

Center for Strategic and International Studies

The Impossible State Podcast

“60 Minutes and Whiplash”

Speakers:

Victor Cha,

Senior Adviser and Korea Chair, CSIS;

Co-Author, “Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies”

Sue Mi Terry,

Senior Fellow, Korea Chair,

CSIS

Host:

H. Andrew Schwartz,

Chief Communications Officer,

CSIS

Date: Monday, October 15, 2018

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 "60 Minutes" segment.)

LESLEY STAHL (CBS News): Slave labor, public executions. This is a guy you love?

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I know all these things. I mean, I'm not a baby. I know all these things.

MS. STAHL: I know, but why do you love that guy?

PRESIDENT TRUMP: Look, I have – I like – I get along with him, OK? And I say –

MS. STAHL: But you said love him.

PRESIDENT TRUMP: That's just a figure of speech.

MS. STAHL: That's like an – no, it's like an embrace.

PRESIDENT TRUMP: Well, let it be an embrace. Let it be whatever it is to get the job done.

MS. STAHL: Yeah, but he's a bad guy.

(End recorded "60 Minutes" segment.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: It has a complex history. And it has become the United States' top national security priority.

SECRETARY OF STATE MIKE POMPEO: (From recording.) While there's still a long way to go and much work to do, we can now see a path to where we'll achieve the ultimate goal, which is the full and final verified denuclearization of North Korea.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Each week on this show we'll talk with the people who know the most about North Korea: CSIS's Victor Cha, Mike Green, and Sue Mi Terry.

In this episode of *The Impossible State*, CSIS's Victor Cha and Sue Mi Terry discuss President Trump's "60 Minutes" interview and we discuss what to expect at the next Trump-Kim Jong-un summit. Plus, the latest chapter in the new edition of this podcast's namesake, Victor Cha's seminal book "The Impossible State."

Victor and Sue, "The Impossible State" was first published in 2012, and it immediately became the must-read for all who were interested in developments on the Korean Peninsula. What's new in this updated edition in 2018? And why did you call – I kind of think I know, but why did you call the new chapter "Whiplash"?

VICTOR CHA: (Laughs.) So the new chapter was called "Whiplash" because that chapter is about Trump more than it is about the situation in North Korea. I mean, in many ways I ended the – I

ended the first edition talking about the uncertainties in the future regarding North Korea. But then it's ironic that the main chapter that we write for the new book is about the uncertainties of U.S. policy given this very unpredictable president.

MR. SCHWARTZ: We have changed. They haven't really changed.

MR. CHA: Yeah. I mean, they've pretty much been on a steady state with this leader consolidating power. When I wrote this book we were working on a nine-month timeline, and then North Korean leader Kim Jong-il died of a massive stroke and they said we need the book in two months. So it ended up being the first book to come out after the death of Kim Jong-il, but we were guessing about the future and talked about a lot of the uncertainties within North Korea. Little did we expect that five years later the biggest uncertainty would be the United States.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Now, this is one of those books on the list in North Korea. It's like a no-no. You cannot bring this book into North Korea. Our friend Evan Osnos from The New Yorker famously left it in his suitcase and brought it in, and the first thing they took from him at the airport was Victor's book, "The Impossible State," the previous edition.

Sue, I believe you were in government when this came out. Tell us what you think about the new chapter and why it's so important now.

SUE MI TERRY: Because it really brings it to just better understanding now of what's happening with North Korea. I think Victor said North Korea actually has been consistent. Even though Kim Jong-un, there was a lot of uncertainty when Kim Jong-un came into power, now looking back there are still – North Korea have a strategy, Kim Jong-un has a strategy and a plan, and it's really the unpredictable wild card here now is the Trump administration. So I think he really needed to sort of write this chapter and bring us up to date. And of course, this is a required reading for my class at Georgetown. It was a required reading for my class at Columbia. And there's a reason why North Koreans don't like it, because he tells the truth. And he has a unique position from –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Victor tells the truth.

MS. TERRY: Yeah, Victor tells the truth, of course.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

MS. TERRY: And he brings that policy background and academic and scholarly background in writing this book. So North Koreans don't like it, but we like it here.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Victor, you intended it – and it is – it's a mainstream book. This is the kind of book that, you know, is at the front of Amazon stores. This isn't just a scholarly book. I mean, this is for people who really want to understand what the impossible state is.

MR. CHA: Yeah. I mean, there's no theory in this book. (Laughs.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right.

MR. CHA: It is really – it was pitched at a general audience, and I'm gratified that a lot of people have read it. I mean, I remember when Michael Kirby, who was doing the U.N. commission

report on North Korea, met with me, and he said that the chapter that we wrote on human rights was one of the first things that he read with regard to human rights as he was thinking about the commission report.

So, yeah, I'm gratified that a wide – you know, a wide swath of society has read it. That's certainly the way it was pitched. It has a lot of my stories in it from when I was in – from when I was in government to try to give it a little bit more of a personal perspective. And so I'm really glad that this new edition has come out and tried to, you know, bring things up to date.

MR. SCHWARTZ: So, speaking of up to date, President Trump last night – Sunday night – went on “60 Minutes,” and a big part of the interview was about Kim Jong-un. What did he say?

MR. CHA: I mean, it was extraordinary. I mean, it was just an extraordinary interview.

MR. SCHWARTZ: (Laughs.) That's pretty –

MR CHA: I mean, first of all, Leslie Stahl asked great questions. I mean, she really pushed him. And what I was really struck by was, first, you know, he reaffirmed his love for the North Korean leader. She asked him, do you still love him, and he said, yes, I do. (Laughs.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: Which was pretty mind-blowing.

MR. CHA: Yeah, yeah. That, and then he also reaffirmed that he actually trusted the North Korean leader. And, you know, Stahl challenged him on his human rights record and all these other things, and she just – you know, he insisted that he – that he trusted this leader. I was saying earlier the thing that really struck me about the interview is when you actually watch the interview they did a very close-shot frame of the president as he was speaking about North Korea, and you look at his eyes as he's speaking – you just look in – and I looked very carefully, and I really sensed either he's got ice water in his veins or he truly believes what he's saying.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Maybe a little of both. (Laughs.)

MR. CHA: Yeah. But I really sense that he truly believes what he's saying; I mean, that he really does believe that he trusts the North Korean leader and that he can do this differently and that he can get to a solution. I mean, it was really extraordinary.

MS. TERRY: Well, I think, you know, maybe he – maybe he's in love with Kim Jong-un over the exchange of the most “beautiful letters” that he has ever read.

MR. SCHWARTZ: They were very “beautiful letters.”

MS. TERRY: But I think, you know, whether he is truly enamored by Kim or not – and I think, you know, maybe Kim is an affable guy. President Moon Jae-in seems to like him. Maybe there is something about him that's likeable in person. But I think another point that I wanted to make is that this kind of shows President Trump's extreme transactional approach to the presidency. It's almost like if there's no meaning to, like, what's good or bad. So even when you look at some other questions that he was answering, for example on Christine Blasey Ford, Dr. Ford's testimony, he was attacking her, but then he justified it by saying he won. So that kind of gave me this idea, maybe he's like this is his

way of kowtowing to Kim Jong-un is sort of, you know, maybe he thinks this is a way to sort of get a better deal out of Kim. So maybe it is both, as you just mentioned.

MR. SCHWARTZ: It doesn't matter what he says now –

MS. TERRY: Yeah.

MR. SCHWARTZ: – but if in the end he wins, the United States, everybody wins.

MS. TERRY: Right. Right, because I was really struck by that, like, I won, right? So maybe he thinks if he wins this way, by really flattering Kim, that justifies it.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And clearly, we'd all like to win on North Korea.

Victor, do you have any recommendations for the Trump administration in its overall approach to North Korea that you put in “Whiplash,” in the chapter?

MR. CHA: Yeah. I mean, I think – well, certainly to keep the – keep our eye on the ball, which is, you know, sort of a true denuclearization. I mean, we're in this because we're trying to eliminate the nuclear threat in North Korea. And so keeping our eye on the ball – I mean, the North Koreans are throwing all sorts of other distractions out there, and the South Koreans are, you know, somewhat complicit in trying to move this – keep the diplomatic momentum going. But that's one thing, is we got to really keep it on verifiable denuclearization.

The other is that, you know, I think, as Sue said, all Trump cares about is winning. And then the question is always – what happens in every one of these interactions between Americans and North Koreans at these very high levels is the Americans come out and they list all the things that the North Koreans are willing to do, but they don't really talk about what we're going to give for those things. And so the second major sort of recommendation is let's not give away too much for too little.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right.

MR. CHA: Right? I mean, the last thing we want is to be giving away equities in our alliance relationships – the exercising, troops, all this stuff – for a bad deal on nuclear weapons that for experts would be unacceptable; but for the politicians, they may have a much lower bar for what is acceptable in terms of saying that they've dealt with this threat. So that would be my second one, is, like, let's not get a bad deal.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, let's talk about that for a minute. Sue, are we on the path towards a bad deal, an unenforceable deal, a deal that we could – that would be untenable to experts in the United States?

MS. TERRY: Well, unfortunately, I just think there's a lot of dysfunction and chaos and lack of policy coordination within the Trump administration. We have, oftentimes, President Trump undermining his own officials. So, for example, when Secretary Pompeo on September 19th said we need timeline, and he gave a timeline on what he wants to see in terms of denuclearization, then President Trump just a couple weeks later says, oh, no, we don't want to play this time game, I don't need to play this time game. So he kind of sort of undermined what Pompeo said.

So I'm with Victor here in terms of not giving away too much and having our eye on the ball. My concern is that because there is a lack of coordination, because there is a lack of – it's just mixed messages coming out of the administration. I'm not sure if we are on the right path here. I really think North Korea has a strategy. Kim Jong-un has a plan. South Korea has a strategy. President Moon Jae-in has a plan. I'm just not sure exactly if we are on the same page among the Trump administration officials and President Trump in terms of our strategy.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, they keep showing they're on the same page. In fact, today the North and the South agreed to connect the two via roads and railroads, and that's a pretty big development.

MR. CHA: Yeah, it's a big development. I mean, it is – it's still not something that they can do without violating existing sanctions, the U.N. – their own sanctions, their May 24th sanctions, the U.N. sanctions regime, and U.S. sanctions on North Korea. So, you know, I think they are pushing as close to the edge as they can get in terms of trying to get the United States to be more flexible on sanctions.

When they did their third – when the two Korean leaders did their third summit, I was in Seoul that week for CSIS. And just watching all of this, the thing that came out of that was a whole list of these economic cooperation projects, which you just mentioned the railroads are one of them. And when I looked at that list, all that said to me was the U.S., you have to lift sanctions. I mean, it's putting pressure on the United States to lift sanctions, again, before we've gotten anything really significant on denuclearization. So this is – you know, that's how you start to get the makings of a bad deal.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, some would say we've already given them too much.

MR. CHA: Yeah, I think some – particularly on the exercising, I think people – there were a number of people after the Singapore summit who felt that the president's unilaterally giving up exercising was a dangerous step because that's how we keep the alliance strong, is through exercising. And it's not clear if he's going to continue to call for suspension of major exercises, which are to be sometime next February.

MS. TERRY: Well, I think we're also poised to, in a way, give away more, if you will, because it looks like there is going to be second summit between Trump and Kim, and there is a lot of pressure to – for the U.S. to give this end of war declaration, peace declaration. There's a lot of pressure from South Korea. Obviously, North Koreans are pressing it, China, Russia. It's really all of them are against – you know, they're pressing the United States, and I think we might give away even that peace declaration. I think that's the next step.

MR. CHA: You know, we always end up in this position, the Americans. I once described it as the dilemma of American reasonableness – (laughter) –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right.

MR. CHA: – because what happens is, you know, everybody's so excited to get North Korea to the table, right – the Russians, the South Koreans, the Chinese are all excited to get the North Koreans at the table – and then, you know, the North Koreans, you know, we want 100 from them and they give maybe 15, right – you know, 15 out of 100. And by any objective standards, that's not acceptable. But the surrounding parties – the South Koreans, the Chinese, and the Russians – all look at the – you

know, what the North Koreans, they've given, and they go, well, you know, it's better than nothing. And if we get –

MR. SCHWARTZ: At least they came to the table.

MR. CHA: At least they came to the table. If we stop here, then we don't – we're not at the table anymore. So who are we going to try to convince? Are we going to try to convince the North Koreans to give more or are we going to try to convince the Americans to take less? And invariably, they always come to the Americans to take less, because we're always – relatively speaking, we're a much more reasonable party than the North Koreans are. (Laughs.) So this is – this is what always happens. And, like, that constellation is starting to come into formation right now.

MR. SCHWARTZ: What kind of leverage do we have if we're – if we continue to give away our leverage?

MR. CHA: If we're going to do a second summit, what it requires is for the president to set the bar high in terms of what we're going to get if we're going to give a second summit. I mean, a meeting with a president of the United States is not like a meeting with any other leader in the world, especially for North Korea. Because he can meet three times with Xi Jinping, he can meet with Putin, he can meet with Moon. The one he really wants to meet is the American president. So we should leverage that. I mean, we –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

MS. TERRY: Yeah, the problem is President Trump wants to meet with Kim Jong-un. So we've always given away.

MR. CHA: Yeah. Well, that's the problem.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, he loves them. They're friends.

MS. TERRY: Yeah. And they said, there's going to be a second summit regardless very, very soon. So we're really giving away that leverage. And if we're going to give away a peace declaration too, we need to make sure we get something out of that. But already South Koreans are sort of saying, well, let's step away from declaration for declaration. Remember when that was a proposal, that we're going to at least get a declaration from North Korea of all their nuclear missile inventory and facilities and program? But we're now even talking about not doing that. South Koreans have floated this proposal for declaration for disablement of Yongbyon facility. So I just think we need to think very hard about if this summit is going to happen – and I think it will – exactly what Victor said. Like, what are we going to get for peace declaration?

MR. SCHWARTZ: Let's talk about the potential second summit. It's pretty clear it's going to happen. You both think it's going to happen. When is it going to happen? It's not going to happen before the midterms, right?

MR. CHA: Yeah, there's probably not enough time before the midterms. I don't know what you think, Sue.

MS. TERRY: I don't think there's enough time. Trump is going to Paris on November 11th to attend – it's a celebration of the end of World War I. And then there's G-20 in November – end of November, between November 30th and December 1st. So if he's going to those two events, he's certainly not – certainly not leaving, again, the country in mid-November, unless he has a stopover when he goes to Paris, maybe in Switzerland or Sweden. That's the earliest he could possibly do it. But, again, I think we're running out of time. Again, of course, unless Kim Jong-un comes to Washington or Mar-a-Lago or –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Is that a real possibility? Is that –

MR. CHA: Oh, I think – maybe not the second summit – but I think Trump wants to host Kim Jong-un at Mar-a-Lago. That would be – you know, that would be the biggest event.

MR. SCHWARTZ: At Mar-a-Lago?

MR. CHA: Yeah, at Mar-a-Lago. That would be the biggest television spectacle that you can imagine. You know, I mean, he would love that.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Talk about made for TV.

MR. CHA: Made for TV. He would absolutely love that.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And it would enshrine Mar-a-Lago, of course, as, you know, diplomatic ground zero.

MR. CHA: Right. Right, exactly. And he's hosted all the other major Asian leaders there. He's hosted Abe there, the prime minister of Japan.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah, the famous golden golf club.

MR. CHA: Yeah, the golden golf club. (Laughs.) He's hosted Xi Jinping there. It was their first meeting where –

MS. TERRY: Had beautiful chocolate cake together.

MR. CHA: Beautiful chocolate – his granddaughter sung a Chinese song.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

MR. CHA: For Xi. You know, so he – you know, I think he really feels like he likes to host the Asian leaders there. And this would be, like, the ultimate for him, I think – just the ultimate.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Oh, boy. Well, we'll have to wait and see, I guess. And that's what the president always says. He says: Well, we'll wait and see. I think you all have made pretty clear that some of the stuff that they've done has been constructive.

MR. CHA: Sure. Yeah, absolutely. And I think the idea of holding out a second summit now and allowing Pompeo and Biegun to start working-level negotiations –

MR. SCHWARTZ: This is Steve Biegun, the – yeah, the representative.

MR. CHA: Steve Biegun, the special representative, senior envoy for North Korea, who is essentially Pompeo's right-hand man.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

MR. CHA: So if Pompeo is Trump's right-hand man on North Korea, then Biegun is Pompeo's right-hand man on North Korea.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Got it.

MR. CHA: I mean, we're now set up now with, you know, Biegun doing working-level meetings, Pompeo doing meetings, all for the purpose of a second summit. That's now starting to look like a more normal negotiating process. That's the way you're supposed to do it, not the way that happened this past summer where we did the summit first without any agreements that were made in advance. So that's a positive thing, I think. And then the other positive thing is at least when Pompeo came back from his trip to south Korea he said that the North Koreans might be interested in allowing outside inspectors in to inspect the decommissioning of the nuclear test site, which they blew up the tunnels for a bunch of journalists in the summer.

I mean, that's good in the sense that it's starting to establish a norm of outside verification of whatever North Korea does on its weapons programs. And that's something that they hadn't agreed to in the past. So those are positive things. But these are still small steps. They're not the – like we said, you have to keep your eye on the ball. The main thing is, you know, the declaration, a comprehensive declaration, verification and a timeline of dismantlement. And those three things have not been scratched yet.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And for our part, we're still trying to exert leverage. I mean, last week Jonathan Cheng of The Wall Street Journal reported that U.S. officials are preventing American aid workers from making humanitarian trips to North Korea. What about that?

MR. CHA: I mean, I think that's really unfortunate. These humanitarian aid groups are largely – they're working on public health issues. There's a drug resistant strain of tuberculosis in the country. And that's very serious. I mean, if those people migrate to China, you know, this could be a disaster. So, and usually they're always – there has always been in existing U.N. sanctions a humanitarian carve out. But it appears as though there has been this blanket refusal recently of all these visas for humanitarian groups. And that's – you know, that is – you know, whether that's actually a bargaining chip presumes that the regime in North Korea cares about the public health of these people who are outside the elite. I'm not really sure they care. So I don't know if that makes it a bargaining chip.

MS. TERRY: No, I 100 percent agree. We shouldn't be punishing the normal North Koreans. Hepatitis, tuberculosis which is highest, I think, in the world, malaria, all of this is totally endemic in North Korea. I think half of North Korea's children suffer from malnutrition. There's half of children living in rural areas don't have drinking water. I mean, they have serious problems. And as Victor just pointed out, I don't think the North Korean regime would at least really care. They can just go on without these people. So they don't care about the suffering of these people.

MR. SCHWARTZ: So this isn't real leverage. Stopping this isn't real leverage.

MS. TERRY: No, it's not. I don't think so.

MR. CHA: I don't think so. I don't think it's real leverage. And I don't really know the full story behind it, and I don't think even in Jonathan Cheng's Wall Street Journal piece –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right. It was unclear why they did this.

MR. CHA: It's not clear why they did this, yeah. So I don't think we have a full picture of what is actually driving this. But it is certainly a change in the policy from what we've seen in the past that has a real impact on the welfare of the average North Korean. Not the elite, but the average – the average North Korean.

Just to cross-plug another CSIS product, you know, Steve Morrison in our Global Health Security Program has just put together this fantastic video on the public health situation in North Korea that really addresses some of these questions about the things Sue talked about – TB, malaria, and all these other diseases because of malnutrition and lack of a public health infrastructure in the country.

MR. SCHWARTZ: I mean, this is really an extraordinary moment, though, when you've got the president of the United States continuing to profess his love for the North Korean leader. You have catastrophic things going on inside North Korea, like we just described. And now, U.S. aid workers not being able to go there. What do you think happens next? Do you think that there's more back and forth between the U.S. and North Korea? Does – do the South Koreans help us step this up? What's the plan here?

MR. CHA: So I think the big enchilada now is this second summit. And is there going to be enough progress made on denuclearization for the United States to agree to a second summit? And from a South Korean perspective, is there going to be U.S. flexibility on lifting sanctions, so that the South can start to pursue their inter-Korean economic cooperation agenda? And then – and then the other question is, where is Putin going to fit into all this, right, because I think there is some questions of whether he will – Kim will meet Putin. And then, where does Japan fit in all this? Because they are – Japan is sort of the odd man out at this point.

MS. TERRY: We know, first of all, Kim Jong-un had seven summits in five months, right? He met with Xi Jinping three times, Moon Jae-in three times, once with Trump. And then it looks like –

MR. CHA: He's busier than the U.N. secretary-general, right?

MS. TERRY: I know. I know, he is. And then now he's going to Russia. He will meet with Putin. Apparently Xi Jinping will come to Pyongyang. And then Kim Jong-un is supposed to go to South Korea, which is going to be huge – just the reception in South Korea. It's just going to be just a big show. And now the Japanese have said they want to open a liaison office in Pyongyang to talk about abduction issues. So he is – Kim Jong-un is fully engaged in all of this summitry and diplomacy. And just my concern is I think we're just going to meet with Kim Jong-un, again, President Trump will, in the second summit.

And not only is sort of, you know, are we talking about sanctions, but I'm concerned that there's going to be a peace declaration. And it's not that I'm concerned about just giving a peace declaration. I just think that if there is going to be one, there needs to be something we get back from

North Korea. And we should have a crystal-clear understanding – agreement on what that looks like in terms of definition, in terms of condition, in terms of intentions, because we saw in Singapore, with Singapore declaration, after there was a lot of confusion about the order, the sequencing, what we mean by denuclearization. So if there is going to be a peace declaration, we need to have a crystal-clear understanding by all parties.

MR. CHA: Nobody's against peace, right? Everybody's for peace. But we know this is something that the North Koreans want. So we have to make sure we get what we want from that. And, you know, frankly, allowing a few inspectors into a test site that they've already cleaned out –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Doesn't cut it.

MR. CHA: Doesn't cut it. Promising to resell the five-megawatt reactor at Yongbyon, which has already been the subject of the last two agreements, you know, for this, you know, really paradigm-shifting agreement to some sort of peace declaration –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah, it's like how many times can you trot out that old horse?

MR. CHA: Right. Yeah, yeah. I mean, there was a famous saying that the Obama administration used. And I mean, Sue knows this well because she was in it, right? We're not going to buy the same horse a third time.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

MS. TERRY: Secretary Gates said it.

MR. CHA: Yeah, yeah. Well, you know, I mean, we look like we may be on that path again. And that would not be a positive outcome, I think, from a U.S. negotiating perspective.

(Music plays.)

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 beyondparallel.csis.org.

And don't forget to leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. That's so more listeners can find us. It's very helpful.

And don't forget to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.

(Music plays.)

This is The Impossible State.

(END)