn't like it. So I ended up going to England for two years to find myself. I did a degree in PPE, philosophy, politics and economics, at Oxford, and it was there I realized I wanted to do a PhD in political science. So that's how I ended up in this field and then the Korea stuff actually came later. It was when I was at the dissertation stage, then I started thinking about what region of the world do I want to write on? And that's when I became interested in Korea and Japan. At Columbia, you could not major in the regions of the world. You could major in Korea. So I actually did Japan with people like Gerry Curtis and Jim Morley at the time. So Korea sort of came later in my academic career.

Mike Green: So that's probably why your dissertation and first book, Alignment Despite Antagonism, looks at U.S., Japan, Korea trilateral, because you started with Japan?

Victor Cha: Yeah. I started with Japan but I was quite interested in Korea and my advisor, Jim Morley, had actually also written a book about Japan-Korea relations way back when in 1965. It's a small book. No one ever read it. I read it, and I thought

it was a great topic. These are the two most important US allies in Asia and they had a difficult relationship so trying to understand how that worked was interesting to me.

Mike Green: It was titled Alignment Despite Antagonism. If you had to retell it today, would it be alignment and even more antagonism? Or dealignment and antagonism?

Victor Cha: Maybe Alignment? Antagonism!

Mike Green: And Sue, how'd you get into this business?

Sue Mi Terry: Well, when I was at graduate school I thought I wanted to do…

Mike Green: Which was Fletcher?

Sue Mi Terry: Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts. And I thought I wanted to do China, because China is China, China is the future and so I did my master's in Chinese foreign policy and I wanted to do a doctorate on China. My dissertation advisors basically said, "Listen, why do you want to do China? You're a Korean American, you speak the language fluently, you understand the culture. Korea is an important field, not only because of North Korea and North Korean threat, but South Korea, 12th largest economy in the world, future of the Korean Peninsula." So basically they convinced me to do Korean history for a PhD and then I thought I would just go into academia. And I came from New York before that, so I thought "Oh, I'll go back to New York and find a place to teach, like Columbia, NYU." Of course academia does not work like that.

Sue Mi Terry: So the positions that were available were just not anywhere in New York but somewhere really far. Meanwhile, CIA came to recruit and I still remember the recruiter asked me this question about, "Don't you want to know what Kim Jong Il eats for breakfast?" I'm like, "Well I kind of do." So it's basically curiosity and the fact that I wanted to be in Northern Virginia or D.C. versus somewhere else, that led me to just join the CIA. Never found out what Kim Jong Il ate for breakfast but I do know that his favorite food was Toro. But from the sushi chef, not through any crazy intelligence. But that was a couple of days before 911, so I thought I was going to be there for a couple of years, but of course I didn't.

Mike Green: But of course your highlight career-wise was when you were my briefer when I was at the NSC and you had to get up at what, two in the morning, to prepare.

Sue Mi Terry: Yes, three in the morning every morning I had to come in to CIA and three in the morning I started preparing all the intel that came in through the night. At that time you covered all over Asia, including South Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan. So that was a lot of work.

Mike Green: That was a lot of Asia.

Sue Mi Terry: Yeah, and having to deal with you every morning was a lot of work.

Mike Green: You made me look good, so thank you. Victor, we'll start with you, but who in your thinking about, not the political science piece as much, but more of the policy geopolitical strategic piece, who do you consider important influences as you've looked at the Korean Peninsula and Asia?

Victor Cha: One of them for sure was Han Seung-ju, a professor at Korea University. Later became foreign minister and then also ambassador. I first met him when he was actually doing a Ford Financial Fellowship in New York from Korea University and he taught a course, a colloquium on Korean foreign policy, at Columbia. And that was actually the first class I had ever taken on Korea. I had taken nothing as an undergraduate, certainly nothing at Oxford.

Mike Green: So before he became foreign minister?

Victor Cha: Yeah, yeah. It was before. He was a professor. He was writing a column for Newsweek International. And so that was the first class I took and that was really what got me quite interested in looking. So I think he was a very important influence. There were others along the way. Even though he wasn't doing Korea, Bob Jervis was a very important influence as well, just because…

Mike Green: Professor at Columbia?

Victor Cha: Professor of Columbia.

Mike Green: Was he was chair of your committee?

Victor Cha: Yeah he was the chairman of my dissertation committee. He was terrific. Historian, Gari Ledyard at Columbia was also a very important influence. So I feel very fortunate I had very good mentors along the way.

Mike Green: Sue?

Sue Mi Terry: Well, I'm not saying this literally because you guys are sitting in front of me, but for me, because I was spending most of my time in intelligence, I looked at policymakers/scholars like you guys. Victor has been around. I'm not trying to age you here.

Mike Green: Let's be sure not to edit this part out.

Sue Mi Terry: I'm not trying to age you here, but I read your things. I'm sure there's a lot of former students of yours who say that. There are other folks, but I really would say that both you, Mike and Victor, have a special space in academia/national security and for people who come from intelligence background or not, that's the most impactful things because you guys are always also policy focused while you're doing academic work.

Mike Green: That's hopefully what we're conveying in this podcast and in Victor's podcast to help people coming up in the field think about how to bridge academia and policy and strategy. Almost three different worlds. Let's turn to the Korean Peninsula. Should we be worried, Victor, about the perfect storm? Tell us a little bit about what you see as part of the perfect storm. You've done a bit of data analytics to put it in context.

Victor Cha: Yeah. So as we approach the end of this year there are a number of pieces that are moving and they could all come together sort of at the end of the year. The first piece is some sort of deal with North Korea. President Moon wants it. President Trump wants it. The North Korean leader has said a deal or else by the end of the year. There are other things obviously that are happening in Washington now that may compel the president to look for some bright shiny object. And so a deal with North Korea in which there is a peace declaration could be something we see by the end of the year. In no small reason because the one person who is the most vocal in opposing a deal at the Hanoi Summit is no longer in the White House. And that's John Bolton. The other piece of this is, we have these negotiations between the US and South Korea on burden sharing, a special measures agreement, $5 billion, five times more than what the US has asked for it to be in the past.

Victor Cha: And that is a negotiation. At least the indicators are that that's not going to go very well and the Korean people are going to be quite angry about it. We've sort of scraped social media data on this and whenever there's a story or something about SMA in the news, the South Korean chatter around it is exponentially higher than a story about North Korea in the South Korean news. So they follow this very, very carefully. And so the perfect storm could be a combination of a failed SMA, a peace deal with North Korea where the president says, "If you don't want to pay and I have peace with North Korea, then we really don't need these troops here."

Victor Cha: And this wouldn't be just something he did on a whim, because there was a long history. We have a dataset in Beyond Parallel that goes back 30 years, where President Trump has made over 100 statements to this effect with regard to the lack of a need for troops in Korea. He has believed this since 1990. Remarkably consistent. So it's this concatenation of events that could come together at the end of the year that could spell, frankly, a disaster for the Alliance.

Mike Green: So the public support in the U.S. for U.S.-Korea Alliance and for U.S. foreign presence is pretty robust. Chicago Council on Global Affairs and other polling. It's pretty good in Korea too. And we know from our interactions with the Hill that in Congress there's at least on the foreign affairs and defense/armed services committees there's pretty broad, in fact almost universal, bipartisan support for the Alliance. But what about in Seoul? Sue, you have President Trump's 100 statements, 30 of which were specifically on how we're getting ripped off by having troops in Korea.

Mike Green: What about in Seoul? In Korea, public support for US Forces for the Alliance is as robust as it's ever been, but within the Blue House you have progressives who may sort of be the mirror of what Victor just described with President Trump. Skeptical about the U.S. president, skeptical about the U.S. We have the GSOMIA issue and we have the demands from the Blue House for wartime op-con transfer for the operation and control of our joint combining command shift to Korea. And other things that could be seen as essentially trying to push the U.S. off the peninsula. Does that worry you? How would you make sense of it for our listeners?

Sue Mi Terry: It does worry me. I do think the South Korean public really broadly supports U.S.-South Korea Alliance and our true presence in South Korea. Although I do think that President Trump's rhetoric and asking for $5 billion right now is creating sort of a negative environment even within the public. But the Moon administration, this administration is a true believer in engagement as sort of moving forward…

Mike Green: With North Korea.

Sue Mi Terry: Yeah. Engagement with North Korea. Moving forward with North Korea at all costs. So if there's a bad interim deal, I'm not sure if the Moon administration would think of it as bad. Because for them any deal with North Korea almost is better than nothing. And try to move forward with that. So if, as Victor describes, President Trump says in this interim deal with North Korea, "Okay we'll have a peace declaration," or "We'll move forward with peace treaty and potentially even pulling out U.S. troops from South Korea."

Sue Mi Terry: I'm not sure if the Moon administration within the Blue House would necessarily be so against that. Just because they are such an advocate for any kind of forward movement with North Korea. So even though true withdrawal is not supported by South Korea, this combination effect of President Trump asking for $5 billion, five times more what South Korea has paid for, and if there is a deal with North Korea, I can see the Moon administration sort of saying, "Okay, well on one hand we have $5 billion that is being asked by Trump, on the other hand there is a deal, so our hands are tied basically."

Victor Cha: Yeah, I agree. So here's the thing. Ideologically, the government in South Korea, because it's progressive, is actually for a more autonomous defense, more independence from the Alliance. Progressive governments in Korea actually have higher defense budgets than conservative governments because they're looking for more autonomous capabilities, and they buy all sorts of silly things. So there's that. And then on top of that you have a populist government, right? That really makes policy based on how they think the wind is blowing in Korea. Now there is a backstop, as Sue said, to any sort of anti-U.S. rhetoric, and that is sort of the silent majority, if you will, who would oppose troop withdrawal or any of those other things.

Victor Cha: But if everybody's angry over the U.S. wanting $5 billion, five times what Korea has paid in the past, it's hard for the conservatives to argue against that. And so then you get a slippery slope where everything starts rolling in one direction. And especially because we have elections here in the United States, but they have elections also in Korea in April. Very important legislative elections. So when you throw in the electoral politics of this, again, it's a very dangerous combination.

Mike Green: And then, if as expected, Korea withdraws from GSOMIA, the information sharing agreement with Japan, after the U.S. Secretary of Defense/Secretary of State have publicly called on them not to do it. And a week after Secretary of Defense Esper and General Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, are meeting with their Korean counterparts, asking them not to withdraw from GSOMIA. If all that happens, you can just imagine how hard it will be for defenders of the Alliance meeting with the president saying, "We have to take this deal Korea is offering," which we know is going to be less than a 500% increase, less than 5 billion. So that's the perfect storm. In this podcast we try not to get too buried in the day to day stuff, although really this is important because this is the kind of inflection point that can have a decade long impact on our strategy. But let me turn to grand strategy and I'll start with Victor. As you know, I wrote a history of U.S. grand strategy. Korea and the Korean Peninsula have often been a blind spot for American strategists.

Mike Green: There's the Mahanian maritime view, which for over 100 years has been skeptical about having presence on the continent. Then there's the more continentalist view, but those thinkers, the Kissingers and Scowcrofts, have focused on China, not Korea. Korean Peninsula is sort of orphaned in American strategic thinking. You can see it now in the national security strategy and the very Mahanian maritime free and open and Indo-Pacific approach, which is very aligned with Japan, where Korea doesn't fit. In the intellectual communities, if you will, in the Academy you have the so-called restrainers. Barry Posen is the most famous one, but you now have the Quincy Institute. They've been very outspoken opponents of intervention, but primarily in the Middle East. People like Senator Rand Paul have been very isolationist in my view, but primarily with respect to the Middle East, looking at the debate on strategy, what do you see? Do you think that there is a constituency among strategic thinkers for getting off the peninsula or do you think we're in okay shape there?

Victor Cha: I don't know if there's a constituency for it, but I would say that there's a soft floor, if you will. In the sense that, yes, historically U.S. grand strategy has a blind spot when it comes to Korea. And not inconsistent is to say that essentially the United States default strategic position on Asia is a maritime position.

Mike Green: Right.

Victor Cha: Right. We've always thought of ourselves as a maritime power in Asia and that if we have the right maritime coalition we could contain whatever force

projection that comes, whatever bad things that could come from the continent we could contain it. Or way back in the olden days, China was so backwards, we didn't even care. We didn't think China could do anything that good. So that has been the default position and even though Korea over the past 70 years has shown its value as an ally, you can't fight history. That's the default position.

Victor Cha: Every time we have neglected Korea, as you've written about, it has come back to bite the United States strategically in the rear end. Right. And so there's always the danger that that could happen. And the way it could happen here is while there isn't Quincy Institute type of position with regard to getting off the peninsula, if the question gets raised or if the even the president just starts talking about it, he says, "Well I'd like to get off Korea because they don't want to pay as much. I've got to deal with my friend Kim but Congress won't let me." Right.

Victor Cha: That is just going to start a discussion where people will say, "Yeah, we've been in Korea for 70 years or whatever it is, they're a rich country now. They really don't need our help." Right. And that's a very persuasive argument. Despite public opinion polls, despite strong support in Congress for the Alliance, if that sort of discussion takes place in the context of peace on the Korean Peninsula, whether it's a real peace or a fake peace, it's very hard to beat that back, I think. So in that sense, I think there is a soft floor that I always worry about when it comes to U.S. commitment to Korea.

Mike Green: And that potential constituency for withdrawal is on the left and the right.

Victor Cha: Yeah, yeah. It's on both. Right. Both the left and the right.

Mike Green: The left like the peace agreement and cutting defense spending and the right to what President Trump says is strategy.

Sue Mi Terry: But I think there's no serious Korea watcher who actually supports that. If you're any kind of historian or you have any kind of interest in the Korean peninsula and you followed it, as Victor said and as you said, when we ignored Korea, like in 1949 when we pulled out the troops, when we left Korea out of the defense perimeter, the whole Acheson speech invited Kim Il Sung to invade South Korea. Right? So no matter what, we are going to have to say our Alliance commitment, our troop presence had kept peace for 70 plus years. So I think at least amongst serious Korea scholars, we don't even need to debate why we have troops in South Korea and why it's so important.

Mike Green: The answer is Japan scholars. Because we fought in Korea in large part because of Japan. Because you can't have, as Victor pointed out, a maritime position in the first island chain if you let Korea go. Sue, talk about the Korean Peninsula in the context of the strategic competition with China. The Korean Peninsula has been the object of rivalry competition at war among great powers many times in history. Sino-Japanese War, Russo-Japanese War, the Korean War. How

should people think about the Korean Peninsula and the context of strategic competition with China? Because when you read the national defense strategy or you read the national security strategy, it's very heavy on Japan, Australia, India. US-Korea Alliance doesn't figure as prominently. How should we be thinking about US-Korea Alliance in the context of strategic rivalry with China?

Sue Mi Terry: Just historically, look at the geography, right? As you said, we had 1894-1895 Sino-Japanese War, with 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War and the Korean War. Just the geostrategic landscape, we need to just look at the geography. Obviously the Korean Peninsula is hugely important. And again, our true presence in South Korea is not only to defend or deter against North Korea or deter North Korean threat, it is to defend Japan. It is with our competition with China.

Sue Mi Terry: And my whole point also when we think about long term interest of the Korean Peninsula, I think we should also think about potential unification of the Korean peninsula. And then where would that unified Korea be, in terms of its own strategic orientation. Because if that unified Korea leans towards China, that completely changes our strategic landscape with East Asia, right? And if unified Korea is pro United States, that also is important and it matters. So just to answer your question, I think historically it's always been a battle ground country for a reason. Why all the regional powers fought over the Korean Peninsula? Why the Korean Peninsula how many times to get to China, right? So I think you cannot discount the importance of the Korean Peninsula in the region.

Mike Green: The Japanese have a grand strategy. I think it's pretty clear. It's a little weak on Korea, frankly, it's very Mahanian and maritime also. Does Korea have a grand strategy? I think most Koreans, especially conservatives, know they cannot survive in the environment Sue described without the U.S.-Korea Alliance. But I don't see that in the strategy coming out of the Blue House. Is it there somewhere?

Victor Cha: No, that's a good question. I think progressives have a pretty clear view on how they feel about defense, but it's never been clear to me what their strategy is in terms of Korea's geostrategic place in Asia. I think ideally they would like to hedge between their primary continental neighbor being China and then their primary maritime partner being the United States. But that becomes harder and harder to do in this new era of US-China strategic competition. It gets harder and harder for Korea to sort of hedge between the two. They're increasingly forced to make choices. They're used to China forcing binary choices on them, but they're not used to the United States forcing binary choices on them. Unfortunately, when you look at these sorts of choices, the results of the choices may not be something that Americans like to see. Because increasingly when Korea is faced with making those choices there's starting to lean more towards China.

Victor Cha: Whether you look at things like AIIB, Korea has not been explicit on the free and open Indo-Pacific, what China is doing in the South China Sea. When forced to make a choice, they have not been leaning towards the United States. And that would be a real tragedy for US strategy because Korea is the U.S. foothold on the continent. And that makes it very important in terms of the strategic balance between the United States and China in Asia. It would not be so important if we had not by accident of history formed this alliance with Korea. Korea would just have been a part of the continental Asia. But the fact that that accident in history made us have this huge stake in Korea. If we were to lose that stake, it would signal a real defeat for the United States in terms of our strategy in Asia. So it was by accident of history that we got brought onto the Korean Peninsula. But it has become strategically very valuable for the United States in the sense that if don't have it or if we lose it, then it's really China's game.

Mike Green: I think in the current strategic competition with China, Beijing's view is that the center of gravity for the U.S., in other words, the thing they will try to weaken is our alliance network. And where I see the most pressure is actually not on Japan, not on Australia, not even on Thailand or the Philippines. It's on Korea. The 2014 CICA statement by Xi Jinping trying to get Korea to sign on to no foreign blocks, selling Asian security alone. The THAAD boycott, billions of dollars in cost to Lotte because of boycotts, because Lotte provided the land for the U.S. missile defense deployments. China's going hard at that alliance.

Sue Mi Terry: I think that was a real mistake on China. Because while South Korea is pursuing this hedging policy between the United States and China and they have been trying to avoid making these difficult decisions. However, I do think China overplaying with the whole sanctioning the wrong country, South Korea, over the THAAD issue, I think played very badly with the South Korean public. So there was sort of a wake up call for the South Koreans because until then they were like, "We know we just have to hedge and we just have to balance." But I do think that has raised questions among many South Koreans and scholars saying, "Whoa, what's going on here with China?" So China is not fully dependable. So it was a strategic mistake on the Chinese part. They pressed too much.

Mike Green: I don't think that the leadership in China sees it that way. That's our problem. They should be reading opinion polls. You probably saw the Joong-Ang Ilbo poll where 75% of Koreans said in the current U.S.-China standoff, Korea should be with the U.S. Last question. If you were back in the NSC right now, what would you recommend to the president? What would you recommend to the national security advisor our posture should be? Should we pressure Korea to make choices we want in what way on AIIB and BRI on the free and open Indo-Pacific? Should we tolerate diversity of approaches to China? My worry is that the administration will think Korea is not a good ally and so we have to force choices and then Korea won't be able to make those choices. What would you recommend? Start with Victor.

Victor Cha: Putting aside the policy choices for the moment, one of the most important things I think for the U.S. to recognize is that of all of U.S. allies in Asia, arguably Korea has the most complex strategy vis-a-vis China. Right? It's less complex for Japan. Japan and China will always be peer competitors forever, right? It's more complicated for Australia, but I would say it's much more complicated for Korea, not just because of geography and because of economics, but because Korea has this one other issue with China that nobody else has. And that is the problem of North Korea and the prospects for unification, right? It is ingrained in South Korean strategic thinking that they need China's understanding when it comes to North Korea and unification. And for this reason, the Chinese can be as punitive to them as they would like, but Korea will always respond in a way that is more like, "In the long term we need China. So we have to withstand the brunt of their criticism, some of their outrageous punitive economic actions for that purpose."

Victor Cha: So part of it is that until we get to that point, unification or something like that, there has to be an understanding that Korea, it's not going to be like Japan and Australia. It's going to be a little bit different. Having said that though, on things that are important to the United States where we want Korea to make policy choices, we should make clear that as an ally we would like to see Korea be on our side. So things like supporting the free and open Indo-Pacific or being able to say something about freedom of navigation in the South China Sea or even on Huawei, right? If they want to be part of the China network or do they want to be part of the Western U.S.-based network. We have to pick and choose, what are these things that we really want Korea to weigh in on the U.S. side.

Sue Mi Terry: So I would completely agree with that. So in order for us to get South Korea to stand with us in dealing with China, I think the most important part right now is picking and choosing and strengthening that alliance between South Korea and the United States. So there are a couple things that we can do. For example, right now the most immediate issue, convince the South Koreans to back away from GSOMIA, letting GSOMIA expire. Amend the relationship with Japan, I think that has to be a priority. So we have to strengthen our alliance relationship with South Korea, trilateral alliance relationship with South Korea, Japan and the United States. And this goes to China, dealing with China is in a longer term watch, much more complex issue. But it has to start with strong alliance relationship. Get off the whole $5 billion ask that were doing with the South Koreans. So there are a number of things that we can do and I think that's what I would be pushing for if I'm at the NSC.

Mike Green: We didn't talk a lot about North Korea today, but you can hear a lot more about North Korea policy and developments in Victor Cha's podcast, The Impossible State, on CSIS.org. But we did a nice job, I think, setting the strategic stage for what in the long run really matters, which is the U.S.-Korea Alliance. Two democracies, common values, common strategic interests, going through a rough patch, and you've helped put it in context. Thank you both.

Victor Cha: Thank you.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening. For more on strategy and the Asia Program's work, visit the CSIS website at CSIS.org and click on the Asia program page.