

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

## The Impossible State'

# "The Worldwide Threat Assessment and the Missile Defense Review"

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SPEAKERS

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*Transcript by Rev.com*

Andrew Schwartz: North Korea is the impossible state. It's a place that's stumped leaders and policy makers for more than three decades.

[President Trump via news clip]: We're here to present the results of my administration's missile review. Our goal is simple, to ensure that we can detect and destroy any missile launched against the United States, anywhere, anytime, anyplace.

Andrew Schwartz: It has a complex history and it has become the United States' top national security priority.

[Dan Coats via news clip]: We currently assess that North Korea will seek to retain its WMD capabilities and it's unlikely to completely give up its nuclear weapons and production capabilities.

Andrew Schwartz: Each week on this show we'll talk with the people who know the most about North Korea. On this episode of 'The Impossible State' we welcome Tom Karako a senior fellow with the International Security Program and director of the Missile Defense Project at CSIS.

Andrew Schwartz: Tom wrote about the Trump administration's recent missile defense review where North Korea played a big role. Plus, the annual world-wide threat assessment was released earlier this week. It concluded that North Korea is unlikely to give up its nuclear stockpiles and President Trump is expected to meet with Kim Jong Un next month to talk about all of this. CSIS top Korea expert Victor Cha joins Tom and me to discuss where U.S. policy on North Korea is headed.

Andrew Schwartz: Victor, Tom, yesterday all the intel chiefs go up on the hill before the senate intel committee and they contradict everything President trump has been saying about North Korea. They contradict what our research has been showing. What's the big takeaway here? What do you guys make of all this?

Victor Cha: Well I mean, a couple of things. The first is that, you know these are independent assessments by the intelligence community.

Andrew Schwartz: All of the intelligence community. Yeah.

Victor Cha: All of the intelligence community with regard to their assessment of whether North Korea's really willing to give up their nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles and their answer is no, they don't think they are and our reports with regard to the missile bases have been essentially showing that aside from the things that North Korea doesn't need anymore, which are things that it's willing to give up, there are at least 20 of these operational missile bases which Tom's Missile Threat program has also shown that the North Koreans are not putting on the table for negotiation. Those are the real threats. Those are operational real threats.

Andrew Schwartz: What do you think about it, Tom

Tom Karako: I think they've kind of gotten themselves with the ICBM tests over the past couple of years. They got themselves to a good negotiating position and so right now they're doing their best to string us along and play this game. It's a gamble. It's a gamble on our part. It's hard not to want to pursue this, this bright, shiny object, but I sure hope we don't get taken for too more ride. More importantly, I hope we don't pay too high a price. Especially for something that may not turn out to be anything.

Andrew Schwartz: What's the gamble and what's the price?

Tom Karako: Well, the gamble is of course in the first instance we lose momentum and then we lose pressure. Political pressure, a sense among our allies. We're serious about this. I like to say that prior to the, this rapprochement, it was the North Koreans who were putting the maximum pressure campaign on us and it seems to have worked because we seem to have blinked. So I question the wisdom of the first Singapore Summit. I would question the wisdom of another one. At least until we get something much more verifiable, like sending some nukes to France, or something like that. But something very substantial and I'm just not seeing it yet.

Andrew Schwartz: But the President, Victor, thinks that it's going pretty well. Even though his intel chief said 'it's not going well.' Our research has said it's not going the way which it should be going. The president thinks it's going pretty well.

Victor Cha: No, he thinks it's just going swimmingly. I mean, he's just so happy with where we are now.

Andrew Schwartz: He's Tweeting about it this morning.

Victor Cha: He's Tweeting about it this morning. Here's the thing, I mean as we approach this second summit there is more pressure on him and arguably North Korea to really get some tangible results to come out of this summit. As Tom said, we just can't have another Singapore statement where there's a bunch of very lofty and ambiguous principals that the two agree on. They actually need to make progress this time and if they don't make progress, then everybody's gonna call it a failure. I think progress from a U.S. sort of policy perspective is the first and most important step, which is a full and verifiable declaration of all their capabilities.

Andrew Schwartz: All of their capabilities.

Victor Cha: All of their capabilities. Including the ones that we have been talking about in our missile reports. If there's anything short of that, then we're back in the same game that Tom's talking about where they say, 'look, we'll give you this 'cause we actually don't need it anymore,' right?

Andrew Schwartz: Right, they're giving us the stuff that's old.

Victor Cha: They don't need it anymore. Right, they give us the stuff that's old or they give us promises about the future, which is not giving up anything and in return this is the gamble. In return they want sanctions lifting. They want the suspension of U.S. military exercises. They may even want troops pulled off the peninsula. They want real things for promises about the future or giving away stuff they don't need from the past.

Andrew Schwartz: Why do they think, Tom, that we'll go for that? Why do they think that we don't see right through that. That we don't know this stuffs old. Why do they think that?

Tom Karako: I think the United States has proven itself susceptible to this kind of game, repeatedly.

Andrew Schwartz: And that's what they know.

Tom Karako: And frankly perhaps they got a few hints from the Chinese. This reminds me of the 1990's when the Chinese were playing games with the Pakistanis and they'd sign a piece of paper, carefully worded and then turns out they interpret it differently than we did, or something like that. Time and again our thirst for a piece of paper, for some kind of agreement, everybody wants a big waxed, sealed treaty with ribbons kind of a moment. Our thirst for that is greater than their desire for disarmament. So I think unfortunately we put ourselves up for this.

Tom Karako: Yes, the Trump administration seems to be betraying that kind of thing. We've seen it before, but we've seen this movie before and it always seems to end the same way.

Andrew Schwartz: They don't like movies over there that we make.

Tom Karako: Yeah, they've made pretty clear to somebody they don't like those.

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah, last time we made a movie about the dear leader it didn't go so well.

Tom Karako: No, no it didn't, it didn't. Although they did like the vice Dennis Rodman.

Andrew Schwartz: Though that was good.

Tom Karako: Yeah.

Andrew Schwartz: That because that showed Roman the great facilitator of diplomacy between the United States and North Korea and basketball diplomacy.

Tom Karako: Yeah and I think it was a dry run for meeting with Trump, right? You meet with Dennis Rodman. That's a dry run for meeting with Trump.

Victor Cha: But look, yeah, yes I guess the Rodman thing, I guess was the precursor, but I think once you let the North Koreans in to the Olympics, once you do all this rapprochement, they get a degree of legitimacy and it's hard to maintain the fire and fury and it's harder to maintain the actual pressure and the context of all that. Yeah.

Andrew Schwartz: Well yeah and Kim Jong Un's a man about town. Kim Jong Un's a man about town now.

Victor Cha: Oh yeah, he'll probably do a walk about in Vietnam also. I agree with what Tom says from the negotiator's perspective diplomacy is all about the art of the possible, right? It's not the idea, it's the art of the possible. At the same time though, when you're trying to make headway you have to maintain some sort of principals. You have to maintain some sort of principals. So leading up to this second summit, to me the principal is if we're really going to do denuclearization, we need the first step which is the declaration.

Victor Cha: Now if North Korea gives less than that, which it certainly sounds like they're going to. They may hand over this rocket test engine stand, right.

Andrew Schwartz: Something they don't need anymore.

Victor Cha: Something they don't need any more or the old five-megawatt reactor at Yongbyon. That's when it's up to the president to say 'that's not enough.' So, but that means the president has to be prepared and if there's any message, policy message that comes out of these missile reports that we've been doing it's this is literally rocket science. This is not easy stuff and you've got to be prepared and the North Koreans are not going to negotiate this at the working level. They feel like they can get the best deal by negotiating with the president. So the president has to be prepared for the second meeting. He can't just wing it. You know, he can't just...

Andrew Schwartz: This isn't just a page out of 'The Art of The Deal.'

Victor Cha: No, this isn't a page out of 'The Art of The Deal' and it's not like he said, reportedly said to Prime Minister Abe before the first summit, which was that he can handle this. He doesn't need to prepare. He can just do it on the fly. This second summit is about actual results, so you just can't do it on the fly. He can't just make it up. The North Korean's have been preparing for 50 years for this meeting.

Tom Karako: I mean, I would just draw attention to the phone call with Erdogan the other day.

Andrew Schwartz: Trump's phone call with Erdogan?

Tom Karako: Trump's phone call with Erdogan and Syria and apparently there was a lot of prep for that, but they didn't stay on message.

Victor Cha: Yeah.

Andrew Schwartz: So Tom, Victor points out how complex this is. Tell us about how complex it is. Like what does the president need to do to prepare for this second summit and really get what we want as opposed to get their old junk?

Tom Karako: I would say Victor pointed to the working level requirements and actually I think Pompeo has held out some pretty good gold standard, no kidding you want, you're serious about this. It has to be completely verifiable irreversible disarmament. That is the right standard. None of this, just sort of freeze cap and freeze kind of stuff. I think the press has reported sending some stuff to France as a good faith measure. That's been out there, been floated. What's happened? So it's about actually getting rid of their facilities, their material, their devices, weapons they've produced and the delivery systems and apparatus that goes with it. That's what the goal is. Anything short of that and I think we are going to be jerked around.

Andrew Schwartz: What do you expect to happen, Victor?

Victor Cha: So I think that the North Koreans won't, I don't think that they will give us a declaration. I think they will try to piecemeal it and give us some bright, shiny objects that could conceivably be held up as a victory because they would chip away at the ICBM homeland security threat and they could be put up as things that no previous president has achieved. But in the broader scheme of things, it's just something that they don't need and the net is that we will not have made progress on denuclearization and we will not really have diminished the security threat that's coming from the operational missile bases.

Victor Cha: So it could be some, it come be a bad deal where they give up this long-range rocket test stand, but in return the president starts giving away things like he did in the first summit. Suspending military exercises or even talking about troops on the peninsula, these sorts of things. Even people who are in favor of a second summit going forward, I don't think there's anybody who isn't concerned that the president might be susceptible to a bad deal.

Andrew Schwartz: Do you think that the North Koreans take this administration seriously?

Victor Cha: I think they take the administration seriously in the sense that they see this as a real opportunity. There's been no other president that has been willing to meet with the North Korean leader, yet Trump is willing to do that. I think they feel like, I mean and Trump is, Trump is very decisive. He makes decisions on his own, regardless of what his people tell him and it's very much in the moment. So if he can, if the North Korean leader can catch Trump at the right time and get him to commit to something, I think that's, that's what they're looking for.

Victor Cha: I think people like Steve Biegun, the special representative, Secretary Pompeo, have been trying very hard since the Singapore Summit to make

progress in terms of denuclearization. Really trying to get tangible steps, but the North Koreans have learned they don't need to talk to these people. They just want to talk to the leader 'cause they think they can get a better deal from the leader.

Tom Karako: I think Victor put his finger on the, kind of the impulse. There's certain fundamental impulses that the president has demonstrated repeatedly and I think the potential willingness to pull troops out of places, such as Syria, such as that Erdogan call, it would be a very unfortunate thing if the South Koreans or the Japanese got a whiff of that impulse manifesting itself with some kind of troop pullback from this very, very critical area of the world.

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah, it's one thing to talk about pulling our troops out of Syria, it's another thing to talk about pulling our troops off the Korean Peninsula.

Tom Karako: Yeah, yeah, 'cause this is about all the marbles. It's one thing to, for Syria to say because yes Russia is messing around there with Assad, but the national security strategy top-level issue, the national defense strategy top-level issue, the central challenge of our time is great power competition and in particular China and if they're not there, then they're gonna be cleaning up.

Andrew Schwartz: You're talking about the national security strategy written by this administration?

Tom Karako: Right.

Andrew Schwartz: This national security council staff?

Tom Karako: That's right. That's right.

Andrew Schwartz: Well let's talk about that a little bit. There was just a missile review that was under way. What is that missile review mean for Russia, China and the rogue states that we've been dealing with?

Tom Karako: Right, so the White House of course put out the National Security Strategy little over a year and change ago. Then the pentagon put out its National Defense Strategy under it and the nuclear posture review and the missile defense review are nested under that review. So what the Missile Defense Review, or MDR, does is to take the big themes of those other policy statements and apply them to the particular area of missile defense and what that means in this particular case is the big task of really pivoting or changing the overall U.S. missile defense posture for the past 20-plus years. Which we've said it's all about North Korea and Iran, kind of thing and not about Russia and China we said, 'well if your overall security strategy is not about Russia and China, then you're gonna have to put those things in the same sentence in some way.'

Tom Karako: What I would say is that the review begins to do that. It opens the conversation at the level of policy says 'we are going to try to do this, not for

ICBM, but for regional missile threats from Russia and China.' That's a good thing, but there's a lot more that needs to be done to actually implement that.

Andrew Schwartz: What do you think is likely to happen in the coming year with the congress and potential follow-on studies?

Tom Karako: Well, the review actually commissioned I think a dozen follow-on studies. A six month, nine month studies so we will be hearing more about that later this summer and fall. July and October. Of course, a lot of attention went to the nuclear push review. I think, especially the democratic house will probably focus on that, but on the missile defense side the remarkable thing is that in terms of programmatic movements the muscle movements are very modest. I would say too modest. I would say that the review stops short of some of the no-kidding integration and air defense type things that we're gonna need to do to adapt our air and missile defense posture to the great power challenge.

Tom Karako: It says, 'hey we want to do a lot more Aegis BMD ships.' That's important for the pacific. It says we want to do kind of explore boost phase UAV kind of capabilities. That's important for North Korea. We explore some directed energy stuff. That's good, but it's going to take a lot more, lot more kind of continuation of this. We're gonna have to keep these things together and that's going to be a challenge. That's going to be a test of our commitment to this great power competition thing.

Andrew Schwartz: How does this all fit in with North Korea, specifically?

Victor Cha: So in two ways. One is that the sort of advances in missile defense that Tom is talking about in terms of the review, will at some point require cooperation with our allies in theater. Japan has been very cooperative on missile defense. South Korea it's been a little bit more rocky because as some will remember the emplacement of a THAAD battery on the Korean peninsula created a great deal of pushback from China and economic cohesion on the South Koreans. Such that the South Koreans even though they accepted the battery ram were ambivalent about it. To say the least. So that's one.

Victor Cha: I mean in terms of North Korea, I think personally like this is a great thing for the diplomacy because it shows that the United States if they do the things that and follow through on the things in the report, it shows that the United States is not, that the pressure in terms of their ability to threaten the United States and its allies with missiles is going to get harder and harder for them to do. So it should push them to make a deal and to move in the direction of denuclearization, economic reform joining the international community of nations rather than thinking they can hold this threat forever to try to extort things from the United States and its allies.

Andrew Schwartz: Tom, is that the way you see it also?

Tom Karako: Yeah, you know there's this one little line in the missile defense review that says, 'while there may be a path to peace towards North Korea, comma, we have to hedge them.' We're not sure that that's actually gonna, that this disarmament stuff is gonna happen and then it proceeds to basically sketch out a continuation of a defense and defeat posture relative to North Korea. So that's good. It's a continuation of that capacity and capability boost for North Korea, but then there's some new things like the ability or the desire to go after hypersonic glide vehicles and that's not about North Korea. That's about China and so it's in China's interest to find bright, shiny objects to distract us. To try to dissuade us to be there, but in terms of the capability side, this is about protecting our carriers and our forward bases that are so important there so that we can continue to have that assurance. Those strong alliance relationships and the projection of power for everything it is the United States wants to do and countering these new kinds of missile threats, especially from Russia and China, are pieces of that equation.

Victor Cha: And the wild card in all of this related to North Korea is that while the U.S. government is moving in the direction of a strategy and a plan for being able to counter Russia and China in turn these missile threats. The wild card is this North Korea negotiation because we could come out of a second summit and out of the first summit he suspended exercises. So we haven't had exercises on the Korean peninsula now in half a year. More than half a year.

Andrew Schwartz: Right and we usually do them quarterly?

Victor Cha: We well we usually do two, two big ones a year.

Andrew Schwartz: Two a year?

Victor Cha: But there are lots of smaller ones.

Andrew Schwartz: Right.

Victor Cha: And eventually that starts to effect readiness capabilities, but the other is that he may come out of the second summit and say something about forward basing or say something about troops on the Korean peninsula, which would then undercut all the work that is a part of this strategy to counter China and Russia. Which goes back to some of our first principles of negotiation which is that in negotiating with North Korea, you can never allow what you want to do in a negotiation to undercut your overall position in Asia and the danger when you're not prepared and you're not briefed up and prepared for this meeting is that you could do that. So this is the thing I think people worry about.

Tom Karako: That's exactly what China is rubbing its hands gleefully and hoping that happens.

Victor Cha: Yeah.

Andrew Schwartz: So if you both had to predict what's going to happen and I won't ask you for your Super Bowl predictions because since the Saints are not in it, I don't even want to talk about the Super Bowl, but let's, if you had to predict what's going to happen here in the next round of talks with missiles and all the declarations need happen, Victor what do you think and Tom I want to know what you think too.

Victor Cha: So, I think there will be some piecemeal concessions by North Korea most likely on things that they assess that they no longer need anymore. The wild card is I don't know what we're going to give for those things. I don't know what the president will give up for those things. A sort of incremental lifting of sanctions? That's fine. Right? That's fine. But if he gives up more than that, then I think you know he is getting a bad deal.

Tom Karako: My prediction would be is kind of boring, that is no matter what happens, Kim's probably going to walk away with greater credibility and greater normalcy and it's gonna be even harder to have a sustained the political pressure to reassert. Back when the JCPOA was being concluded, we said 'don't worry, we can always snap the sanctions back into place.' Nothing snaps back into place. Once you stretch the rubber band out, its, you can't snap it back in to place and so even if we don't give anything super substantial, I see Kim just getting lots more inertia on his side and it's going to be harder and harder.

Tom Karako: Now I don't think, the president rolled out the missile defense review, I don't think he wants, he's in the, he wants to be in the mantle of Reagan on this issue. I don't think, I don't expect him to give any concessions on that, but it's really the overall picture. I want to point to Victor's testimony I think from last summer when this was going on. He said, 'it's all about what price you're willing to pay.'

Andrew Schwartz: The testimony before the Senate Committee?

Victor Cha: Mm-hmm.

Tom Karako: The price. Listen and it was about what the price you're willing to pay for this and we ought to walk into this negotiation with an understanding of what is the price that is too high to pay. What is the price that we would say, 'no, keep your nuclear weapons. We're not going to pay that' and I would say that the answer to that is going to have to align with what the national security strategy and what the national defense strategy says.

Victor Cha: Right. That's the way it should be done. It should be done that way and sort of internally an agreement on what price we're not willing to pay as well as coordinated with our allies what price we're not willing to pay, but you know this is far from sort of regular negotiation.

Andrew Schwartz: It feels like we're getting a lot of symbolism from them and we're legitimizing him, but we're not getting much in return.

Victor Cha: I think yes. I mean, for the North Koreans this negotiation is as much about internal domestic politics as it is about the United States. I mean, North Korea has always wanted to sit at the same table with the United States. No previous North Korean leader has really had that opportunity and this young fellow who came to power accidentally after his father had a massive stroke needed to do a lot to legitimize his domestic position. These meetings, whether it's a summit with Trump, whether it's the four meetings with Xi Jinping the three with the South Korean leaders, the Singaporean Prime Minister, a Putin meeting should drop at some point soon.

Victor Cha: You know, he is really sort of cementing his position. So that, that's important. That's important for them.

Andrew Schwartz: He's gonna have a wall of photos his father and grandfather didn't have.

Victor Cha: That's right. He's gonna, yeah and he'll have a special place in the mausoleum for all the gifts from all these leaders. We have to understand that their game is to negotiate away things they don't want any more or don't need any more or promises about the future. Things they won't do in the future. Meanwhile they're trying to get things from us. They're all about the present.

Andrew Schwartz: That are real.

Victor Cha: They're all real. Right? So this is the trap the president has to avoid and there are others in town who say, 'well it's still good enough because it's incremental progress and the negotiations then don't falter,' but that's a rabbit hole that you can go down and in the end with each summit we'll get less and less and they'll get more and more and the end result will be they will be accepted as a nuclear weapons state. Which if anybody doesn't think that's true, just look at Kim Jong Un's New Years speech this year. Which actually spurred the second round of diplomacy.

Victor Cha: In his New Year's speech he makes very clear that North Korea's willing to cap fissile material production and is willing not to transfer. Which is essentially saying, 'accept us as a responsible nuclear weapons state.'

Andrew Schwartz: Right.

Tom Karako: Right.

Victor Cha: Yeah.

Tom Karako: Yeah I think the domestic legitimacy is one thing, but it's the longer this goes on, the more the symbolism, back to the question, the more the symbolism and the acceptance of this is first of all with our allies in the region, but also with the American public. Couple years ago every time they'd launch a missile the news agencies, everybody would be all a flutter. Every time. They had the attention of the American public.

Andrew Schwartz: Big news story here.

Tom Karako: Yeah.

Andrew Schwartz: It's one of the few foreign policy stories, national security stories that can actually break through our political coverage.

Tom Karako: Yeah and I would tell the reporters sometimes, 'look, don't you think you're maybe playing in to their hands by dramatizing this so much? I know you want the clicks and all that, but I just don't think it's good.' So now there in this state and it's like everybody's kind of gonna get used to it. They're not so scary anymore and we're kind of used to that situation. That normalization legitimacy and that's a robust thing that they are acquiring.

Victor Cha: It's a very unusual situation where you're negotiators like Secretary Pompeo and others are trying to make real progress holding to principals - maximum pressure on sanctions, denuclearization - and you're supposed to be doing it for your president, but then you're president is out there saying, 'oh there's no threat. We have plenty of time. The nuclear threat is gone.' I mean, it's difficult to negotiate under those sorts of conditions.

Tom Karako: Well and the other thing is, you know when Singapore happened our allies in Japan and Australia a lot of people were just absolutely floored and flabbergasted and what does this mean?

Andrew Schwartz: Abe's golden golf club didn't look so good anymore.

Tom Karako: You know, if the United States is able to be— back to Turkey and the Erdogan call, back to these summits. If we're able to be knocked off our positions so easily. If we're able to be flattered or cajoled off our positions so easily, what does that mean for them? Back in the Obama administration what was the thing? 'The Red Line' and that had global implications 'cause fundamentally it was about the word and the honor of the United States. We said something and we did something different and at the end of the day, it's not just about a particular threat or particular thing that glows in the dark, but it's about what is the credibility of the United States to do what it says it's gonna do.

Victor Cha: Yeah and I, so that's why this summit if it happens in the end of February, is something that the whole world is gonna be watching. Not just as a spectacle 'cause it'll be a spectacle, but they're watching for it because it messages a lot about U.S. credibility. I mean if we come out of that summit meeting for example and Trump says, 'I've dealt with the ICBM threat. The homeland threat so I'm done,' then what does that mean for extended deterrents for all of our allies? Not just in Asia, but what allies in NATO are thinking about. Or in other places if we are willing simply to say, 'we've gotten rid of our threat. You deal with your own threat.' And on top of that, this is the only place right now where the United States is actually trying to do diplomacy.

Andrew Schwartz: Right. This is the focus of our government.

Victor Cha: This is the focus of our government and I mean yes, we're in trade disputes with other places, but this is the only place where we're actually trying to take a conflictual situation and find a negotiated diplomatic solution. So everybody is going to be watching this, again not just for the spectacle of it, but for what it's saying about the United States.

Andrew 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). 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](http://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.

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