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POLITICO

NORTH KOREA: THE FULL TRANSCRIPT

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By Susan B. Glasser

Susan Glasser: I'm Susan Glasser and welcome back to The Global Politico. This week: a deep dive on the North Korea crisis, with Admiral Dennis Blair, who's spent decades working on this. He is the former Director of National Intelligence and a former admiral whose job as commander of the US Pacific Fleet was to confront the North Koreans. And then we'll hear from Ambassador Christopher Hill, the last senior US diplomat to negotiate face to face with the North Koreans when he did so during President George W. Bush's second term.

Chris Hill: Look, it is a very frustrating issue to deal with North Korea. I'm still in therapy over dealing with North Korea. But it doesn't mean that we shouldn't keep our cool and keep at the task.

Glasser: Well, we may all need to be in therapy soon at this rate. Look at what's happening just about every day: The North Korean missiles are flying. So are the intemperate American tweets. Here we are all wondering: Are Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump once again bringing the Korean Peninsula to the brink of war? Kim just tested his biggest nuclear bomb yet; he's twice in the last few weeks flown missiles over Japan. Trump appears to have drawn his very own red line: saying North Korea obtaining an ICBM capable of launching a nuclear weapon to hit the US mainland is unacceptable. And of course he's doing it in very Trumpian, very unpresidential language, taunting Kim as "Rocket Man."

So: is the war scare this time different? How worried should we be? First, Admiral Dennis Blair:

Glasser: Admiral Blair, you've been a voice of sanity on this to a certain extent. What do you make of the fire and fury and the war panic? Should we really be worried this time? Is it something different?

Blair: I don't think we should be relaxed, Susan, but I don't think that we are running a very high risk of a nuclear exchange between North Korea and the United States. My experience with North Korea goes back to 1994, I guess, when I was a commander of a battle group in the western Pacific around Korea, and at that time the United States put

some sanctions on North Korea in response to some illegal activity, and this same sort of bellicose rhetoric from Pyongyang, I think “sea of fire” was the term that was used back then in '94, and then that crisis ended by Kim Jong Il, the grandfather of the current leader, dying, actually.

And then, when I was director of national intelligence back in 2010, we had the incident when a North Korean submarine sank the Cheonan, the South Korean frigate, and 60 South Korean sailors were killed. At the same time, North Koreans fired artillery at two islands, killing some South Korean citizens, and there was a great uproar with high tension at that time.

So, these crises and this brinksmanship from North Korea and confrontations with the United States and extreme bellicose rhetoric have been going on for quite some time, and I think it's good to be aware of that as you face what we have to deal with right now.

Glasser: Well, that's right. So, let's talk about what we have to deal with. You saw North Korea under the grandfather; you saw it under the father; and a lot of people believe this current crisis is a result of the fact that the grandson, the current leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Un, is something a little bit different. What is your assessment of North Korea's leader and how much are we seeing this increase in capacity in the nuclear program a result of his leadership?

Blair: His leadership has certainly been more active and he has followed a more consistently confrontative policy; but, if you look at the things that he has done, interestingly, they are all confined to measures within North Korea: tests, nuclear tests, missile launches. When I was in the business, there were special forces teams of North Koreans who would come down and abduct South Korean citizens. I mentioned these ship sinkings and killings.

These things really had the potential to light the powder train and put us into a true conflict situation between the combined forces of South Korea and North Korea, but I think that Kim Jong Un has found this formula where he can do things within North Korea, technical things in missiles, and nuclear tests, and then parlay them into the sorts of influence that he wants, and continue to develop this nuclear capability, which he has decided—and he is just finishing a decision which I think was made by his father, and presaged by his grandfather, that North Korea is well served by having its own nuclear capability.

So, he wants it to, for what he sees as protection, but, in fact, the degree of tension that these actions cause depends on our reaction to them, not on the incidents themselves.

Glasser: Well, that's a good point, and I guess one of the questions is, have we correctly read the actions of the North Koreans? Did we correctly understand the nature of Kim Jong Un and his determination to pursue this level of nuclear program? You were the head of the national intelligence in exactly this period, right? During the decline of his father, and sort of the—

Blair: Right.

Glasser: —sudden emergence of him as the unexpected successor to his father. What was our view of him at the time, and how has that changed?

Blair: He was kind of a blank slate. We didn't have a lot of information on him. In fact, we don't have sort of detailed information on many of North Korea's leaders. The individuals do make a difference, but the overall consistency of North Korean policy has been pretty remarkable over, I'd say, 50 years or so, and he basically is carrying on that policy, which is to provoke, take outrageous actions below the level of triggering a major conflict with the United States and South Korea.

Then he takes the results of those provocations and he tries to turn them into political gains that may be something like an aid program. We responded to some of the North Korean provocations by trying to work out a deal with them to provide them peaceful nuclear power in return for giving up military weapons.

Sometimes they turn them into negotiations to get simple recognition that they have achieved a new status. Sometimes they use them to try to divide their adversaries: the United States, Korea, Japan, occasionally Russia. So, this pattern of operating below the level of a major war, but sufficiently alarming to get the attention of other governments, is quite consistent, and he seems to have updated it, pursues it perhaps more vigorously than others, but I don't see a radical change in the North Korean game as I've seen it played out.

Glasser: Right. So the big departure, then, is here in Washington, where we have a new president who has engaged in some very unorthodox approaches to this North Korean saber-rattling, including rhetorical—what's the right word?—heights of his own, when it comes to countering them.

So, do you see that as being a changed ingredient? And how will that affect this latest round of recriminations?

Blair: I think our rhetoric is scaled up a bit. We used to be the strong, silent type on all of this crazy rhetoric coming out of Pyongyang, and we were the models of restrained, careful statements, and that's not the style of this president. He's sort of weighing back at, or firing back at the rhetorical level, which has been his specialty. And so that is unusual.

People are used to the United States—you know, it's like a little dog yapping at you. The general thing has been that the United States sort of marches through and doesn't talk too much about it; may give a "bad dog" occasionally—and now we have this rhetorical stream going back at North Korea itself. So that is different, and I think that's what's throwing off the calculations of people who observe the situation.

But, I think in the case of the United States, as well as in the case of North Korea, there is a difference between rhetoric, and even presidential rhetoric, and the underlying interests and policies, which tend to have more durability. So, I think that is a big factor.

One other very important thing to keep in mind on this whole point is that the point that the Trump administration seems to be making is that if North Korea achieves an ICBM capability, that is a missile that can reliably reach the United States with a nuclear weapon, that changes everything.

Well, it doesn't. It never has. For, when I was CINCPAC [commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet], which has gone on 20 years ago now, we thought that North Korea had two or three crude nuclear weapons which could be delivered quite effectively to South Korea; they could be put in a submarine and the submarine goes down the coast, pulls into a

harbor and detonates the weapon. It could get to Japan in that fashion.

It would be risky, but there would even be ways in which a weapon like that could be smuggled into the United States on a tramp steamer, on another submarine, and North Korea could have said, "There's a nuclear weapon in Puget Sound, in San Francisco Bay, and we need you to do such-and-such." We maintain deterrence; we've maintained nuclear deterrence against North Korea now for 20 years; despite the threat to South Korea and Japan, certainly, and to a lesser extent, to the United States.

And remember, a threat to South Korea and Japan includes the 300,000 Americans that are in South Korea, the about twice that number who live in Japan, so for two decades a North Korean leader has been able to kill a lot of Americans, but he hasn't. Why? Because he would be destroyed in return. No president would stand for an attack like that on our allies, as they also killed American citizens. He may have 20 weapons; we've got 2500; and we would blow him away.

So, I think this hyping of the nuclear missile, which is merely one form of delivering a weapon, being able to reach the United States is a self-inflicted policy disadvantage which this administration has placed on itself.

Glasser: Self-inflicted because they've inflated the threat by talking about it?

Blair: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Because they've said everything changes, and we won't allow it to happen. Well, it may be two weeks from now; it may be six months from now that we receive an intelligence estimate that says North Korea has successfully tested an ICBM weapon and successfully tested the re-entry capability of a weapon like that carrying a nuclear device to the range that would reach the United States, and so what's the United States going to do at that point?

It's something we've said is unacceptable. You don't say something's unacceptable in my experience unless you can do something about it.

Glasser: So this is the red line, basically, that they have created, even if he didn't call it that name?

Blair: Looks like it to me. Doesn't it to you? It's pretty—

Glasser: You know, if it barks...

Blair: Yeah, right, exactly, exactly. And so, I don't mind—I mean, red lines judiciously used are something a superpower ought to have, but if you put a red line out there, you have to be able to enforce it at acceptable cost, if your enemy miscalculates and the line is crossed.

And based on my experience, the only options which would stand any chance of disarming North Korea of its nuclear capability in a short, quick, and effective manner are very high-risk. North Korea are master tunnelers; they've been moving stuff around and hiding it for generations, and it would be a very brave director of national Intelligence who could go to the president and say, "Yup, we've got them all located. We know where every single weapon is. We have the bunker-buster weapons that can get down deep through these mountains. We can take care of it all in 30 minutes

and North Korea won't have time to pop one off before we get it done.”

I mean, that is just a very high-risk option to take care of. So don't put a red line out there if you don't have a way to enforce it with acceptable risk, should it be crossed.

Glasser: Well, it's interesting. You know, right now there really is this sort of different schools, different camps if you will, and certainly the ones who are very experienced in this, like you, say, effectively, there is not credible military option for the United States to stop this program. And that seems to be what you're saying.

Blair: Well, I'd say we could give it a shot and we would be able to take out a significant portion of the North Korean nuclear capability. Then the question is, what would be the North Korean response? It's high risk. You don't know how a government, how very isolated, power-hungry, megalomaniac leaders like Kim Jong Un would react under those conditions.

Now, even if he issued the order, at that point the question is, would more sane North Koreans who have to actually push the buttons carry it out?

Glasser: Can I flip that around on you?

Blair: Yes.

Glasser: What if Donald Trump ordered General Mattis and the Pentagon to pursue a military option?

Blair: Conventional or nuclear?

Glasser: Well, let's just go with conventional.

Blair: I think if President Trump—and let's get a little more clear on the circumstances—this would be in response to North Korean development of an ICBM capability, or in response to some provocative action?

Glasser: Let's say it's in response to an action over the next couple of months. Diplomacy clearly isn't going anywhere; he continues to fire provocative missiles and threaten the United States and Japan as well as South Korea, and something happens that Trump and others believe requires a response. Perhaps a preemptive strike on a nuclear facility.

Blair: Right, right. It's not an impossible situation. If you look at the history of when we have worked ourselves up to the point that we were, no kidding, going to strike North Korea—the famous one was the cherry tree incident in the DMZ, and we deployed several carrier battle groups, lots of land forces, air forces—we just turned the Republic of Korea into an armed and ready camp; we made it absolutely clear that if North Korea started any action we would finish it. And that's not an impossible situation. In that incident that I was involved in '94, the United States also took a number of actions of which my battle group was part of it, to really reinforce our forces around North Korea. We made it clear that we were prepared to take military action in response to Korean provocations, and North Korea backed down.

Glasser: What would your job have been if that had come to military action in '94?

Blair: It would have been to carry out the opening stages of our war plan against the Republic of Korea, which is take down their air defenses, neutralize the artillery threat that faces Seoul, and prepare for a land force invasion of North Korea if things went to that point.

So, yeah, if the United States gears up, conventionally deploys a lot of force there, and then takes a military action, which would be anything from a strike against suspected nuclear sites to strikes against these very dangerous artillery emplacements that threaten Seoul, part of that preparation would have to be civil defense for the Republic of Korea, getting citizens out of Seoul into civil defense shelters, underground and so on.

That response we have taken to North Korea in the past, and they have backed down on those occasions. So, that is the kind of military option that I would think. But, you know, in military encounters, Susan, what we've learned over time is, it matters who starts these things, right? When you get the U.S. public behind an administration, it's when we're attacked.

Pearl Harbor is a classic example, but 9/11 is a much more recent one—the blood is up, we're going to punish those who punished us. It's the same thing in South Korea. When just two South Korean civilians were killed back 2010, public opinion in the Republic of Korea was just at a feverish edge, and there was strong pressure on the South Korean government to do something.

So, what you want to do in most of these situations is maneuver the other guy into taking the first step, and then you crush him after he started it. There's much less support; it's much more divisive if you are the one who initiated, as we found out to our sorrow in 2003 with the second Iraq war, and so on.

Glasser: It's a really interesting point you make. When you were the DNI, the director of national intelligence, it was this period where South Korea was very eager for more aggressive steps to be taken to contain this threat against them. You mentioned the sinking of the Cheonan and the like. I was talking with another veteran of the Obama administration today from the Pentagon who was making this point to me, and this person said it's almost as if we've changed places. We saw our role as trying to ratchet down the desire of the South Koreans for more aggressive actions at the time, and now you have a situation where arguably it's the United States that's demanding more, and it's almost like a reversal from the situation that you experienced back then.

Blair: I think that's a valid consideration. These things are never 90/10, you know; they're 60/40 kinds of things. But when I was involved after I left government after the Cheonan and the Pyong Ni incidents, I went over to Republic of Korea to do some advisory planning, and the South Koreans explicitly developed a doctrine that they called "immoderate response," they were not going to, I don't—

Glasser: That's very far away from strategic patience.

Blair: That's right. I didn't know what the Korean word for it was, but—

Glasser:

Immoderate response?

Blair: Immoderate response. They were determined not to play tit for tat with two artillery shells for two artillery shells, and so on, and so—but, the United States was right there in the planning situation, and eventually worked out our different approaches.

You know, the last thing that we want out of a crisis with North Korea is to mess up our alliances with Korea and Japan—good God, if we take action that is high risk, and the result of it is that we fracture the alliance with the Republic of Korea, the alliance with Japan, because we haven't consulted them; we haven't thought it all the way through; we don't have a backup plan; then the North Koreans win big time, and frankly, I see a little too little concern for that and talk about that from the administration, when to me that's right up there with our top objectives.

Glasser: It's interesting you raise that point. I have, in more than a decade in listening to this conversation here in Washington play out, this is the first time—people are, I've observed, scratching their heads and saying, "Well, maybe this really is something different." You have people speculating in informed conversations, "Well, is Trump really willing to risk civilian casualties in Seoul at this point in order to secure the U.S. homeland in a way that we haven't seen before?"

Blair: I think it's stupid. I mean, the primary advantage we have is our alliances with the forward presence it supports; our goals are all the same.

Look at it from a Republic of Korea view. We've been living under a nuclear threat for 20 years now, and when you think that you were now under a nuclear threat, the United States, you go crazy. Where were you when we were working on this? And the thing is, we were there. We talked about and practiced extended deterrence, that is an attack on one of our allies, specifically Republic of Korea, would be like an attack on the United States, would be met by a nuclear response, thereby, as I mentioned, deterring it from happening. And the reason we did that was to maintain the advantages of the alliance and our forces that are stationed there, and the overall—both military and geopolitical and economic advantages that the United States has in that part of the world, which rests on our relationships with the Republic of Korea and Japan.

To lightly throw those away for some theoretical chance that Kim Jong Un might take a completely uncharacteristic suicidal action seems to me a bad way of analyzing the problem.

Glasser: Very understated. Well, I want to ask you about something that hasn't been so understated, which is President Trump and his views toward the U.S. intelligence community of which you were the head for some period of time.

Are there potential consequences now that we are in a geopolitical crisis to that? What have you observed as the fallout from having this extraordinary situation of a president who has so openly and publicly been critical, and very much saying he wants to lay the blame for different conflicts and wars at the intelligence community, right? That's what he continues to say about Iraq, that that was an intelligence failure.

One could imagine a situation where if he's forced into something with North Korea, he would also blame that as an intelligence failure.

Blair: There's been a tawdry little bargain between the intelligence community and politicians in recent years, and it goes like this: The politicians say, "Okay, intelligence community, you need to warn me against any event that might affect the interests of the United States, and you need to inform me in precise tactical detail so that I can take precise tactical action to forestall it. And if you don't, then it's your fault, and I can blame you publicly."

So, that's the bargain on the political side. Remember 9/11, all of that controversy about was there a president's daily briefing item about Al Qaeda, or wasn't there?

Glasser: "Bin Laden determined to strike in the U.S."

Blair: Yeah, yeah. Right, right. And the bargain on the intelligence community's side goes this way: It does the best it can, but it's a lot more limited than Matt Damon movies would lead you to think, and so a lot of what you do is a combination of really good insights into your adversaries, and assumptions, and assessments, and guesses, based on your knowledge. And every once in a while you'll screw up, and when you miss one—as 9/11 was clearly missed, that's the extreme example—then you say, "Oh my God, it was an intelligence failure. We really screwed up, but we're so busy, we need another x-billion dollars in order to develop the resources to be able to watch that." And the politicians say, "Okay, it was your fault, but here's 10 billion more dollars a year, and don't let it happen again."

Maybe an intelligence leader or two is pushed off the gangplank, and the intelligence budget continues to grow, and the bargain resumes. So, what's going on? That's part of it. The politicians want to put the bills in the position in which they should have perfect foresight of bad things that might happen to the United States.

The reality is that intelligence can only do so much along that regard. Now, military commanders have understood this for years, and they allow wide margins in their plans for the quality of the intelligence that they have.

Politicians don't allow margins in their policy. I guess this was most vividly brought home to me in the Iranian nuclear debate, when the politicians were putting tremendous pressure on us to give sort of—to know as much about the Iranian nuclear program as the Iranians did. You know, this is stuff that Iranians are trying hard to hide. If they find any leaks, human spies, they kill them. So the chance that we can get it exactly right is low, and you shouldn't say, "Well, Iran has exactly 172 kilos of highly-enriched uranium this month, and in two months they'll have 185, and therefore, they are exactly four months away from a weapon, and therefore we should take action."

I mean, I would constantly emphasize in my briefings that here's our best guess, but here are the error margins that you should put around it. So that's the other standing tension between the—well, I guess there's a third. The third is, the intelligence chief so often has to be the bearer of bad tidings. I saw it most poignantly. You know, I'd sit in a National Security Council meeting when one of my fellow secretaries would report a conversation that he or she or one of his or her subordinates had had with an adversary, or even an ally, and they'd say, "Oh, I really put the U.S. point over, and they understood when they walked out what the United States is going to do."

And then, through one means or another, we might get a copy of what that same person reported back to his own government about the same meeting: “God, did I take in that rube of an American. He thinks that we are going to do this stuff he’s asking us; we have no intention of doing that.” And so, so often you’re the teller of truth.

And so, I don’t mind a standoff relationship between the DNI, or between the intelligence community and the politicians for all those reasons. You don’t want to get too close; you don’t want to fall under this bargain of intelligence has to be perfect, and you don’t want to sign on for being able to produce tactical perfection when you know that you can’t.

And so, there’s always been that sort of a tension, but as we said before, the personality of this president sort of exacerbates and gives new dimensions to these underlying tensions of the role of intelligence in a democracy.

Glasser: But I have to ask you, he’s explicitly rejected the findings, the more or less unanimous findings of the intelligence community, that Russia intervened in the elections. How does that kind of standoff get resolved?

I mean, doesn’t that mean that he’s going to get less good advice, or less candid advice, or less support when he needs it, whether it’s a nuclear confrontation with North Korea or somewhere else?

Blair: Depends on the leadership within the community. Left to themselves, the analysts will trim. I mean, if you put your—if you’ve got a president and high-level White House staffs who are beating directly on intelligence analysts, saying, “How can you come to that conclusion? Where’s your evidence?” and so on and so on, they will bend. I mean, they’re humans.

But, if after one of these briefings in which it’s rejected, you bring your guys and gals back to the room and you say, “Okay, looks like what we told them didn’t go down very well but I want you to go out and continue to do as good a job you can.... But if they’re just talking nonsense disregard it and go ahead and continue to do your analysis and we’ll go back the next time with our best estimate.” And so that’s a real leadership job and frankly I had that trouble within the Obama administration and I feel sorry for Senator Coats now, because he’s clearly subject to it. But so what? You’ve got to pass the look-in-the-mirror test. You take an oath to the Constitution, not to some individual. And you do your job and you know that’s the best for the country.

Glasser: Well, let’s end on North Korea again. Admiral Dennis Blair is our guest this week on The Global Politico. I have to ask you: Do you think that there was anything that could have been done differently on North Korea? Do you feel it was inevitable that they would end up with this nuclear program? Could it have been stopped?

Blair: My observation is that if a country is willing to pay any price, bear any burden, it can develop the technical expertise, the engineering programs, and can either steal or develop the materials you need to develop some form of nuclear weapons. We’ve seen that in Pakistan. We saw it in programs that have been stopped short that were started in places like Syria and South Africa and other places. So I think the cold hard reality is, the shibboleth you hear that you can go on the internet and find the design for a nuclear weapon is true. The hard part is how do you do the engineering, the metallurgy, all of the other very tough engineering feats that are required to make it work. And I have very high regard for North Korean technical capability. They have shown themselves not to have a broad-based

capability but they have some smart people who can do some quite innovative and impressive things. We've seen some of their hacking opportunities; when there are only - what? -- four internet sites in North Korea and yet they were able to take down Sony. So no I think the answer is if a country is absolutely determined to develop nuclear weapons it's going to do it.

In the peculiar North Korea case, with this philosophy they have of *juche*, self-reliance, it's actually an advantage to be isolated by the international community. Then you have a reason for people having no food. Then you have a reason for spending less money on your armed forces, and the nuclear weapon is the apotheosis of that. Then you have a reason: I may be starving but I am defying the great United States. The curious thing about North Korea is that it plays into their narrative, which keeps their grip on government, and that is what matters to them the most. Contrast that with Iran. Iran does not see itself as an international pariah. It sees itself as a powerful, connected part of the world community. Now, it wants to have nuclear weapons too if it could. Now when it made that agreement it decided that being a near-nuclear power and having better economic ties with the rest of the world was the smartest thing it could do. North Korea has taken the other approach completely.

Glasser: So Admiral Blair I think I'm coming away from this conversation with two takeaways. Number one: North Korea is not going to give up its nuclear program. And number two: we're not headed to war, at least not anytime in the next few weeks. So I'm going to sleep better at night. I hope that was your intention. Either way I feel enormously more enlightened about this really long-term policy dilemma for the US and I know that all of our listeners will thank you for sharing your insights with us.

Blair: Well, thank you, Susan.

Glasser: And so now we're back with Ambassador Chris Hill, who has joined us to talk all things North Korea. And I have to say this is somebody who has something which is a real rarity when it comes to North Korea and American foreign policy; he has actual face-to-face experience with North Koreans. So what can you tell us on the basis of having actually interacted with North Koreans, negotiated with them face-to-face over a period of some months during the second term of the George W. Bush administration? What does that experience tell you about what's going on right now?

Hill: Well, I think first of all to understand North Koreans is to understand Koreans. I mean, these are very intelligent people. You know, we're not dealing with people who don't know anything about the world. But they've lived their lives over the decades and, frankly, centuries in a way to be very sort of distrustful of foreigners and otherwise very skeptical of anything we say. But as negotiators they did not take out paper and read it to us by any means. They did engage in back and forth. Of course, the problem has been that they didn't want to denuclearize, so we had to kind of take it one step at a time.

When I was working with them we were launching really the six-party process. And I must say they did care what China thought. And so often when I'd reach an impasse or when the North Koreans would go back on something that they

had already agreed with I would shut it down and go and talk to my Chinese counterpart. Most of these negotiations—almost all of these negotiations took place at the Diaoyutai, which is a large complex in the center of Beijing. And so I would tell the Chinese, “Look, we agreed to talk to the North Koreans because you wanted us to, but our condition was we would agree to talk to them provided we could make progress. And I’m not seeing that progress right now, so I don’t see any purpose in having any additional sessions with them.”

And the Chinese would then kind of swing into action, talk to the North Koreans, and then finally come back to us and say, “Well, I think you’ll find some more flexibility on that position, if you’re prepared to go back.” And, sure enough, the Chinese had some say in issues. They did make progress. I mention all of this because I think there is a sharp contrast between then and now. I mean, I’m talking about negotiations that took place over 2005 to 2008. And I don’t mean to sound nostalgic about Kim Jong Il, but he did seem to care what the Chinese thought, and he might have even cared what we thought.

What is pretty clear today and pretty clear in terms of why there is no progress is that Kim Jong Un does not care what the Chinese think or what we think. And frankly he is not prepared, from what I can tell, to restart negotiations on the basis of what the purpose of the negotiations was in the first place, which was denuclearization. So I think we have a very serious problem combined with the fact that I think North Korea has made a lot of progress on their missile and nuclear development.

Glasser: Well, there’s certainly a lot to unpack there. But let’s stay for a moment in your own experience of that period of time right before Kim Jong Un came to power. And in many ways, right, it was the decline of his father which spelled the end of the process of negotiations that you took part in with the North Koreans. In hindsight—recognizing it’s 20/20—was that our last best chance to stop them from becoming a nuclear power that could threaten the United States?

Hill: It might have been. But let me make very clear we negotiated on a step-by-step basis. First we got them to shut down the reactor. Then we got them to take some disabling steps, including blowing up the cooling tower. These disabling steps were not meant to essentially make the reactor and other facilities unusable for the rest of history, but they were meant to make it difficult to reuse them. And we had estimated it would take about five years, which I think proved to be more or less accurate.

So we had done that. Then we got people in to look at how much plutonium was probably developed through the reactor. We got to take a lot of records from the reactor, so we understood its whole development history. So we were able to make progress there. Ultimately the negotiations collapsed because although we were able to make progress there, we were never able to come up with a verification agreement. So North Korea did give us a declaration. We felt it was incomplete and incomplete especially for the fact that they never explained what they had done with all this equipment purchased in various channels, which was equipment that was consistent with a highly enriched uranium facility, that is the other means to attain a bomb.

So we were not prepared to go forward without an adequate verification. It’s one thing for them to give us an inaccurate declaration. Frankly, nothing they would have produced would have necessarily been accepted as fully

accurate, but in the absence of verification we weren't able to go forward. So the real question is why weren't they amenable to verification? And was it because Kim Jong Il was at that point very ill and not able to issue instructions? That was one theory. Another theory was that they felt they wanted to wait for the new U.S. administration in 2009.

But still another theory—and this may be proved to be the accurate one—is they never really intended to fulfill the requirements set out in September of 2005 of abandoning all their nuclear programs, and to agree to verification or a standard of verification acceptable to us would have meant they'd have to make progress on that specific issue of abandoning all of their nuclear programs. And by 2008 they were pretty much clear that they were not going to go forward with that.

Glasser: Well, so that's the really interesting question. Were they, in the end, just successfully, as it turned out, buying time for their nuclear program? And if that's the case—again, recognizing this is all in hindsight—was it a mistake to have engaged in those negotiations?

Hill: Well, I don't see how not engaging would have necessarily helped. I mean, they would have continued to develop their nuclear programs. In fact, there were very few negotiations in the course of the Obama administration, and there is no sign whatsoever that nuclear programs were in any way slowed up during that time. So I don't quite understand the notion that somehow they were buying time, that we could have otherwise done something else to hasten the denuclearization.

I think there is also another absolutely critical point, which is maybe a bit of an elusive concept in the U.S. because we don't often think about how other countries, specifically how other allies, regarded all of this. In the first Bush term there were many voices within the administration adamantly opposed to any type of negotiation. And with respect to the North Korean negotiations one of the reasons to engage was to make sure your partners and allies who after all live in the shadow of North Korean artillery feel that the U.S. is adequately addressing the problem. It's very easy to be in Washington and say, "Don't negotiate." It's a little more difficult when you're some 25 miles away from North Korea.

So I don't think it's surprising to me that the Trump administration would rather like to get going with some kind of negotiation, provided it's on the basis that we pursued the negotiation, which was the denuclearization of North Korea.

Glasser: Well, you raised this issue, which is a fascinating one, which is that in negotiations often it's the politics back in Washington and on your own side that influence these things as much as your direct interactions with the others. And the politics of the Bush administration were—what's the right word—toxic when it came to this issue. As far as I can tell, your enemies from that period of time are still writing about and litigating this war with you over whether we should have negotiated.

You have a fabulous memoir, which I recommend to all our listeners, called *Outpost: Life on the Front Lines of American Diplomacy*, in which you recount what it felt like to have this internal politics of the Bush administration constraining you at times, subjecting you to a lot of second-guessing from what you call the neocon hawks in the Bush administration who pressed for the war in Iraq. That wasn't going so well. This issue of the North Korea talks came up, with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice empowering you to go ahead and conduct this diplomacy.

There was an awful lot of second-guessing. Vice President Cheney was a very public skeptic of what results you would achieve. And even now *The Wall Street Journal* just wrote an editorial saying, “a noted appeaser on North Korea, Chris Hill,” right? So tell us a little bit about the politics in Washington and how that might have affected our relationship with North Korea.

Hill: Well, I think you have to go back to the extreme skepticism about the so-called Agreed Framework, which was the Clinton-era negotiations. And that too was a negotiation that succeeded in getting the reactor shut down and succeeded in getting people on the ground and had a kind of way forward with respect to eventually somehow supplying North Korea with civilian-use nuclear power that would be, if not bombproof, but certainly more difficult to produce bombs.

Now, of course, later, at the end of the Clinton administration and the beginning of the Bush administration, it came to light that lo and behold the North Koreans were making purchases consistent with developing a highly enriched uranium facility. In short they were clearly obfuscating that and, frankly, lying about it. And so when the Bush administration came in there was a feeling, you know, “Why are we negotiating with those people when they’re not telling the truth?”

So I think in the first Bush administration people kind of held the line, “We’re not going to talk to those people.” And, in fact, I think the creation of the six-party process was an effort by President Bush and the Chinese president Jiang Zemin to say, “Okay, we can talk.” You know, “The U.S. will talk to the North Koreans, but we need to do it in a multilateral context where there will be Chinese there and that therefore the obligations North Korea makes are not just made to the U.S. but rather to all of their neighbors.”

So by being advocates of multilateral diplomacy, which by the way is not something the Bush administration is particularly well known for, they were able to kind of get going with the negotiations. But still there were extreme skeptics of this. And certainly as the negotiator out there I was often the brunt of their ire about it. My answer to them then and my answer to them now is that rather than Vice President Cheney speaking to the journalists or worse yet talking about it in his memoirs, if he had problems with what I was doing he should have walked the 10 feet or so to the Oval Office, sat down with the president, and made his case. Because if the president didn’t want a negotiation with North Korea or didn’t want me to conduct the negotiations with North Korea, I wouldn’t be conducting them.

This was entirely up to the president and, frankly, the secretary of state. And yet there is this kind of weirdly romantic notion that a diplomat can be out there making up his own foreign policy and doing things on his own without any kind of instruction. So my advice to Dick Cheney is to have talked to his boss. And if President Bush didn’t want us to pursue this he would have shut it down.

Glasser: So speaking of advice let’s flash-forward to today. You are the last senior American to negotiate with the North Koreans. Have you given any advice to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson or H.R. McMaster or the Trump administration?

Hill: I have not. I’d be happy to, but they seem to have the problem in hand. My own view is that we need a lot of

diplomacy on this issue but not necessarily with North Korea. I think we need diplomacy to make sure our allies feel comfortable with how we're pursuing it, namely South Korea and Japan. But we also need diplomacy to try to sit down with the Chinese and do a very deep dive with them about what exactly are their expectations from all of this, what are our expectations.

It's extraordinary to me, for example, that for years the short form of China's policy was somehow they didn't want North Korea to collapse because they're worried about refugees. I think the first part is correct; they don't want North Korea to collapse, but I think their concerns have to do with how we could take advantage of that. Would there be a perception that this is an American victory? Because, after all, the American ally, South Korea, would be the successor state, so would there be a perception among the Chinese public that it's an American victory and a Chinese defeat? How would China look at this?

And so I think it's very important that we try to have these kind of deep dives with the Chinese on this. And so far we sort of communicate with them by the occasional dead-of-the-night tweet or a few phone calls, maybe one or two visits, but we haven't had the sustained kind of discussions. You know, when Nixon went to Shanghai and pulled that rabbit out of a hat, well, you know, rabbits don't live in hats. Henry Kissinger spent days on end stuffing that rabbit down the hat.

And so I think we need that kind of approach because as difficult—and it is difficult to get the Chinese to take this problem seriously and deal with us as a partner in it as opposed to an adversary. As difficult as that is, I think we'll see that if we eventually solve this we'll look back and realize we solved it because we worked with China, not because we worked against China. So that would be my advice to President Trump, and I hope he listens to this podcast.

Glasser: Well, me too. But I have to say, you know, there's a certain circular even Groundhog Day quality to some of this, right? You write in your book that in your own interactions—and this is now a decade ago—with the North Koreans, the Chinese were the key actors. And the key question even then was were they willing to graduate from this legacy problem of being tied to the North Korean regime that they had inherited. And here we are having that same conversation.

You wrote in your book when it came to sanctions, for example, "the fact was that North Korea was the most heavily sanctioned country in the world, and it was unclear that any additional imposition of sanctions would yield a different result." Well, here we are again more than a decade later. The United Nations just the other day has passed another package of sanctions in response to what appears to be one of the biggest North Korean nuclear tests yet. And so why should anything be different this time?

Hill: Well, I think the sanctions have moved somewhat from those days 10 years ago. Even though North Korea was the most heavily sanctioned country at the time, it's even more heavily sanctioned than it was 10 years ago. North Korea does not have refined petroleum. That is, they don't have gasoline. They don't have refinery capacity. So I think there is a kind of further effort than ever before. But I think most importantly that China has agreed with this every step of the way.

So it hasn't worked yet, but it's still the right approach to take. And the question is—it's not that we've been rebuffed and have gotten nowhere; we just haven't gotten the distance that we need to get to in order to have real pressure.

Those who would try to kind of size the problem to fit the solution, that is, say that North Korea is a country interested in a couple of nukes because after all they're a poor country and they don't have a lot of prestige in the world or, "North Korea wants a couple of nukes because they think everyone is going to attack them," I don't think that is really what we're dealing with here.

I think we're dealing with a country that has much more ambitious objectives with those nukes, namely to try to decouple the U.S. from South Korea, to force a U.S. president to consider that in helping South Korea he or she would be subjecting the American people to a possible nuclear attack. So I think it's an extremely serious effort by North Korea. And if we don't live up to our obligations in those treaties I think that would undermine our alliance systems around the world.

So I put this at number one, and I really wonder why people say, "Well, let's ignore it for a while." I don't think strategic patience or strategic neglect is going to help us.

Glasser: Well, you know, this is the question that really is why I wanted to do this week's podcast on North Korea. For many, for a long time this "strategic patience" notion really came into play during the Obama administration. Then it became clear that North Korea was on the verge of this breakthrough. You had President Obama telling President Trump in their first meeting that this was going to be the number-one foreign policy crisis on the agenda.

We now seem to have moved into crisis mode, but my question to you and to others who have looked at this is: Are there really any different options than there were before, or is the nature of the threat now revealed to be so much more serious that President Trump and his national security team really might be considering something like a preemptive attack on North Korea or sacrificing citizens in Seoul to protect citizens in California? How alarmed should we be?

Hill: I think the problem with a preemptive strike is you have some 20 million South Koreans within range of North Korean artillery. So with a preemptive strike you run the risk, or certainly a risk that's greater than zero, that North Korea would retaliate against South Korean civilians. And so if we fail to tell our ally that we're launching this preemptive strike I think that does, to put it mildly, some serious damage to the U.S.-South Korean alliance, which, by the way, the North Koreans would love to see happen.

So I think we kind of have to tell the South Koreans. And then if you tell the South Koreans, you face the prospect where they would try to protect some 20 million people in bomb shelters, which of course is not an easy proposition. So I think the preemptive strike idea has a big problem with, frankly, the whole purpose of the whole exercise, which is to defend our alliance with South Korea.

Now, the question is, are there other ways to address this? And I think we should be looking at the very small space, albeit small space, between peace and war. We should be looking at things that I think the Obama administration did more than look at, and that is cyber attacks. We should be looking at whether there are other means to sabotage this

program such that the risk of an intervention in the form of a retaliation against those South Korean citizens is truly minimal.

So I think we should just continue to explore this space, and I think in so doing we need to make clear to China that when a country aims nuclear missiles at us, we cannot be indifferent to it and we cannot be patient about it. We need to deal with it. And I think we can work with the Chinese and get them to understand that, because that was not the situation 10 years ago. So I think there is some scope there for working with China, even though it does appear to be the triumph of hope over experience.

Glasser: Okay, but “fire and fury.” Is this rhetoric that we’re hearing? Is it something real that we’re hearing from the Trump administration? Or, to be polite about it, are they just merely trying to restore the credibility of the military deterrent? People widely believe that there is no viable military solution. You just sort of suggested that yourself. If there’s no viable military solution, how can the Trump administration really succeed at diplomacy where others have failed?

Hill: I think the Trump administration was very wise to take its most credible spokesman on foreign policy, that is General Mattis, and have him go out in front of the cameras and explain the fact that we will defend our allies and ourselves, that we have the capability to do this, and that what we’re looking for is denuclearization, but if North Korea wants something different, we are certainly prepared to obliterate that country. I think those were much wiser words actually than talking about fire and fury in an impromptu press conference at a golf-course clubhouse.

I think it was important. We need to be careful not to start sounding like North Koreans and really not to upset our allies. And, you know, remember, why are we there? We’re there to support an alliance. Why are we supporting an alliance? Because our whole system of national security depends on alliances around the world. We can’t walk away from alliances. So I think talking about fire and fury was not very comforting to the South Koreans and moreover I think when the president also suggested that South Korea is appeasing the North Koreans or that we need to abrogate our trade deal with South Korea that didn’t really help in the game either.

Look, it is a very frustrating issue to deal with North Korea. I’m still in therapy over dealing with North Korea. But it doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t keep our cool and keep at the task. And, again, I really feel that just because we’ve had these episodic occasional discussions with the Chinese or the suggestion that somehow if they take care of the North Korea thing we’ll go easy with them on intellectual property rights or something, I don’t think that’s a serious approach to China.

Glasser: Okay, so you’re still in therapy, but are the rest of us going to now have to be traumatized by this too? Can you imagine a situation with the president of the United States, President Trump sitting in the Situation Room being briefed on casualties of hundreds of thousands of people in Seoul and in South Korea and still potentially going forward with a military course like that? Is that a conceivable option for the president of the United States?

Hill: Again, I am skeptical that the preemptive strike, A, would get all the missiles and nuclear material or be—

Glasser: What about a conventional war?

Hill: If we are prepared to have a conventional war, if the American people are prepared for that, if the South Koreans who would so to speak host the conventional war, sure, let's put our helmets on and go for it. But I think war is a very serious means to a serious end, and I'm not hearing in the United States a real conviction that that's what people want to do.

Glasser: I was really struck by the fact that you wrote in your book about taking on this role as the assistant secretary of state for East Asia. You talked about what a pedigree it had, these great diplomats, Averell Harriman, Dean Rusk, and of course your mentor Richard Holbrooke had had the position before you had the position in the Bush administration. There has not been anyone appointed by the Trump administration to that job, to many others. They're in the middle of drastically cutting back, it looks like, the footprint of American diplomacy in the world. And yet you're suggesting what amounts to a very complicated diplomatic series of maneuvers as the correct response to North Korea. Is that even a feasible policy option, given the Trump administration's seeming disdain for diplomacy?

Hill: Well, I think sometimes they appear to have disdain or certainly the view that diplomacy is weakness. Actually if you consider diplomacy in the context of keeping your allies close and pushing your adversaries to do something they might not have done if you didn't push them hard, I think they've misunderstood the concept. But to your basic point, if you're going to conduct diplomacy it would be useful to have a few diplomats around.

Glasser: So recently when I interviewed Tom Donilon on this podcast we talked about North Korea. And I was struck by his willingness to sort of say, "Yeah, we in the Obama administration and in the previous couple of administrations, we didn't get what we needed out of this." By any indicators, he said, "all the dimensions of the North Korea situation have gotten worse in the last few years." Do you agree with that? And as you look back in the rearview mirror—I know you've been looking back through some of your records of the interactions with the North Koreans in those negotiations—were there turning points along the way that we missed? Was there anything that we could have done to avoid being where we are today?

Hill: I think the quick answer is no. I do not blame the Clinton administration. I don't blame the Bush administration nor the Obama administration. I try to keep the blame on the North Koreans. I think at times we could have done things better. That is we could have made sure that we stayed closer together with the South Koreans. As I've suggested, I think we need to engage China in a way that leads to good results. And it doesn't mean that we haven't engaged China. It's just in my view we haven't done it very well.

And I think one of the problems, and certainly this was a problem that existed during the Obama administration, that every engagement with China was a sort of Christmas tree of issues that suggested that we didn't have any real priorities in the world. I mean, the one thing I will say for the Trump administration is they seem to understand that North Korea should be the priority and other issues, alas, are going to have to wait.

I think some of the sort of anger during the Bush administration from within the Bush administration was frustration, and I don't think anger from frustration is ever a good way to pursue foreign policy. So I think we need to kind of keep ourselves cool on this.

Certainly I would hope that some people in the Obama administration would be asking whether perhaps during those eight years they could have been more engaged on some things and try to push China a little harder or something like that. But, again, I don't want to blame people. I think there are problems certainly in how we've all pursued this. If you want to blame the people, there's blame to go to the moon and back. But I think what we do need is to be very tough on this, very clear about what we need out of this and really resolute in dealing with it because this problem is not going away.

Glasser: Ambassador Chris Hill, thank you so much for joining us in this week's Global POLITICO, "Making Sense of North Korea." Thanks again, ambassador.