

PBS Interview; The Redacting and Selection of Wikileaks documents by the Corporate Media

NYT Reporter Defends Publishing WikiLeaks Cables

By [Global Research](#)

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Global Research Editor's Note

The following transcript points to the involvement of the corporate media including the New York Times in the Wikileaks project.

How do we interpret this relationship?

The corporate media is the source of disinformation and at the same time it is supporting "transparency" and truth in media.

David E. Sanger, Washington Correspondent of the New York Times, worked closely with Wikileaks. He was involved in the distribution, editing and dissemination of the leaked documents.

Sanger is member of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the [Aspen Strategy Group](#) together with Madeleine K. Albright, Richard Hass, R Talbott, Robert.B. Zoellick (president of the World Bank), and Philip Zelikow (formerly executive director of the 9/11 Commission)

We have highlighted a number of important statements in the first part of this interview, which confirm that the NYT has not only been involved in the selection and redacting of the Wikileaks documents, it has they also undertaken these activities in consultation with the US government.

Unquestionably the released documents constitute an important data bank in their own right.

The question is who controls and oversees the selection, distribution and editing of the released documents to the broader public.

What interests are being served?

Michel Chossudovsky, December 12, 2010

TRANSCRIPT

National Public Radio (NPR), Fresh Air, December 8, 2010

NYT Reporter Defends Publishing WikiLeaks Cables

TERRY GROSS, host:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross.

Yesterday, Senator Joe Lieberman suggested that the Justice Department should look into whether the New York Times broke any laws in accepting and publishing WikiLeaks documents.

We're going to get a reaction from the New York Times chief Washington correspondent, David Sanger, one of the reporters who has been reading and writing about the leaked diplomatic cables. We'll also talk about revelations within those cables. Sanger is the author of the book "The Inheritance: The World Obama Confronts and the Challenges to American Power."

The Times is reporting that the Justice Department is looking into possible offenses that the founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, could be charged with in the U.S. Assange is facing an extradition request from Sweden, where he's wanted on charges of sexual offenses pertaining to his encounters with two women. Yesterday, Assange surrendered to British authorities and was denied bail.

David Sanger, welcome to FRESH AIR. Let me quote what Senator Lieberman said yesterday. He said: I certainly believe that WikiLeaks has violated the Espionage Act. But then what about the news organizations, including the Times, that accepted it and distributed it? To me, the New York Times has committed at least an act of bad citizenship, and whether they have committed a crime, I think that bears a very intensive inquiry by the Justice Department.

Now David Sanger, I'm sure you had legal advice before publishing at the Times. What were you told about whether you would be breaking any laws if you published WikiLeaks documents?

Mr. DAVID SANGER (Chief Washington Correspondent, New York Times; Author, "The Inheritance: The World Obama Confronts and the Challenges to American Power"): You know, we did have a lot of legal advice, and we had a lot of internal debate because this is never an easy decision to publish national security information. The Times wants to go do it responsibly, and I think at the end of this process, what we did was responsible, it was legal, and it was important for a democratic society.

I've covered Senator Lieberman for a long time, and learned a lot from him about national security. I think that on this issue of journalism, I think we just disagree, because the Times knew that this material was going to be out there anyway.

We didn't get the initial leak. It came to us through whoever gave it to WikiLeaks. WikiLeaks gave it to The Guardian in London. The Guardian gave it to us. It was out there, and the question was not whether the world would learn about it.

The question was whether it would be released in a responsible manner and whether it would be interpreted in a way that readers around the world have expected the New York Times to deal with major news events, that is put it in perspective and explain it and explain what it means to the United States and to citizens around the world.

GROSS: Were you surprised to hear that Senator Lieberman had suggested the Justice Department investigate the New York Times?

Mr. SANGER: No, in fact, I had suspected that we would probably hear more calls like this at various points in this debate, and I think most people recognized that what the Times was trying to do was make sense of an enormous mass of material that was out in the world anyway.

If we had done nothing, if we had ignored it, I think it would have looked strange. I think that also would have been irresponsible. It is the responsibility of American journalism, back to the founding of this country, to get out and try to grapple with the hardest issues of the day and to do it independently of the government.

And we can argue for a long time whether this material ever should have leaked, and I have a lot of concerns about the leakage of classified information. I've also got a lot of concerns about the over-classification of information. But the fact of the matter was that this information's out there.

GROSS: Let me quote something that Julian Assange just wrote in an op-ed piece that was published in Australia, and he is an Australian citizen. He wrote: WikiLeaks is not the only publisher of the U.S. embassy cables. Other media outlets, including Britain's The Guardian, the New York Times, El Pais in Spain and Der Spiegel in Germany have published the same redacted cables, yet it is WikiLeaks, as the coordinator of these other groups, that has copped the most vicious attacks and accusations from the U.S. government and its acolytes.

The Australian Prime Minister Gillard and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have not had a word of criticism for the other media organizations. That is because the Guardian, the New York Times and Der Spiegel are old and large, while WikiLeaks is as yet young and small.

Do you consider Julian Assange a journalist?

Mr. SANGER: I don't, and the reason is that I believe what journalists do is not only dig out information but filter it, explain it, put it in context, do those things that you've come to expect of the New York Times and other great American newspapers and other media organizations for many decades. That's a very different thing from simply downloading a computer system and throwing it out onto the World Wide Web.

He's coming to this with a political motivation. As journalists at the Times and elsewhere, we are not. We are coming at this to explain the world. He was trying, as - just to use his own words, to embarrass the United States and make clear that America's actions are different than its rhetoric.

Well, in fact when you look through these documents, America's actions are pretty consistent with its rhetoric.

GROSS: Now, on the one hand, the New York Times is contextualizing the information in the WikiLeaks documents. On the other hand, can you make the argument that the New York Times has really been a megaphone for this leaked information and is making it a much bigger story than it otherwise would have been?

Mr. SANGER: You know, Terry, I think you could argue that the New York Times is making

this a much more subtle story than it otherwise would have been because by contextualizing it, to use your word, we are explaining what's new here and what's not. We're explaining what's important here and what's not. And we're filtering it out to try to avoid the greatest harm to individuals, ongoing operations and so forth.

So yes, there is certainly a megaphone effect by virtue of the fact that one of the world's larger news organizations is reporting on this. But, you know, had we waited until this all just appeared on the Internet and then tried to catch up with it, we would be a megaphone again, but we would not have had any real time to digest it or certainly to think as hard as we did about what should and shouldn't be redacted.

GROSS: My guest is David Sanger. He's the New York Times chief Washington correspondent, and he's been reporting on what the WikiLeaks documents reveal about the U.S.' diplomatic relations with China, Iran, Pakistan and several other countries.

I found the whole issue of these WikiLeaks documents so confusing. I'm captivated by what I'm reading, but at the same time, I'm worried that diplomacy requires discretion, and these leaks are undermining the possibility of discretion in diplomacy. Do you have any concerns that the documents that you've been analyzing and writing about in the New York Times will hurt diplomatic efforts in the future?

Mr. SANGER: You know, Terry, I think it's a very complicated question. I think that the first instinct of many in the government was to say that this would be enormously destructive, that diplomacy, as you say, relies very much on discretion, on private sources, just as journalism as we practice it here in Washington and around the world relies in many cases on confidentiality and certainly the confidentiality of sources.

At the same time, we have heard some government officials, including the Defense secretary, Robert Gates, make the case that the long-term damage, he thinks, is pretty minimal, that in the end, nations talk to the United States because of their own national interests and that while some individual sources may be more hesitant, my guess is that over the long run, probably diplomatic discourse will go back to something approaching what it was before.

But we were concerned at the Times, and it's one of the reasons that we went through so carefully to try to redact material that we thought could be damaging to individuals or undercut ongoing operations. And we even took the very unusual step of showing the 100 cables or so that we were writing from to the U.S. government and asking them if they had additional redactions to suggest.

Now, they had many to suggest that we weren't willing to go do, including the conversations that took place between some U.S. diplomats and some world leaders, and we thought those are not people who are at any risk of harm if this is published. That was merely embarrassing to U.S. diplomats or to the foreign leaders.

GROSS: Well, let me stop you there. Is it a question of embarrassing or damaging to our relations with that country? Because again, you know, so much diplomacy is carried on through back channels or private discussions. Diplomats have to save face. Heads of state have to save face in order, you know, in order to carry on diplomatic negotiations.

There's so much – it's such – it's a relationship that requires discretion. So in addition to

embarrassment, is it possible it's going to damage relationships between our country and other countries?

Mr. SANGER: It could, and in some cases, it might improve them. But this is not a new problem that faces journalists who write about foreign policy and national security.

As journalists, we are not here to make a judgment about whether or not a newsworthy story that explains how the U.S. engages with the world will, in the end, be harmful or helpful, because it's a very difficult thing to predict. And a good example of this was one of our first stories, one that I worked on with two of my colleagues, about what Arab leaders were saying about Iran.

And for years, we have heard that Arab leaders were as concerned about the Iranian nuclear program as, say, the Israelis are. But it was a very different thing to hear that from the Arab leaders themselves. And just last week, I had a very senior member of the State Department say to me, you know, in the end, it may be helpful that this came out because it may free up the Arab press, which takes its signals from its own leaders, to write about the Iranian nuclear program, which is something that, by and large, they have not done.

GROSS: Now, you've written – you wrote very recently, that while WikiLeaks made the trove of documents available with the intention of exposing the U.S.'s duplicity, what struck many readers was that American diplomacy looked rather impressive. Is that how it looks to you?

Mr. SANGER: You know, Terry, when you go through these documents, what is most impressive to my mind is that the U.S. government, by and large, was doing in secret what it said it was doing in public statements. And that was impressive.

The other thing that's very impressive about these documents is that you see American diplomats at work trying to solve some of the thorniest problems around the world, trying to deal with the violence in the Sudan, trying to defuse the potential for what could be a horrific war on the Korean Peninsula. You see them trying, day by day, to organize a set of sanctions against Iran, that some people think are a good idea and others think are a bad idea, but which the Obama administration, like the Bush administration before it, thought was much preferable to a military strike on the Iranian facilities.

So it is impressive to see the dedication with which diplomats work each day, and it was very impressive to see that they frequently were putting world interests ahead of much more narrow interests.

(Break)

GROSS: Now, you just got back from China, and China is so pivotal right now with its relationship to North Korea and North Korea's threats to South Korea and the possibility of actual military confrontations, further military confrontations breaking out there, the possibility of war.

And China is also very critical in the development of Iranian nuclear weapons and the possibility of further sanctions against Iran. So let's talk about China a little bit.

You say that China thinks of the United States as a fading world power. Why does it think that of our country, and how is that affecting China's, the way China deals with us?

Mr. SANGER: You know, Terry, I've been reporting in and around Asia for more than 20 years and used to be the Times' bureau chief in Tokyo. And what struck me most recently was that the Chinese, who used to be a lot more discreet about making the point that they view the United States as a fading power and view themselves as the rising power, today come out and say it outright.

They make it very clear that they think that the U.S. is not only a debtor nation but that since it is in debt to China, since the U.S. bears a considerable responsibility for what triggered the global financial crisis, that Washington is now in no position to be lecturing to the Chinese either about economic management or about diplomatic management around the world.

The other thing that's very notable is that really since January or February, you have seen the Chinese take a far more assertive role in describing their own region of influence throughout the Pacific region.

They have declared that the South China Sea is an area that they define as one of their vital interests and have objected when others have tried to navigate those seas. They objected last week when the U.S. moved the USS George Washington carrier group into the Yellow Sea as part of those military operations that were meant to be a deterrent to North Korea after the shelling of the South Korean island. So you are seeing, at least rhetorically, a new Chinese assertiveness of what their territory should be.

GROSS: So President Obama called China's president, Hu Jintao, Sunday night to urge China to discourage North Korea from further military provocations against South Korea. Let's talk a little bit about China, North Korea and South Korea.

You know, you've been analyzing WikiLeaks, and some of those WikiLeaks documents pertain to South Korea and North Korea. And secret cables show that South Korea was planning for the fall of the North Korean regime. Why did South Korea think North Korea was going to fall?

Mr. SANGER: Well, they wouldn't be the first ones, Terry, who thought the North Koreans were going to fall. Every American president since Harry Truman has believed that North Korea would collapse on his watch, and every one of them has been disappointed so far.

I was in Tokyo as a correspondent during the fall of the Berlin Wall. And throughout Asia, there was a belief that North Korea, given its poverty, given its ideological bankruptcy and given the forces of globalization, couldn't survive another two or three years.

I took a long, 10-day train trip through North Korea in 1992, or so, and wrote a New York Times magazine piece whose basic thesis was this country would be gone in a few years. Well, you can see how wrong I was.

So it's not a strange assumption. What was interesting about the WikiLeaks case, though, was that here we had, in just February of this year, the American ambassador to South Korea, Kathleen Stephens, meeting with the vice foreign minister, at the time, of South Korea. He's now the national security advisor in South Korea. And basically, they were talking about how one would get China, and to some degree Japan, accustomed to the thought that the South Koreans would have control, effectively, of all of the north.

And the discussion got pretty interesting. The South Koreans said, well, of course, we would

have to tell the Chinese that American forces would never move north of the demilitarized zone. In other words, we wouldn't move the 28,000 American forces that are in South Korea into what is now North Korea and up toward the Chinese border. So that would be intended to try to set aside those Chinese concerns that they'd have the U.S. military right on their border.

And the South Koreans said that they recognized that they would have to give Chinese companies a big stake in operations in North Korea, so that it became profitable for the Chinese to have a South Korean-dominated Korean Peninsula.

This is pretty advanced planning. I'm sure it's gone on before. What was interesting about the WikiLeaks documents is we got a real granular sense of what those conversations are like.

GROSS: Is China not worried about North Korea's nuclear weapons?

Mr. SANGER: China is worried about North Korea's nuclear weapons, but they're not as worried as we are. You know, President Bush, after he met Jiang Zemin, the previous Chinese leader, at his ranch in Crawford in 2003, stepped out and said, you know, we're both committed to the same thing, a completely denuclearized Korean Peninsula. And President Bush would raise this as his first point whenever you talked about North Korea with him.

Well, it's true. Both countries are technically committed to denuclearization. But for China, it's well down the list of priorities. What are the Chinese worried about? They're worried about an implosion of North Korea that would send thousands of extremely impoverished North Koreans over their border, to be fed in China, to be employed in China.

They are, of course, worried about losing the buffer zone between China and South Korea and those American forces on the Korean Peninsula.

The nuclear concerns they have are well down the list. There's one exception to this rule, Terry. A few years ago, in the course of conversations between the United States and China, the U.S. gave the Chinese a weatherman's map of what would happen if there was a nuclear accident at the Yongbyon Nuclear Site, where North Korea has developed many of its weapons and has its reactors. And, of course, many of these maps show that with the prevailing winds, a nuclear cloud, if there was an accident, would go right over the Chinese border. And from those who were in the room at the time, I hear that really got China's attention.

(Break)

GROSS: Cables released by WikiLeaks show that there was a far deeper military and perhaps nuclear cooperation between North Korea and Iran that we didn't know about before. What has been revealed about how North Korea has helped Iran build its arsenal?

Mr. SANGER: Well, in this case, Terry, we've got some known cooperation, some speculated cooperation and some mysterious cooperation. We've known for years that the North Koreans have sold some of their missiles and missile technology to Iran, and also to Syria and to Pakistan and many other countries. This is the cash crop for the North Koreans.

What we learned from the documents, particularly a lengthy assessment of Iranian missile

capability, is that the United States believes that a longer-range missile called the BM-25 that's based on an old Russian nuclear submarine missile design was sold by North Korea to Iran in 2005. They believe that the Iranians bought 19 of these missiles. Now, this missile has never been tested in North Korea or Iran so we're not certain of its range in their hands, and the Russians pushed back and said they have some doubts about whether or not the missile had been sold or even whether it really existed. Now that may be a self-interested position, because if it does exist, it came from, as I said, a leaked Russian design.

The concern here is that if the Iranians actually succeeded at developing a nuclear weapon and then could shrink it to be small enough to fit atop this missile or some other missiles that the Iranians have been developing, then Iran would become not only a nuclear power but one with considerable reach. Not only the reach to get to Israel but, perhaps, to get into Western Europe, perhaps as far as Berlin.

Now the Russians say there's no evidence of this and it's a long way away. But it does bolster President Obama's case for his new missile defense policy, which would put a missile defense system sort of floating offshore not far from Iran.

The big mystery right now is whether or not North Korea and Iran are cooperating in the nuclear arena as well. We've never found any evidence of that, but the North Koreans did reveal the other day, to a visiting American scientist, a large centrifuge facility that they built right at their main nuclear complex at Yongbyon. American intelligence had missed this. It appears that Chinese intelligence also missed this. They've known that the North Koreans were working on the technology but did not know that they were installing 2,000 centrifuges at this site. And this centrifuge technology is very closely related to what Iran's been working on for many years, and that naturally raises suspicions about whether or not they're cooperating.

GROSS: Now at the request of the Obama administration, the New York Times agreed not to publish the text of the cable on what Iran got, what kind of weapons or material Iran got from North Korea. Without giving away anything that you're not supposed to give away, could you tell us why you decided not to publish that?

Mr. SANGER: The administration made a persuasive case that there was no sense in telling the Iranians not only what the U.S. knew and suspected, but what gaps there were in American intelligence about Iran's missile capability. Now parts of this memorandum - it's a very long cable, because it describes a daylong sessions with the Russians - parts of this have been published elsewhere, including by WikiLeaks, so while we were cautious with it and urged the European papers that were publishing things, The Guardian and Der Spiegel among others, to be very cautious with it and they were, elements of it have gotten out anyway.

GROSS: So were you at those meetings with members of the Obama administration, going over documents, deciding what to publish and what not to?

Mr. SANGER: I was at...

GROSS: Hearing the Obama administration arguments about what not to publish?

Mr. SANGER: I was at some of the meetings at which the Obama administration made some requests. There were no decisions made there. The Times took the requests back and

considered them and Bill Keller, our executive editor, and a number of other editors, made the decisions in the end about where they would draw the line. I did hear some of the administration's concerns along with several of my colleagues and with Dean Baquet, who is our bureau chief here in Washington, and we asked a number of questions so that we understood the nature of the State Department's concerns, but the decisions were not ours.

(Break)

GROSS: In talking about Iran's nuclear capability, you know, we all know that Israel has been very worried about that for a long time. What was really surprising from the WikiLeaks documents is how concerned some Arab countries are about Iran's nuclear capability. Let me quote a couple of things. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, his advice to America was to cut off the head of the snake. The king of Bahrain told Americans that the Iranians' nuclear program must be stopped and that, quote, "the danger of letting it go on is greater than the danger of stopping it." The crown prince of Abu Dhabi warned about the danger of appeasing Iran and he compared Ahmadinejad to Hitler.

But you wrote that if Israel bombed nuclear sites in Iran, the Arab countries, the same Arab countries that condemned Iran would probably be condemning Israel for bombing.

Mr. SANGER: There's a lot of doublespeak that goes on in the Middle East when it comes to the Iranian nuclear program and there are many reasons for that, Terry. One of them is that many of these Arab states, while largely Sunni states, have significant Shia minorities that are very sympathetic to Iran. The second is that in public most Arab leaders would rather talk about their sympathy for the Palestinian cause than their concerns about their Shia neighbors, the Iranians.

But we've known for years that Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, many other countries deeply fear that an Iran with a nuclear weapon – even if Iran didn't use that weapon – would become the most powerful state within the region. And what became clear from the WikiLeaks documents and what really jumped out at us was how explicit they were about those concerns when speaking in confidence to American officials. And in some cases, how explicit they were that the United States should step in with military action if Israel did not, and that was implicit in many of those quotations that you read.

Now what's missing from this picture? What's missing is what the Arab states themselves might be willing to do to stand up to Iran. You don't see any of these Arab leaders saying to the United States, you know, you should take military action and we'll help you or we'll stand behind you. It's very likely that if the U.S. ever did get to the point of conducting military action, or if Israel did, these Arab states would immediately step out and condemn the action. That will be much harder now that WikiLeaks is out.

GROSS: Oh, that's interesting. And so that's an example of what you mean by about how it might actually be helpful in some ways to American interests to have disclosed these documents?

Mr. SANGER: It could turn out that way. It's very difficult to predict but certainly, I think that many in the Arab press will probably now feel that it is no longer a taboo subject to take up the question of whether an Iran that is nuclear-armed would be a good or bad thing for the region.

GROSS: In reading the WikiLeaks documents and in the reporting you did for your recent book "The Inheritance" about the war that the Obama administration was inheriting, what did you learn about how close the U.S. or Israel actually came to an airstrike against nuclear facilities in Iran?

Mr. SANGER: You know, it's interesting. In the WikiLeaks documents, which are by and large State Department documents, they are not Intelligence Agency documents, there is very little discussion of U.S. planning or even Israeli planning for a strike on the Iranian facilities. But many of the foreign leaders who talk to American diplomats ask the question what does the U.S. believe the reaction of the Iranians would be if Israel or the U.S. struck? In some cases you saw U.S. diplomats try to talk down this possibility saying, you know, they don't see a chance of an American military action in the near future.

Now military action is one thing, covert action is another. And when I was doing the research for "The Inheritance," which was just at the end of the Bush administration, one of the things that I found was that the Israelis had come to President Bush in the summer of 2008 and asked for the bunker-busting bombs and for other equipment including refueling equipment that they would need in order to strike Iran at some point in the future. And the Bush administration turned them down for almost all of that.

The Israelis may have been asking because they thought whoever was coming in as president at the time they made the request - President Obama had not yet been elected - they probably figured would be less sympathetic to their request than President Bush would be.

What the U.S. did start up during the Bush administration, though, was a very active covert program against Iran. That program included efforts to try to disrupt the electrical systems that would go into the Natanz nuclear enrichment plant and efforts to get inside the computer systems that are used by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps which runs the nuclear program.

Now, it's a covert program. It's very hard to say how much of that has been successful or not, but it is interesting that just in the past few months we've learned a lot about the Stuxnet worm, which is an extraordinarily complex computer worm that somebody created - we don't know if it was Israel, the United States, some other group, private hackers - that is very specifically targeted, it appears, at hitting electrical supplies for the centrifuges that run the Natanz enrichment center.

GROSS: A lot of what we've been talking about pertaining to the WikiLeaks documents has to do with the Obama administration. What do you feel like you learned about the end of the Bush administration from WikiLeaks?

Mr. SANGER: Well, you learn a number of things, Terry. The first is that the American diplomatic corps was quite concerned about the damage that had been done to the standing of the United States around the world by the Bush administration, and particularly by the events that led up to the Iraq War. There is a subtext to many of these cables, particularly those that go through the last two or three years of the Bush administration, that Iraq was sucking up so much of the attention of the top leadership of the United States government that there was insufficient attention being paid to festering problems elsewhere, whether it was the Iranian nuclear program, which President Bush really couldn't go after in a big way while he was wrapped up in the Iraq War. There were concerns that the Korean Peninsula

had spun out of control. And throughout the documents there is concern that Afghanistan became the stepchild of Iraq.

Now, many leaders in the Bush administration to this day, and President Bush himself in his recently published book, deny that they ignored any of these problems, particularly Afghanistan, while they were dealing with the Iraq War. But it's clear from these documents that the whole effort of trying to extract the U.S. from a war in Iraq, that became far more complicated than anybody had anticipated on the way in, soaked up a huge amount of the diplomatic and strategic energy of the United States and we paid a price, not only in Iraq but around the world.

GROSS: Now in talking about – in writing about what WikiLeaks reveals about Obama diplomacy – Obama-style diplomacy, you write it's a complicated mixture of openness to negotiation, constantly escalating pressure on a series of deadlines – some explicit, some vague. So what's an example of how Obama's form of engagement is a complicated mixture of openness to negotiation with escalating pressure behind the scenes?

Mr. SANGER: Well, I'd say, Terry, that the best example, the most vivid one is Iran. You know, the president said during the campaign that he would engage the Iranians because the United States had not talked to Iran in a serious and sustained way for 30 years, since the hostage crisis.

And you may remember that during those debates, his opponent, Hillary Clinton, said that he was naive if he thought that he could engage in an unconditional way with rogue states. But as soon as President Obama came in, what you see from the WikiLeaks documents is that while the president did make opening initiatives to the Iranians – speeches that he gave, radio broadcasts that were sent out over Persian-language stations, secret letters to Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader – that the U.S. was already working on Plan B.

It seems as if the Obama administration never really expected that engagement would yield many results with Iran. And so from the first months of the administration, they began working on a sanctions regime that would be much stricter than anything that the Bush administration had put together. And this comes together over a series of months until the documents end in February of this year.

And, of course, in June of 2010, the United Nations passed its latest round of sanctions against Iran, and the administration was ready and imposed those very quickly, much faster than any had been imposed in the Bush era. And that was because of all this groundwork they had been doing secretly in the background for many months.

The other thing that becomes clear from the cables is that the U.S. accelerated – during President Obama's years – the deployment of antimissile defenses around the Persian Gulf. They got them into many of the Arab Gulf states, playing off of those fears we discussed before by Arab leaders that Iran could get both a nuclear weapon capability and a greater missile capability.

GROSS: As The New York Times chief Washington correspondent, I'm sure you have a lot of sources who are in the diplomatic corps. What are your sources in the diplomatic corps telling you about the impact of WikiLeaks on their work?

Mr. SANGER: Well, many of them are quite distressed, as you would imagine. And I've had a

lot of painful conversations with people who I've known and interviewed professionally for many years. Many of them have said that they are concerned that no foreign leaders will ever again have an honest conversation with the United States. Many are worried about mid-level sources who they fear will not talk again for fear that their names would appear in future documents that could get leaked in some other way.

You know, we're in a new technological age where things can get copied electronically so easily, that many of these sources are concerned about their own futures.

But I have had a few who have expressed delight that Americans saw the hard kind of work that diplomats do, and you saw Secretary of State Clinton talk about this at the end of last week. And a few of them have mentioned some cases where they think that the publication of the cables may be helpful. We discussed one involving Iran, but let me give you another example. A very senior American diplomat said to me just the other day that he thought that the publication of the cables concerning China's increasing use of cyber-weapons against the United States might help embarrass the Chinese into rethinking the strategy.

(Break)

GROSS: You've been writing about the Korean Peninsula on and off for many years. So I'm wondering what you think the possible scenarios are now. Do you think there is a genuine likelihood of war breaking out between North and South Korea?

Mr. SANGER: You know, Terry, I think that we are probably at one of the tensest turning points on the Korean Peninsula that we've been in in many, many years - at least since the 1994 nuclear crisis, which was the closest that the U.S. and North Korea came to war, I think, in recent times, and maybe back to the era of the end of the Korean War.

Why is that? There are a few things going on. First, there's a power transition under way in North Korea. That's always a very dangerous time, particularly at this moment when the heir apparent, Kim Jong Un, who is the son of the current North Korean leader and grandson of Kim Il Sung, the founder of the country, is trying to establish his credentials with the North Korean military.

And that may well explain why you see this recent rash of incidents, the sinking of a South Korean ship that killed 46 people, the shelling of this island. It may all be an effort to establish that the son is as fervent about confronting the West, the United States and South Korea, as his father and his grandfather were.

Now, usually what happens is the North Koreans stage an incident and then pull back and see what happens and try to restart negotiations and see what they can get out of the West. The Obama administration has come in with a different philosophy. They have said we are not going to engage in reopening old agreements, that North Korea has to make good on its previous agreements. I think Secretary of Defense Gates put it best last year when he said: I bought that horse once before. I'm not buying it again.

And the question is could the North Koreans react to that policy by staging even more outrageous incidents, and could that lead to a dangerous escalation? I think there's a real risk of that.

GROSS: You're the New York Times' chief Washington correspondent. You've been reporting on diplomatic relations for, you know, for a long time. And now all of these, like, secret

documents basically kind of fell into your laps. So what's an example of a story that you had been covering that you thought you got right, and now you see a completely different version of it because you're reading these secret documents?

Mr. SANGER: You know, there are several, Terry, where I think it's worth going back and taking a second look. The U.S. relationship with Russia is one where what was happening on the surface, I think, was a bit different from what was happening beneath the surface. If you read these documents, it sure seems as if there had been an implicit deal brought about by the Obama administration to at least temporarily suspend the missile defense program in Poland that Russia objected to in return for getting Russian help on Iran and on a number of other subjects.

There is a lot in the cables that looks at how difficult many foreign leaders are to deal with, whether it is the American ambassador to France's description of President Sarkozy's work habits, to the concerns that many of the diplomats in Russia had about whether or not President Putin is as fully engaged in day-to-day events as he should be, or where some of his money may be hidden.

In fact, one of the themes that runs all through the documents is an American effort to try to describe where world leaders hide their money. And there is a case – there's one case of a very senior Afghan official who is caught going through an airport with \$52 million in cash – or so the WikiLeaks document indicates, or the State Department cable indicates. Now I'm not quite sure how you get \$52 million into the overhead on an airplane, but it sounds to me like that would be quite difficult.

There's a real sense, a day-to-day sense of how threatening the world seems to many in the State Department, and there are a couple of examples in this archive of a daily sort of threat assessment where you see concerns about terrorist plots in the making. And it's a reminder to you of the degree to which American diplomacy not only changed after 9/11, but has changed even nearly a decade after 9/11, that it has focused us much less on sort of grand strategic relationships and much more on hunting down terror groups or debating whether or not counterinsurgencies can be effective.

What worries me the most coming out of these is not only what's in the documents, but what's not in the documents. You know, anybody who goes to China on a regular basis I think sees the degree to which the Chinese are challenging us – not only economically, but technologically. I spent this weekend on a Chinese bullet train that was full of middle-class Chinese just going home after a long weekend in Beijing. And this network of bullet trains has built up in just a few years, while we're still debating whether or not Amtrak can improve the speed of the Acela by 2040.

And you do wonder from reading these documents whether or not we have so preoccupied American national security policy with the concerns about terrorism that the long-term issues of American competitiveness have really not gotten the attention in the past 10 years or so that they need.

GROSS: David Sanger, thank you so much for talking with us.

Mr. SANGER: Thank you, Terry.

GROSS: David Sanger is chief Washington correspondent for The New York Times, and has

been reporting on the diplomatic cables leaked by WikiLeaks. Sanger is the author of "The Inheritance: The World Obama Confronts and the Challenges to American Power."

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