Interview with Victor Cha

Colin Tait, recent graduate of the Advanced Master’s Program in International Relations and Politics (IRP/AMP) and student guest editor of this edition of the CIRP Journal, interviewed Dr. Victor Cha to discuss US relations with North Korea. Dr. Cha is a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the inaugural holder of the Korea Chair at the organization. He is also a professor of government and holds the D.S. Song-KF Chair in the Department of Government and the School of Foreign Service (SFS) at Georgetown University. In July 2019, he was appointed vice dean for faculty and graduate affairs in SFS. From 2004-2007, Dr. Cha served as the director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council (NSC) under the George W. Bush administration.

Tait: Can you discuss your experience working as the Director for Asian Affairs in the National Security Council?

Cha: I started as the Director for Asian Affairs in the National Security Council in 2004. Working in the National Security Council is very small unlike other government entities, and at times the work was like drinking water from a firehose. It was my first time serving my country in public office and I was both happy and proud to do so. Although I was already an expert in my field, I learned an incredible amount about Asian affairs, and I was able to learn about many other countries through my interactions with government officials and experts worldwide.

Tait: How did your 2007 trip to North Korea impact your work? What are the most significant lasting impressions from personally experiencing the country?

Cha: I traveled to North Korea in 2007 to negotiate the return of POW/MIA remains of soldiers from the Korean War with then New Mexico governor Bill Richardson and former Veteran Affairs Secretary Anthony Principi. Doing so gave closure for families who did not know what happened to their loved ones for decades and I was fortunate to have taken part in such an experience. My colleagues and I were the first White House representatives to have visited North Korea since the Jimmy Carter administration and the North Korean officials treated us very professionally and as guests. I was happy to see Pyongyang as well as the countryside of North Korea, and like President Trump’s trip to meet the leader of North Korea, I walked across the demilitarized zone to South Korea. My experience over there was a very memorable and impactful experience. Despite what many Americans think, North Koreans are not scary people and do not have horns on their heads.

Tait: You were nominated to be the US Ambassador to South Korea in 2017 but withdrew your nomination in 2018. What major barriers and disagreements with the Trump administration led you to not move forward with this potential appointment? How do you think Ambassador Harris has handled his own appointment?

Cha: I did not campaign to be the US Ambassador to South Korea and I did not
withdraw my nomination. I was asked to serve as an expert and I was willing to do so. Presidential administrations choose appointees based on their preferences and they have the right to change their minds. I published my geostrategic views on relations with the Korean peninsula, and these did not align with President Trump, but it was necessary that I publish these views. I know Harry Harris personally and he was originally supposed to be the Ambassador to Australia but ultimately ended up in South Korea. He is handling his appointment well and doing a very good job at his post.

**Tait:** South Korea and Japan are amidst a trade tiff and most recently, the possible degradation of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). How does this impact regional stability? In what ways does it threaten US national security interests?

**Cha:** The deterioration of bilateral treaties is dangerous. The crisis between Japan and South Korea is detrimental for the United States and the unified posture between the trilateral alliance of the United States, Japan, and South Korea against North Korea and China. The national security of interests of the trilateral alliance and overall regional security are damaged with the degradation of Japanese and South Korean relations. The Trump administration has focused on diplomacy with North Korea and paid less attention to its two key alliances, which may have contributed to the downturn. The United States needs to make a strong effort to preserve the current alliance structure to maintain desired levels of security for the Korean Peninsula.

**Tait:** Shifting to North Korea more specifically, in the final chapter of The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future, you argued that the end of the North Korean state is near. Do you still believe this to be true? What has changed and stayed the same since you published this book?

**Cha:** The North Korean regime as we know it could be gone tomorrow or could be gone in twenty years and we would not be surprised. That is how wide the range of probability is on the regime. We just do not know its future and we have few metrics to assess regime resiliency. Having said that, I believe that It is not possible to have a Stalinist regime in the current world order. If North Korea opened up their economy and society to the world, they could be a very successful and prosperous country, but this could come at the cost of an end to the family cult of personality regime. Since I published that book, the North Korean leader has survived long after my expectations of his sustainability. So, he's done something to defy expectations. Having said that, I think most would agree that North Korea is a failing state and its people will continue to suffer under the current regime.

**Tait:** What is your vision for responsible American policy towards the Korean Peninsula? Can you discuss the major priorities policymakers must focus on?

**Cha:** Counteracting North Korean nuclear capabilities has been at the forefront of discussions on the Korean Peninsula. Although a nuclear North Korea is frightening, maintaining the US–South Korean alliance must be focused on. This alliance is the key to regional stability and to address US national security interests in East Asia. The social, political, and economic development of South Korea throughout the twentieth century is a success story and needs to be preserved.

**Tait:** The CIRP Journal is circulated among alumni, students, and young professionals seeking to pursue political science. Do you have any advice for young, aspiring national security specialists?

**Cha:** The world seems like a chaotic place right now with countries like Iran, North Korea,
and Russia acting nefariously. However, this should not deter students from pursuing international relations, but instead inspire them to do so. Young minds must be trained to make the world a better place whereas my generation failed to do so and made it worse. Do not be afraid nor intimidated by the current state of world affairs. There is so much to learn and study as young, aspiring political scientists beginning to establish their careers. Now is a great and important time to pursue international relations whether this be in the private sector, academia, or public service.