

**Center for Strategic and International Studies**

**The Impossible State Podcast**

**“A Great Deception”**

**Speakers:**

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H. ANDREW SCHWARTZ: North Korea is the impossible state. It's a place that's stumped leaders and policymakers for more than three decades.

REPORTER: (From recording.) News that North Korea is still improving its ballistic missiles at as many as 20 hidden bases.

REPORTER: (From recording.) Report reveals seven underground tunnels hiding mobile missiles.

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

MS. : (From recording.) What the North Koreans have been trying all along to do is not give up their nuclear weapons program and maybe just dismantle parts of the program.

MS. : (From recording.) But the reality is they didn't really make an agreement on the missile testing.

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, we have The New York Times' David Sanger and CSIS's Victor Cha to discuss the CSIS satellite images that we gave to The New York Times this week. The satellite images show the world clear proof that North Korea continues to develop a ballistic missile program at scores of hidden bases. David and Victor join me by phone to talk about the recent article, what the images show, and how the Trump administration and the president himself are reacting to this set of new findings.

Victor Cha, David Sanger, we broke major news this week with the publication of the CSIS satellite photos that showed that North Korea is still working on missile bases. David, you wrote about it in The New York Times after we gave you the photos and you did your own analysis. The president then went on to say, quote – he tweeted this – “The story in the New York Times concerning North Korea developing missile bases is inaccurate. We fully know about the sites being discussed, nothing new – and nothing happening out of the normal. Just more Fake News. I will be the first to let you know if things go bad!” This is what Trump said. President Trump responded to the story and called it “inaccurate.” The New York Times was the first to respond and stand by the story. We also stand by our CSIS report. David, as the person who reported it – and, Victor, as the person who did the research – how do you two want to respond to the president?

DAVID SANGER: Well, what struck me about the president's tweet – first of all, the first thing that struck me is I was glad he read the story. The second thing that struck me was that he said that this was “fake news,” but then he said we've known about this for some time and it's “nothing new.” Well, first of all, he's got to choose; it's either fake news or it's true and he's known about it for some time, but it can't be both, right? Second is that if he has known about it for some time – as the story said, U.S. intelligence agencies have watched these sites, some of them for decades; some of them are not new – it's interesting just as a reportorial observation that he never mentioned these. In other words, he would step out and say we're on our way to denuclearization and the North Koreans have agreed to dismantle test site and the launch site and so forth, and he then never turned around and said

but we're looking at a dozen or a dozen and a half or nearly 20 other sites where they are also going to have to go dismantle their capability or they won't actually be denuclearizing. So it's what's left unsaid.

And it's part of the challenge that his own team has as they deal with the fact that after the Singapore Summit, which I applauded as a very good first move because I think you have to do this from the top down if it's going to have any chance of working, he then said there is no longer a nuclear threat from North Korea. That's clearly not the case. They have as many or more nuclear weapons, as many or more launch-capable missiles as they had on June 12<sup>th</sup>, when they first met.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Victor, what's the significance of this report? And why do you think the White House reacted so strongly?

VICTOR CHA: Well, I mean, I think they reacted strongly because it – I mean, it was inconvenient for them. You know, we have revealed that there are 20 of these operational missile bases in three belts arrayed along the peninsula that so far are untouched by any discussion/declaration/agreement that has taken place from Singapore onwards. You know, he just didn't want to hear that.

I mean, he is sort of caught in a loop now where he wants to have a second meeting, but what's on offer from the North Koreans are things that they don't really need anymore, whether it's the one missile test site or the one nuclear test site. You know, the North Koreans would like to put forward things that may have at one time been useful to them, but may no longer be useful to them, while retaining their real operational capabilities. And all our report did was reveal to the public – I mean, I'm sure that the intelligence community and people inside the government know this.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And this is where the president's saying it's "nothing new."

MR. CHA: Right, right. Revealed to the general public that this is an issue, that these are operational. The one that we revealed is the one closest to Seoul. It's like 80 kilometers from Seoul and is SRBM- and MRBM-capable. So, yeah. Yeah, I mean, I think in that sense it may be nothing new to the government, but I think it is probably new to the general public. And it helps to contribute to a more well-informed policy discussion overall about where this is all going.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, I thought it was interesting the president, in his tweet, he said nothing is happening that's "out of the normal." Well, yeah, that's kind of the point: The North Koreans continue to normalize developing missile bases.

MR. CHA: Yeah. I mean, it's an interesting statement because, yeah, "normal" is essentially they're deceiving us and pushing us in the direction of things that they want to give up, not things that they don't want to give up.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And so, David, where do you come in on this? The president, he didn't dispute the facts of our CSIS report, but he disputed your reporting to some degree in his statement. Where do you come out on that?

MR. SANGER: Well, it's interesting because when you look at the statement from the State Department, his State Department, that's in the story – we had gone to them and the intelligence agencies earlier, and the intelligence agencies chose not to respond – but what they basically said was,

in the statement: as the president has often said, if we're going to have denuclearization North Korea has got to give up all of its nuclear weapons and all of its ballistic missiles. I thought it striking that the president in his tweet didn't say that's what they've got to go do. His State Department said it, but he didn't.

Which takes you to the interesting speculation here: Is the State Department growing a little bit frustrated, as I believe from my conversations with them that they are, that the president is somewhat undercutting the line they need to take after the North Koreans, which is that there will be maximum pressure on them until they give this stuff up or get on a – on a plan to give this stuff up? Because the president steps out, basically, with statements like we're on the way, things are going great, don't worry about it, which I think the State Department fears is taking the pressure off. They're worried about going into a second summit in which, when the two men meet, the president may agree to, say, a peace treaty – which certainly is a reasonable thing to get to, and he may have already agreed to it at the previous summit – without first getting even the first steps toward denuclearization. And I think – I think that's their fear. It's controlling the president's own instinct that he knows how to negotiate all of this because he is a practiced negotiator from his real estate life.

MR. CHA: I mean, I think that's correct. I think that if you take the president's statements and compare them to the pace of the negotiations, there is a core concern, I think, that he might accept a bad deal; that he might accept something that is slightly better than what has been achieved in the past, but as our report shows certainly not deal with all the very real military threats that are coming from their untouched capabilities. And so in this sense, you know, I think what the report and what The New York Times story showed is that, you know, there is this inconvenient truth that there is much more to the program than what is on the table for negotiation right now, and it alerts everybody to the fact that we don't want a bad deal at the end of all this.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And –

MR. SANGER: Andrew, let me just throw in one additional thought on Victor's interesting point.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

MR. SANGER: The president has set a pretty high standard for the deal himself by withdrawing from the Iran deal.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right.

MR. SANGER: What were his complaints about the Iran deal? First of all, that merely shipping 97 percent of their nuclear fuel out of the country wasn't enough; that a 15-year freeze on their ability to go produce new uranium wasn't enough, because he rightly pointed out that they could resume the program thereafter; that the deal did not include – the Iran deal did not include dealing with the missile threat from Iran, a perfectly legitimate concern about the limits on the – on the Iran deal. So if you accept the president's critique of the Iran deal as perfectly reasonable, then you've got to assume that in the North Korea case he's got to do at least as much as the Iran deal did and more, right? He's got to get all – he's got to deal with all the missiles.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

MR. SANGER: He's got to get a –

MR. SCHWARTZ: But he's saying –

MR. SANGER: He's got to get 97 percent of the nuclear fuel and presumably all the nuclear weapons out of the country. And he needs something that lasts longer than 15 years.

MR. SCHWARTZ: But he seems to be saying I know exactly what's going on in North Korea and I'm going to hold them to that standard – trust me, don't bother me about this, I know what I'm doing, let me do it. Is that acceptable?

MR. SANGER: Well, at our end we're going to cover it as vigorously as we would cover anything else that the president does, whether it's the health care bill or whether it's the Iran nuclear negotiations. We're not going to sit around and wait for the president to declare whether there's a problem or not.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right.

MR. CHA: So I think – what's disturbing to me about the overall reaction to our report and David's piece is this – you know, a couple of things. The first is, well, this wasn't part of the Singapore agreement, so therefore they are not deceiving us – the North Koreans are not deceiving us. Or, secondly, that we've known about these things all the time and they are not under any obligation to disclose these facilities; so, in other words, they are deceiving us, but they're not required by any obligation to disclose these facilities.

These are both, frankly, ridiculous responses because, first of all, the Singapore Declaration was a declaration. It wasn't an agreement. It simply laid out three paths for negotiation. So the notion that somehow operational ballistic missile bases are not included in the definition of denuclearization is ludicrous.

And then, secondly, the notion that they may not be deceiving us but they're under no obligation to disclose these bases, this has been a response that we've heard from none other than the South Korean government. That is also ludicrous because there are – there are 10 U.N. Security Council resolutions, starting with U.N. Security Council Resolution 1718, that ban all ballistic missiles from this country – all of them, not just long range but also the short range. So, yes, they are certainly under obligation to dismantle these missiles by standing U.N. Security Council resolutions. And if they want sanctions relief from these – from the U.N. Security Council resolutions, then they must indeed disclose and dismantle these facilities. So, you know, people have gotten really spun up over the headline of David's piece, and they're completely missing the core policy issue, which is that this is a threat that they are required under international obligations to disclose.

MR. SCHWARTZ: The headline being that – that's what we're talking about, the headline being that North Korea – this is “a Great Deception.”

MR. CHA: Right.

MR. SCHWARTZ: But how is this not – this is the other thing. I don't understand how people can be – maybe you guys can explain to me why people are so spun up about this being a “great deception.” How would you possibly define this as not a deception?

MR. SANGER: Well, you know, I think Joe Bermudez put it very well when he – when he made the point that, you know, this is what the North Koreans have done for years; they’ve hidden these facilities. I think the point that the critics of the report and our story are making is that the North Koreans in the Singapore Declaration did not agree that they would reveal all of this stuff. Well, that’s fine. I’m perfectly willing to sign up for that. But then you don’t turn around and say there’s compliance with the agreement because they have agreed to give up one or two facilities – or a compliance, I’m sorry, with the declaration – and forget about the others.

You know, one way to do this is every place that you see the word “North Korea” substitute the word “Iran” and say what would the White House reaction be. Because one of the arguments the White House made for pulling out of the Iran deal was that even though the Iranians were complying with the four corners of the agreement as shown on paper, with the 2015 agreement, by continuing to launch missiles, by continuing to subsidize terrorism and so forth, they weren’t living within the spirit of the agreement. So the spirit of the agreement means something in an Iranian context, but apparently not in a North Korean context.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, you know, the big difference here too is this is not fake news. This is not a political debate that we’re having in the United States. This is real policy, and this is national security. So to label this as fake news or – it seems to be really inaccurate.

MR. CHA: Well, I think it’s inaccurate because it’s – I mean, it’s inaccurate, first of all, because it’s based on actual, empirical evidence. I mean, there is imagery and analysis that show that these things exist.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right. It’s true. (Laughs.) It has the benefit of being true.

MR. CHA: And then, you know, in addition to that, I think – you know, in answer to your question, Andrew – this is what happens – this is often what happens in negotiations with North Korea, where we become so focused on the next step that we are willing to contort our bodies in all sorts of different directions in order to now allow the momentum in a negotiation to fall short. And so for, you know, governments or experts to make arguments about, oh, no – essentially making arguments that, you know, they’re allowed to keep these operational based they were not – they were not specifically agreed to in the Singapore declaration, again, it just doesn’t make any sense, from a national security perspective.

Now, in defense of the administration, I am certain that people in the intelligence community, people who are working the actual negotiations are concerned about all these things and want to try to get as expansive a declaration from the North as they can get. It’s just at the sort of rhetorical level everybody has gotten very spun up over our report and David’s piece, and have contorted their bodies in all sorts of positions to try to argue why these bases that we’ve revealed are not somehow – are somehow a sign of disingenuousness on the part of the North Koreans. I mean, anybody who’s negotiated with the North Koreans – and I being one of them – know that they are disingenuous. So – (laughs) – to try to contort your body and make arguments that they’re not, to me, really shows that people are so focused on trying to get to the next step, they’re willing to essentially give up almost anything.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Victor, were you surprised that people in the administration didn’t view the report as being helpful?

MR. CHA: I actually don't know – is that the case? I don't know that that's the case. You know, I think certainly the president didn't view it as being helpful. But my sense, again, is that everybody who was working this issue wants to get as expansive a declaration as possible, which would not just include, you know, an old test site that they don't need, but would include actual, operational military capability.

MR. SCHWARTZ: David, you alluded to the fact that the State Department and the White House may have some disagreement about this. And does the State Department view this report as helpful?

MR. SANGER: I have not heard them follow the president's critique that it was fake news. Quite to the contrary, their statement said the North Koreans are ultimately going to have to give up everything – missiles and nuclear – in order to get at this. So I took that as whatever final deal would happen, would have to embrace whatever's going on on these bases if they involve ballistic missiles. That seemed pretty straightforward in their statement.

You know, to some degree, I think we have to dismiss the fake news phrase here at the president used as somewhat of a reflexive, President Trump instinct to write – to say that about any story that he doesn't care for, right. Especially if he then turns around and says, we've known about all of this for a long time, because that begs the question, well, if you've known about it what do you plan to go do about it? He can't say that he's going to ignore it, because the State Department says it has to be part of an ultimate agreement. And yet, to admit that it's out there is to say I've been out touting the dismantlement of a couple of bases, and not mentioning the fact that they've got 20 more half-hidden away.

MR. CHA: Yeah. If at the end – Andrew, if at the end of all this, right, they come back with a deal that doesn't include 20 operational ballistic missile bases that threaten the 22 ½ million population in Seoul, as well as the entire population of Tokyo, I mean, have we really gotten a deal? I mean, I think our report does is it shows that we can't ignore these things. We can't simply sweep them under the rug and say, oh, they don't really matter, they're not the core of denuclearization deal. I mean, this is an extant threat. And to simply ignore them as fake news really isn't in the interest of U.S. national security.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, what do the South Koreans think about this?

MR. SANGER: Well, the South Koreans were certainly quite critical of the story. And certainly I think they felt like it got in their way, which is pretty interesting, I mean, if you just – if you look at the statement that President Moon's office issued. Because most of these bases involve missiles that are directed at them. Only one of them conceivably could have ICBMs that might reach American territory. Now, of course, anything that can reach South Korea and Japan can also reach American troops in South Korea and Japan. But I thought that it sort of really revealed the willingness of the South Korean government to tolerate an awful lot from North Korea right now in order to keep the conversation going.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Victor, what did you make of it? Yeah.

MR. CHA: Yeah. I mean, I agree. I mean, you know, it's unfortunate. They're essentially acting as North Korea's lawyers right now, and trying to, you know, make technical arguments about

why this is not a deceit, you know, as David's article suggested. As David said, this is an inconvenient truth for them at a time when they really want to try to push forward with the – with the negotiations. And so I found that they were quite upset by the piece. I was actually in Seoul when David's speech came out. And it was – it was the top-line news story on every news channel, and it was on the bottom ticker, you know, of the newsfeeds for all the cable news shows.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Did you have to dress up as, like, a rock star with sunglasses and a hat at the airport to avoid being detected? (Laughs.)

MR. CHA: Yeah, yeah. (Laughs.) I just wanted to make sure I could get through immigration, that's all.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah, right. I mean, David often is in disguise, so, you know. (Laughter.)

MR. CHA: But it does – I mean, what our report raises is a – you know, is a core strategic question. And that is: Are we willing to do deals that essentially delink or decouple the regional and peninsular threat from the homeland security threat, because if we're saying that the only thing we care about are the ICBMs and the nuclear warheads that could be attached to those, and we don't care about these short of medium-range missile bases, then effectively we are decoupling. And as David said, it's bizarre that the South Korean government would criticize the report and David's piece, as though they would like to accept a decoupling of regional and peninsular security from homeland security of the United States. Again, that borders on bizarre.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah. So – OK, so this is now out there. This is in the public record. No one's disputing our report. No one's disputing the reporting of David, except for this word of "deception." What is next? What are the next steps for the U.S. and North Korea in negotiations going forward?

MR. CHA: Well, presumably, they will – the next steps are more working-level meetings to try to actually make progress on either the declaration or initial denuclearization steps to set up the second summit. I thought it was interesting – David, maybe you caught this too – I thought it was interesting. At least the reporting of the vice president's trip down at APEC is that – something to the effect that he said: We don't need a declaration – comprehensive declaration for there to be a second summit. Which, if true, is telling about the overall strategy, that we have moved from a maximalist position to one where we're simply satisficing, trying to just get something so that the president can have his second meeting with the North Korean leader.

MR. SANGER: I thought it was pretty remarkable, because in the reporting after Singapore there was discussion that within a few weeks they expected to get, as a first step, a declaration from the North Koreans about existing numbers of weapons, production facilities, missile sites, number of missiles, and so forth. Compare that to what U.S. intelligence knew or believed it knew, and then make that the basis of the beginning of discussion. And that – we thought that might, you know, take a little while, but by the end of the summer that's where we would be.

Instead, what the North Koreans said to the State Department negotiators was: To give you that list is to give you a target list. The State Department said: We don't need it as a target list. We've had target lists for 40 years. What we need to do is have a starting point from discussing – if we're discussing denuclearizing the country, you got to start with an inventory of what it is we're dealing

with, and then go figure – tick them off one by one and figure out how we’re going to go deal with them, which would be a very American, you know, step-by-step approach to dealing with this.

The fact that the vice president announces we don’t need really need this list to get to a second summit I think is revelatory because it suggests that they have changed their negotiating strategy and their process for getting this done without having declared that they are changing it.

MR. CHA: Yeah. And let me just add, Andrew, to the last thing David said. I mean, you know, the reality is, you know, whether the North is under any obligation or not to dispose these things, we cannot negotiate over the dismantlement of things that they do not declare. I mean, we cannot – you know, we cannot ask for a declaration of things that they don’t disclose having. So, you know, this was the problem in 2005 during the six-party talks. David remembers this well, when we were negotiating with the plutonium program. We knew they had a uranium program, but they wouldn’t admit they had one. So we couldn’t get a declaration on it and we couldn’t get them to negotiate over it.

So I think part of the other thing – contribution that a report like ours and David’s story make, is, you know, we are simply showing the public that there are things here that need to be declared and negotiated over. And we can’t just sweep them under the rug and say, oh, they don’t really exist or they’re not important. You know, they’re critically important.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And I think, again, the significance of this report is this information is now out there. The public knows this. This was a worldwide story this week. And I can’t imagine that this is not on the table going forward, can you?

MR. CHA: I think it’s hard – it’s hard to imagine that it wouldn’t be, especially because we’re not really talking about one base. We – our report was on one base, but there – you know, there are scores of them. And, again, just think about, if there is a deal that comes out of this and none of these bases are touched, do we really feel more secure after that? You know, it’s hard for me to imagine that we do.

MR. SCHWARTZ: David, anything to add on that?

MR. SANGER: Well, the only thing to add is I can understand their unhappiness, because even if they know about all of this – as the president suggests – and they have to go deal with it, it narrows your decision space when it’s all made public. And this is, you know, the usual problem that governments have when we report on diplomatic negotiations. If you’re in government, and Victor can speak to this having been on the other side of it when he was in government, frequently things that appear to CSIS reports or other reports from other respected think tanks, or stories that appear in The New York Times or The Washington Post, or The Wall Street Journal get in the way of your negotiations. And so they’d rather not have it.

But, you know, that’s life in a democracy. We cover diplomatic negotiations for the same reason that we cover every other form of governance so that the American people and other readers around the world can understand it. And, you know, the Trump administration was deeply grateful when they were – before it was an administration – for our aggressive coverage of the Iran deal because it was on the basis of that that they put together their critiques – whether you agree with their critiques or you don’t agree with their critiques. But the shoe is on the other foot at this point. And I’m sure it’s

difficult for them to read about existing bases, because it makes it impossible now not to go deal with that in the negotiations, as Victor has suggested.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, to be continued. We'll have to have you back on Impossible State to talk about these developments as they – as they go forward. Thanks to both of you for being here remotely. Really important discussion.

MR. CHA: Great. Thank you.

MR. SANGER: Thanks very much, Andrew.

(Music plays.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: If you have a question for one of our experts about The Impossible State, email us at [impossiblestate@csis.org](mailto:impossiblestate@csis.org).

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(Music plays.)

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