Center for Strategic and International Studies

The Impossible State Podcast

“Episode 5: Where Do We Go from Here?”

Speakers:
Ambassador Robert King,
Former U.S. Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues

Joseph Kim,
Intern, CSIS; International Affairs and Policy Student, Bard College;
Author, “Under the Same Sky: From Starvation in North Korea to Salvation in America”

Host:
H. Andrew Schwartz,
Chief Communications Officer,
CSIS

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

(Begin recorded segment.)

REPORTER: In Singapore, smiles and a stroll from Kim Jong-un. But back home, a U.N. report paints a much more grim picture.

REPORTER: The grueling task of hammering out details and a lack of specifics has drawn fierce criticism.

(End recorded segment.)

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

(Begin recorded segment.)

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: It was discussed at length outside of – outside of the nuclear situation.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Otto Warmbier. I really think that Otto is someone who did not die in vain.

(End recorded segment.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: Each week on this show we’ll talk with the people who know the most about North Korea.

In this episode of The Impossible State, we’ll be talking about human rights in North Korea. We’re calling this episode “Where Do We Go from Here?” We’ll be talking with special guests Ambassador Robert King and Joseph Kim, who’s a young man who defected from North Korea in 2006 and resettled in the United States a year later.

Ambassador King was the special envoy for North Korean human rights issues at the State Department from 2009 to 2017.

Joseph Kim is an intern at CSIS this summer and he’s studying international affairs and policy at Bard College. He’s also the author of a memoir called “Under the Same Sky,” which is an astonishing account of Joseph’s escape from North Korea.

Ambassador King and Joseph join us in the studio to talk about human rights in North Korea and the Trump administration’s approach to addressing the issue in the aftermath of the Singapore summit.

Joseph, can you tell us the story of why you left North Korea and how you left North Korea?
JOSEPH KIM: Sure. Let me begin by saying, Ambassador King, it’s my great honor to be on this program with you.

I guess how I escaped is easier to answer than why I escaped. When I was 12 my father passed away of starvation, which led my sister and my mom going to China look for food. Long story short, my sister was sold to a man in China and my mom came back to North Korea, unfortunately, and eventually she ended up being arrested by North Korean authorities and went to prison for attempting to or went to China without the government permission, which left me alone on the street for about three and a half to four years. And –

MR. SCHWARTZ: You were on the street for three and a half to four years?

MR. KIM: Yes, which means you have to learn how to beg on the street from the strangers. And which was hard because, you know, even when I was in elementary school, because of my personality, I’m naturally introvert, so like it was hard to talk to my friends too. But –

MR. SCHWARTZ: How old were you?

MR. KIM: I was 12.

MR. SCHWARTZ: You were 12. And what year was this?

MR. KIM: This was in 2002.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And it was in Pyongyang, or?

MR. KIM: No, this was in Hoeryong city, which is very further of – which is near to Siberia, the border between China and Russia as well.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And you were on the street for four and a half years. This is all, of course –

MR. KIM: About three to four years.

MR. SCHWARTZ: This is all in your book, your memoir, called “Under the Same Sky.” But what was it like being on the street in North Korea for four years?

MR. KIM: I think often I was – I asked myself why: Why do I have to be on the street when my other friends or my friends going to school with their backpacks on their back? Sometimes when you don’t – go without food for up to three to four days, you just get to think about so many different things. I don’t think I necessarily have a right word to describe what was it like.

But I guess one thing that I could tell is that when I was on the street, it was not like I was the only one. There were many other North Korean boys and girls who were as young as five, six years old, trying to survive on their own by trying to – stealing food from the streets or the markets or begging. Or often, when you beg food from situations where most people also struggling with their food, like it’s hard to get some food. If it was in the U.S., maybe stopping someone on the street, explain to the person about your situation, maybe buying one hamburger is not too big of the deal. But in North Korea, when I was on the street in that time a lot of people also were struggling, meaning if
they shared their portion of food with me then that means their own children also has to face the consequences of sharing.

I guess if you were to ask me what helped me to survive, I think I would like to say that I think the knowledge that I was being loved by my parents and my sister, and that I’m worthy of being loved. Receiving love was what helped me to stay strong and have a hope to leave.

ROBERT KING: I’ve read Joseph’s book.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yes.

MR. KING: It’s a remarkable account. And I’ve – you gave me a copy. I appreciated it and I read it.

MR. KIM: Of course.

MR. KING: and it’s one of the best accounts of what it’s like to go through that experience.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And you were sleeping in the streets as well and you were – you were just literally outside all the time?

MR. KIM: Yes. So, I mean, during the summer times, I mean, you know, it’s a little bit better in the sense that the weather helps. But during the winter times, you have to find like abandoned shelters, like, or the trains in the train stations. You know, these days I cannot wake up without alarm clocks in the mornings, but in North Korea you don’t need alarm clock to wake up because you’re constantly hungry.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Obviously, you had good reason to leave North Korea. How did you do it?

MR. KIM: Let me try to – I was – luckily, I was – I grew up in a hometown nearby the border and the river that serves as a border between China and North Korea, and so I knew at least how to get closer to the border, which was a big help. So it was during the day, and I decided to run over the ice. I mean, the water was frozen because it was during the wintertime, and I just hoped that, you know, no one caught me. And I think probably up until my life probably that was the quickest run I had in my life.

MR. SCHWARTZ: I bet.

MR. KIM: Yes.

MR. SCHWARTZ: What was it like leaving your family behind in North Korea?

MR. KIM: Boy, I think leaving North Korea, you know, itself was just very emotional in a sense that when I crossed the river to other side in Chinese mountains, where I climbed up the mountain and I looked down from Chinese land to my hometown, which I saw my elementary school, I saw the – I could like literally see the places that I used to go when I was in North Korea. But like by virtue of just crossing less than a hundred feet river on the border, now I was in – I was in a totally complete different land and I could – it was not like I could go back just freely without consequences. So I think I stood up, for a good few minutes was just thinking about memories that I had in North
Korea. And was – I think I was internally asking myself: Am I ever going to go back – be able to go back to this country? And it was very emotional because you know it takes – it would take less than 30 minutes if you walk fast enough, but because of the security issues and once you leave North Korea you can’t really freely go back. So I think in sum I would say I have very mixed feelings.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And how did you get from China to the United States?

MR. KIM: To make a long story short, I – when I crossed – when I went to China, I used to sleep in the mountains or sometimes in abandoned houses in the rural area in China. And I eventually met South Korean missionaries who were helping North Korean refugees hiding in China, and with the help of some of these South Korean missionaries I connected with an NGO from the – which is based in Liaoning called LiNK, Liberty in North Korea. And with this human rights organization, I was able to go inside American consulate in China.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Ambassador King, I want to turn to you and ask you your views on what’s happening with North Korea now with regard to the Trump administration’s negotiations. And what is the Trump administration’s policy on human rights? And what do you see as the prospects going forward after this historic meeting with Trump and Kim Jong-un?

MR. KING: A couple of things. One, the Trump administration hasn’t given much attention to the human rights issue in the context of the discussions that have been taking place with the North Koreans in the last couple of weeks. The president was interested in human rights when it was a weapon, a stick that he could use to beat the North Koreans. He raised the question of North Korea when Otto Warmbier was released. He raised the question of human rights in North Korea in his State of the Union message, where he devoted a large portion of his conversation to the North Korea human rights issues. There were people in the audience; the Warmbier family members were there. There were also a number of defectors from North Korea who were present in the House chamber when he gave the speech. And then he spoke disparagingly of North Korea’s human rights record. But this was part of an effort to try to press the North Koreans to move towards talking with –

MR. SCHWARTZ: It was strategic.

MR. KING: It was strategic. It was not a commitment to the human rights issue as much it was a – as much as it was a use of the human rights issue to make progress on the nuclear issue.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And there’s – all of that was that he – three Americans were returned from North Korea.

MR. KING: Yeah.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And the president called that a great success, was a great success. He also said that Otto Warmbier didn’t die in vain. What’s going to happen going forward now, in your view?

MR. KING: I think the focus is still going to be on the nuclear issue. And in looking at the issue – the broader issue of U.S.-North Korea relations; of the relationship with North Korea with its neighbors, particularly with South Korea but also the other areas in East Asia – the nuclear issue is still the most important concern, and we have to deal with the nuclear issue. But I believe very strongly that unless we’re able to make some progress in terms of dealing with human rights, we’re not going to be making progress that has any lasting value in dealing with the nuclear issue. If we don’t deal with
human rights – if there isn’t a sense that the people who live in North Korea have the right to express their views about issues, that they have the right to make certain choices – that it’s going to be very difficult for the relationship to go very far with North Korea and it’s going to be very difficult for North Korea to go very far in terms of the objectives it has in terms of economic development and so forth.

MR. SCHWARTZ: What’s absent from the negotiations right now, in your view?

MR. KING: The fact that we’re not even pressing a little bit for some progress on some of the human rights issues. This is not the kind of a thing where you need to start out with the most extreme demand in terms of the human rights question, but there are some issues that we need to press the North Koreans on if we’re going to make progress.

One of them is, for example, access to information. North Korea is the most isolated place on the face of the Earth. It’s the place where it’s illegal to listen to radio broadcasts that are not domestic North Korean radio broadcasts. It’s illegal to have a cellphone that has the capability of making calls outside of North Korea. It’s a place where people are purposefully kept in the dark about what’s going on elsewhere in the world. And it seems to me that access to information – knowing what’s going on elsewhere, knowing what’s happening in other places – is one of the most important things for people to make reasonable choices about themselves, their country, and their future.

MR. SCHWARTZ: What else should the administration be trying to take small steps with now, or big steps?

MR. KING: We need to have some kind of engagement with North Korea. And by engagement, there needs to be opportunities for North Koreans to come to the United States. There needs to be opportunities for Americans to go to North Korea. The difficulty in the past has been it was a one-way – a one-way traffic. People were able to go to North Korea. There were definitely risks in terms of going to North Korea and it was a source of income for the government. We need to have situations where people can go to North Korea, where they can go and go in safety, and be able to engage with North Koreans. But we also need to have opportunities for North Koreans to come to the United States. There’s nothing that gives you a better idea of what the United States is than by visiting the United States and by talking to Americans. I’m sure you know, that, Joseph, from your own experience.

MR. KIM: Right.

MR. SCHWARTZ: How do you think the administration should facilitate that going forward? And do you think it’s realistic to have exchanges?

MR. KING: Yeah. I mean it’s realistic to have exchanges. They need to be done – handled carefully. People need to understand the difficulty of visiting North Korea and how to avoid problems that occur.

MR. SCHWARTZ: I mean, Evan Osnos, the journalist for The New Yorker, told me that when he visited North Korea last summer he had brought with him several books. One of the books that he brought was Victor Cha’s “The Impossible State,” which this podcast takes its name for. And he realized when he brought the book that he shouldn’t have brought the book, because it was a book that the North Korean authorities confiscated upon his entry to the country. And he then spent the next five
days while he was in North Korea wondering whether he was going to be allowed to leave North Korea for – just for bringing a book. So that’s what we’re talking about here.

MR. KING: Yeah. And the difficulty is that North Korea has very different rules. The kind of things that a person here in the United States can do without any qualms or questions is something that can get you arrested in North Korea.

MR. SCHWARTZ: How many people are in jail in North Korea right now?

MR. KING: In terms of the number of North Koreans, hard to tell. Estimates are that between 80 and 120,000 people are in political prison camps. In terms of Americans, as far as we know, there are no Americans who are currently imprisoned there.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Joseph, what happened to your mother? Is she still in prison? Did she ever get out?

MR. KIM: I have not disclosed this information with anyone else. But – well, I didn’t know about my mom up until last year. And when I was going through my final exams last December I received the news that my mom passed away at one of North Korean prisons.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Sorry.

MR. KIM: So, but, again, like Ambassador King points out, any information from North Korea it’s really hard to validate. But nonetheless, you know, I thought it was – the person who delivered message to me, you know, there was no ulterior motives to lie to me or send me such news. So I wouldn’t necessarily ask a question or raise a question as to why he tells me. I guess my point is that, yes, I received my mom’s last news was last December. And it was that she passed away at prison in North Korea.

MR. SCHWARTZ: That must have been incredibly hard to hear that news.

MR. KIM: I’m actually glad that I received this news during the final week, because I, like, had, like, just complete two days in my room. But I could not afford just completing idly or sitting in my room and just thinking about that. And I think it also helped me to – forced me to get out of my room to – because – since finals were coming. So I guess, you know, since I intentionally channeled my sadness toward studying –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Something productive.

MR. KIM: Yes.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Are you able to be in contact with your family in North Korea at all?

MR. KIM: My mom was the only family member who are still in North Korea. But now that I have news that she’s not alive, then I – technically I don’t have direct family in North Korea.

MR. SCHWARTZ: What happened to your sister? Was she able to escape?
MR. KIM: She – yes. She went to China in 2002. And I believe she was sold to a man in China, but that’s all I know. I don’t know who this man is. I don’t know where.

MR. SCHWARTZ: She was sold?

MR. KIM: Yes.

MR. KING: Human trafficking is one of the major problems.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Of course.

MR. KING: Because these people in China have no rights, will be returned to North Korea if they’re captured. And the result is that these people are forced into basically slavery, sexual slavery in some cases.

MR. SCHWARTZ: When you know stories like Joseph’s story and the story of his family, how do you turn that into policy action?

MR. KING: These are policies and principles that have been established by the Congress, by the established authorities. And what my role was is do what we could do in terms of making progress on those policies. One of the things that we’ve pressed to do is to call attention to the North Korean human rights issues. And the United States in terms of the reports that the U.S. government publishes on human rights, trafficking reports, so forth, North Korea consistently comes out as one of the worst violators. These reports annual update and give information about the problems of North Korea.

Second thing we’ve tried to do is work through the United Nations in terms of calling attention, of bringing focus on the North Korea human rights issues. We have been – worked with a number of allies in the Human Rights Council – U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva, the U.N. General Assembly in New York, where we’ve been able to get resolutions that have been critical of North Korea. We’ve had special rapporteurs that have been appointed every year since 2004. The biggest step forward was in 2013, when the human rights established a commission on inquiry on North Korea’s human rights issues.

And that commission, composed of three quite independent, recognized specialists on North Korean human rights issues and on human rights in general – Michael Kirby, a member of the Australian Supreme Court equivalent, former prosecutor general – the attorney general of Indonesia, a prominent human rights leader of a human rights nongovernment organization in Serbia. The three of them carried out a year-long investigation into North Korea’s human rights. They held public hearings in Bangkok, in Seoul, in Tokyo, in Washington, in London. And they produced an outstanding report that’s probably the textbook example of what a U.N. report ought to do in terms of identifying the problems and in terms of calling attention to what was done.

As a result of that, strong resolutions were adopted in the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council calling on North Korea to make progress. The issue of North Korea’s human rights has been discussed at the U.N. Security Council for the last four years as a result of the report that’s come out. So basically, it’s calling attention to the issue, making sure people are aware of what goes on, and putting pressure on North Korea every opportunity we have to make progress on the human rights issues.
MR. SCHWARTZ: What’s the status of the North Korea Human Rights Act?

MR. KING: The North Korea Human Rights Act was legislation that was passed by the U.S. Congress. It established a commitment on the part of the United States to make progress on human rights issues. One of the more visible things that it did was to establish the position of special envoy for North Korea human rights issues – the position that I held for seven years. That legislation has – was passed originally in 2004. It was passed – reauthorized, extended for another four years in 2008. It was extended for five years in 2012. It was—has been under consideration by the current Congress. The House has passed a version of it. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee had adopted a version of it which has not yet been voted on by the Senate. And it’s sitting in the Congress, not acted upon. It should have been acted on over a year ago.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Why hasn’t it been acted on?

MR. KING: Hard to tell. I don’t want to say anything disparaging about the Congress, but it’s somewhat dysfunctional these days.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

MR. KING: And that will be part of the problem. (Laughter.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: I’ve noticed. So this is another issue that Congress hasn’t acted on that needs to be acted on.

MR. KING: This should be done.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And what’s holding it up?

MR. KING: Not any differences. The legislation that was adopted in the House of Representatives last year passed by a vote of 400-and-something to two. Now, this is not something that indicates that there were differences or problems on it. In the Senate –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Broad, bipartisan agreement.

MR. KING: Broad, bipartisan support. Same thing is true in the – in the Senate.

MR. SCHWARTZ: So we’re without – and so we’re without a special envoy right now because this hasn’t been reauthorized. And it’s hard to understand how the administration would have a tool to push human rights further, to advance the cause here of human rights, without this position.

MR. KING: Yeah, no. Having someone who has designated responsibility to give focus to human rights provides, I think, a good opportunity for being able to make progress and move forward on these issues.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Because what message does it send to the North Koreans that the Congress of the United States hasn’t reauthorized this position?

MR. KING: That we don’t care. No, I think it’s a serious problem.
MR. SCHWARTZ: What has the administration said about this?

MR. KING: The administration hasn’t said anything. During the initial part of the administration, the then-Secretary of State Tillerson called for eliminating most of the special envoy positions, without necessarily coming up with a solution. His one proposal was to designate an undersecretary of state who has responsibilities for a whole range of issues to also be a special envoy – this special envoy for North Korea human rights issues.

MR. SCHWARTZ: OK, so he was trying to consolidate.

MR. KING: Trying to solve the problem by giving somebody the responsibility without actually appointing someone. He was also involved in a proposal for a massive reduction in the personnel of the State Department. There was a budget limitation imposed and so forth.

MR. SCHWARTZ: So is there anyone in Congress championing that this should go forward and be acted on?

MR. KING: A number of members of Congress have been very –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Bipartisan, across the aisle?

MR. KING: Across the aisle, both Democrats and Republicans.

MR. SCHWARTZ: So what’s it going to take to get it voted on?

MR. KING: Maybe people who listen to your podcast will have some impetus to call their congressman.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Joseph, I want to ask you – obviously you follow these issues very closely. You mentioned in your in school. What are you doing in the United States now?

MR. KIM: So I finished high school in four years, and, well, I’m in college now, in my last year, I have one more semester to graduate.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Where are you in college?

MR. KIM: At Bard College.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Bard, right.

MR. KIM: And the reason why I decided to go back to college from taking a break from human rights activism was that I felt like – well, let me put it this way. I think Mahatma Gandhi once said that speed without direction is irrelevant. And I felt like I was going fast in terms of what I was doing with my activism, but I wasn’t sure where I was heading exactly. And so I decided to invest my time and effort in education, trying to understand the language of politics because I think human rights and security issues are not necessarily separate issues. And I thought that at the time I needed to understand the language of politics so that I can be more effective in the human rights work that I used to do.
So, yeah, I’ve been just studying in college, trying to understand more. Knowledge comes with certain burdens as well. I think, you know, as I am studying more and more – not to say that I now understand a lot about politics, but I think even just understand a little bit of it, it’s very – it’s hard not to feel depressed. And I wanted to – I would like to take a brief moment to thank Ambassador King, because he recently published his opinion about the lack of human rights issues at the Singapore summit. And I was very touched. And let me explain to you why I was touched by your point.

MR. SCHWARTZ: So you can find that on CSIS.org.

MR. KIM: Definitely, yes. I took a critical security class this past semester. And this was a seminar course. So at the end of the day I had to produce 15-20 pages paper on any topic related to security issues. And my topic was exactly the linkage between security and human rights issues. And my expressed concern was that – or question, was how did Kim Jong-un, former madman in President Trump’s statement?

And while I was handling this paper, I was kind of unsure about whether to submit this paper or not because by virtue of our raising a question about authority or President Trump, his very contradictory moves in the last several months, so I was just kind of worried about whether I should submit this paper to my class or not. So, in that regard, I was very touched that, you know, Ambassador King basically, you know, like, asking our government to be more – consider more on human rights issues. And I thought that really gave me hope as well as encouragement.

So I appreciate your time and your genuine support. And I was very encouraged.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Let me ask you about the summit. Do you give President Trump any credit for brining Kim Jong-un to the table?

MR. KIM: I am not sure if I can say that he deserved all the – full credit. And I’m worried that his recent statement and the actions about human rights issues on North Korea specifically would undermine the United States’ national reputation, but as well as its power. Because, I mean, he’s not the one who orchestrated all the summit, so I don’t know for what reason I should give him credit.

MR. KING: I think the real credit goes to Kim Jong-un. Kim Jong-un is the one –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Really?

MR. KING: – who basically reached the point where he felt like he had the nuclear weapons capability that had been demonstrated and the missile capability that he had demonstrated on several occasions that he felt comfortable, that he felt like he could engage the United States.

And you go back and look where this all began was with Kim Jong-un’s New Year’s speech where he indicates he’s interested in – the possibility of engagement is indicated. And the invitation was something that was delivered through President Moon of South Korea who had been, since his election, looking for options and opportunities for moving forward.

I think this is more a question of an opportunity being presented to Trump and him saying yes.
MR. SCHWARTZ: But didn’t he – I want to push back a little bit here. Didn’t President Trump do something to make this happen? Wasn’t the results of his strategy seeming to work to bring the North Korean leader to talk rather than fire off weapons?

MR. KING: My sense is that the North Korean leader certainly has not been willing to talk in the past. Kim Jong-un didn’t bother to talk to the United States when we made efforts to reach out to him four or five years ago. But there’s no question that one of the main issues of his policy was dealing with the United States.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

MR. KING: And for him, once he felt comfortable and secure that he had demonstrated a nuclear capability and a delivery capability, he felt secure enough that he could engage the United States and he was not willing to do it until that point.

Now, whether he was, you know – whether the election of Trump changed the situation in terms of his calculation at all, I don’t know. But my sense is this was not a response to Trump, this was Trump responding to an invitation, to an indication of interest from the North Koreans.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And so, what do you think happens next?

MR. KING: Well, it’s very clear that the summit produced a document which says we’re making progress and we’re moving forward. Trump feels like he can sleep comfortably at night. I think there are many of us who still have trouble sleeping. And the real issue is, where do we go from here?

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

MR. KING: The agreement has less specific and less onerous requirements on North Korea than agreements that were negotiated in the George W. Bush administration and in the Bill Clinton administration.

And furthermore, the requirements that were imposed on Iran in the agreement that Trump scrapped were more onerous and more difficult to meet than the requirements that are included in the document that the president is praising as a step forward.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Can I ask you both where you would like to see this go from here?

MR. KING: I mean, it is in our interests to move forward in terms of trying to work with North Korea and resolve the issues that are creating difficulties in the nuclear realm and in the human rights area. And I think we’re hopeful that the fact that the conversations have begun in Singapore will lead to progress in terms of being able to make – to make – to reach agreement on how to limit and control North Korea’s nuclear weapons and how to move in a direction that will ultimately lead to greater contact and engagement between the United States and North Korea and permit engagement between North Korea and South Korea as those two governments work out the arrangements there.

MR. SCHWARTZ: So what would you advise him to do next?

MR. KING: President Trump?
MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

MR. KING: Let’s get specific.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Specific on human rights, specific on denuclearization.

MR. KING: Specific on the denuclearization. Let’s see if the North Koreans are willing to do it. But it takes more than a photo-op in Singapore. It takes very hard work and it takes people who are willing to engage with the North Koreans in serious discussions.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Joseph, is there anything you want to add?

MR. KIM: Sure. I think, obviously, if denuclearization actually takes place as everyone hopes, I mean, that would be the ultimate good. North Korea rescinding all nuclear weapons surely is a welcome development. But at the same time, I feel like we don’t know whether if that’s going to happen or not.

And I think a few days ago, I read in an article it takes 2,000 experts to take a full three years to completely verify and denuclearize the nuclear weapons. Within the three years, so many things can happen.

If I had to send a message to the U.S. government or the administration, I think not addressing human rights issues, that’s a mistake the current administration is making, especially when President Trump he himself talked a great deal about the importance of the human rights issues going on in North Korea during his visit at South Korea’s National Assembly last year where so many North Korean defectors were so touched by his interest in the human rights issues.

But now I have to ask myself, did he mention human rights issues, was it because of a political calculation behind, or was it he’s genuinely interested in addressing human rights issues? I’m not sure, it’s hard to tell.

So in that regard, I think just to completely and bluntly disregard human rights issues moving forward is an insult to so many North Korean human rights activists and also people like Ambassador King who have been working on this issue so much with a genuine heart. I think it’s a – I don’t think it’s the best way to say thank you to people who have served this country to make it better.

Like I said, you know, if denuclearization happens, I mean, that’s great, but I’m not sure if that’s going to happen. And if we can’t achieve our goal of completely denuclearizing the state, then we’ve got to at least make sure to provide a place and have a plan for still continuously working on addressing and highlighting North Korean human rights issues.

MR. SCHWARTZ: You mentioned the article you read about the complexities of verification for denuclearization. I think you were referring to the paper that Sieg Hecker and his colleagues at Stanford published about what it would take.

I want to ask you, Ambassador King, it’s also got to be extremely complex to unwind the human rights issue. Is there going to be any study that would give some kind of guidance?
MR. KING: It seems to me like there are some things that can be done in terms of moving in a
direction that leads us toward respect for human rights. The U.N. has played a key role in terms of
respect for human rights around the world. And I think the U.N. has representatives, special
individuals who are designated to deal with human rights issues.

The North Koreans have made a very, very modest step forward in terms of agreeing to meet
with the U.N. special rapporteur who deals with the issue of persons with disabilities. Disabilities has
been an issue that’s been a problem in the past in North Korea. And North Korea has been one of the
countries that’s been particularly criticized for its record and treatment of people with disabilities.

The North Koreans agreed to allow the U.N. special rapporteur on people with disabilities to
visit North Korea. I believe it was a woman, she was there for a few days, was able to meet with some
people in North Korea and make progress there. You know, that’s the way you begin the process.

There are people who have special expertise in terms of dealing with women’s issues. How do
you deal with problems of discrimination against women, of limitations on women in terms of
opportunity and so forth? It’s not a politically sensitive issue to focus on that.

It’s a politically sensitive issue when you start raising the questions of political prisons. And
that may not be the first – the best first issue to raise with the North Koreans. Persons with disabilities,
women’s issues, treatment of children, there are areas like this where we could move forward, make
progress, talk with the North Koreans about what to do, invite people from outside to come and visit
North Korea and see what they observe and make recommendations.

Another thing that would be helpful in terms of this would be to invite people from North Korea
to countries where they have had – for example, looking at the United States court system might give
the North Koreans an idea about how you act in courts to preserve rights of the accused as well as those
who have had their rights violated. So there are ways that we can move forward if there’s a willingness
on the part of the North Koreans to move forward.

So far, they’ve been very cautious. There have been a few openings. The North Koreans on the
disabilities front were willing to allow a couple of young people to participate in the Paralympic Games
which followed the Winter Olympics in South Korea. If we could make progress and begin the process
of working on those areas, I think there are ways that we could move forward and make progress with
North Korea and have an opportunity to show the North Koreans what human rights are like in other
countries, as long as the North Koreans are willing to engage with us on these issues. They have not
been willing to engage in the past. And I’m saying “with us” meaning with the United Nations because
it’s much less sensitive to deal with the issue in countries other than the United States.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Joseph, you’re about to graduate from Bard. What are you going to do
after you graduate?

MR. KIM: I realized that carrying more knowledge was like opening Pandora’s box. But I
think for some reason, I’m still interested in opening more boxes, which means I’m going to – I’m
planning on going to grad school, planning to study international relations or security. So that’s my
idea or plan so far.

MR. 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 bringing a better understanding of the Korean Peninsula. You can find it at beyond parallel.csis.org.

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(Music plays.)

This is The Impossible State.

(END)