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Brookings Cafeteria: The US in Southeast Asia, and the China challenge

Friday, July 12, 2019

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(MUSIC)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts that have them. I'm Fred Dews.

On today's show, Jonathan Stromseth, a senior fellow and Lee Kuan Yew Chair in Southeast Asian Studies at Brookings, interviews Brookings President John Allen about the strategic significance of Southeast Asia, US relations with countries in the region, and the China challenge.

President Allen recently returned from an extended trip to East Asia, where in June he opened and participated in a Brookings conference in Taipei on "The Risks of the Asian Peace: Avoiding Paths to Great Power War." That conference is part of a broader Brookings project focused on Sustaining the Long Peace in East Asia. Subsequently, John Allen travelled to Singapore where Jonathan Stromseth had an opportunity to join him for a series of dialogues with senior officials and regional policy experts.

In this episode, President Allen reflects on his trip, and considers the possible implications of his discussions and observations for U.S. Asia policy.

Also on the program, what's happening in Congress, with Senior Fellow Molly Reynolds on divisions in the House Democratic caucus and why interparty polarization is the more serious issue in Congress.

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And now, here's Senior Fellow Jonathan Stromseth, with Brookings President John Allen.

STROMSETH: Thanks for the introduction, Fred. I'm Jonathan Stromseth and I'm delighted to welcome John Allen to our podcast today to discuss his recent trip to East Asia, including to Taiwan and Singapore. I thought we could begin by touching on your own personal experiences in Asia. Before becoming president of Brookings, you had extensive government experience, not just in East Asia broadly but in Southeast Asia in particular, the part of the region, as you know, that I focus on as Lee Kuan Yew Chair here at Brookings. Could you give us and our listeners a sense of those experiences and how they informed your perspectives on Southeast Asia today?

ALLEN: Well first, Jonathan, thank you for the opportunity to have this conversation with you today. The trip that we took to East Asia was, I think, very enlightening. It was a very helpful trip for me. I had not been back in a number of years and I really enjoyed it. With respect to Southeast Asia, it had always been a very special place to me as a long-serving Marine. East Asia in general had always been important to us. The theater, as we call it, is a naval theater with the Marine Corps as a

major part. And so East Asia in general but Southeast Asia in particular has had a special meaning to me. I've had the opportunity in the course of my duties while still on active duty to spend time in the Vientiane, Phnom Penh, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, certainly a great deal of time in Singapore—I think we'll talk about that in a bit—in Kuala Lumpur, in Jakarta, and of course, Australia. So, I know the area pretty well.

Strong relationships—a long-term desire by the United States to have strong relations in this area. Those relations, I think, have generally improved in the last 20 years or so. And it comes from a whole variety of reasons. I think a constructive foreign policy in Southeast Asia, good relations between the American people and the various populations, the emergence of democracy in some of the states that struggled for a long time under corrupt regimes or dictatorships.

And on top of that was this one moment that I think really made a huge difference in much of the region, which was the South Asian tsunami. And perhaps that's a conversation for a different podcast, a longer story. But it was my duty and it was my responsibility in many respects to prepare and ultimately to help to execute, with the help of course many, many others in the Department of Defense. The defense response to that tsunami. I can remember standing on the end of the runway in Banda Aceh in the island of Sumatra after the incredible devastation of that tsunami, and of course the earthquake, which generated the tsunami, and seeing our Southeast Asian partners, and in particular Singapore and Australia but others. And of course a mass of non-governmental organizations, NGOs, and relief agencies that came to help.

It was really a moment I, think, that while the United States, of course, was engaged on the ground fighting in Afghanistan and in Iraq, I was so proud of the United States for its capacity to mobilize such an enormous relief effort on such a short timeline, but also to bring together the coalition of the East Asian Nations and other countries from around the world to try to provide relief to Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and in other places. So, I have very strong feelings for the people and for the countries of Southeast Asia. It is a place where the relationship with the United States is very natural and it is one that we should be cultivating as years go on.

STROMSETH: Well, you've touched a little bit on the bilateral relationships that the United States has in Asia. Let's dig a little deeper. The United States has a wide range of bilateral relationships in Asia, from relations with longstanding allies, like South Korea, Japan, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines to relations with emerging partners, like Vietnam, Indonesia, and India. Singapore doesn't really fit into either of these categories because it's already a well-established partner with which we have extensive security relations. But it isn't a treaty ally either. How would you characterize and assess U.S. relations with Singapore today in the current regional context?

ALLEN: Well, it's a very special relationship and I, of course, credit the wisdom and the vision of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew many years ago, who saw as the relations of the United States in the region were changing—that there was an opportunity here for Singapore and the United States to form a special bond. And so, I will use a term, which I think is very important, and that is the relationship with Singapore is truly a strategic relationship. And, you know, often countries will call themselves a small country or a young country. Singapore has an influence in the region and has an influence globally that is far outsized of the size of its population and the surface of its landmass.

Singapore has a strategic relationship with the United States and it was my great honor years ago to work closely with Singaporean officials in the fashioning of the strategic framework agreement, but also in the years that followed—to have a close relationship with many of those officials today, even to this point, but also to serve in combat. There were Singaporean officers who served on my staff in Kabul, but also Singaporeans that served with the Australians in the Uruzgan province of Afghanistan. And they did so magnificently and it's something that Singapore should be very proud of.

And they have been a great partner for the United States, not just in a security realm, but they've been a great partner for the United States and other areas as well—to include areas associated with technology, areas associated with the finance industry. So, it has been a great friend to the United States and a great strategic partner and it is unique in that part of the world. It is not a treaty ally. It's not at the cusp of an emerging U.S. relationship with some of the young democracies. It has a very special place both in the context of our foreign policy, but also, I think, in the context of the hearts of Americans as well.

STROMSETH: And looking beyond Singapore, are there other bilateral relationships in the region that you're feeling particularly bullish about, or perhaps have some concerns?

ALLEN: Well, I continue to be concerned about the situation in the Philippines—the state of the Philippine democracy. The Philippines, of course, has always been a great and close friend of the United States. We watch that unfold both in terms of the state of the democracy, but also the rise of Islamic State elements, which our Philippine partners, the Filipinos, conducted extensive operations to try to clear them from one of the cities in the southern Philippines a year or so ago. So, we were very conscious of the state of the Philippine democracy and its stability as a state. Concerned over the state of the Thai government as well, in the aftermath of the death of King Bhumibol and the ascension of the new king, the troubles with the military coup, and the settling, ultimately, of the long-term sate of the government in Bangkok. We've watch that very closely as well.

But also, it's very encouraging, I think, with respect to the emergence of Vietnam as a significant player in the region. I'm old enough to have been in the service during the war in

Southeast Asia with Vietnam and I've had the great honor of returning to Vietnam on a number of occasions. And the Vietnamese people and the American people, I think, have a very deep bond today and I think our two governments share many of the same objectives of stability in the region and a long-term economic relationship.

And I think beyond that, the emergence of the democracy in Indonesia is a very positive thing. As with all young democracies, there are challenges as time goes on.

So, on the whole, I'm pretty upbeat about Southeast Asia with the emergence of democracy, with what is contributed by our friend in Singapore as a partner in the region. And I'm confident that those areas within the region that experienced difficulties right now can solve those difficulties.

STROMSETH: So, as you well remember, shortly before we arrived in Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong delivered a bold speech at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in which he addressed really the hottest issue in the region today—the growing rivalry between the United States and China that appears to be spiraling out of control. Basically, Lee encouraged Washington and Beijing to work together, reconcile each other's interests, and refrain from creating conditions that force other countries to choose. He had strong advice for both the U.S. and China, but seemed particularly direct toward the U.S., saying new international norms and rules need to be forged in many areas, such as trade and cybersecurity, and quote unquote "it is entirely reasonable for China to expect a say in this process." Do you agree with the broad tenor of these remarks?

ALLEN: Well, the first thing I'll say is once again, Singapore remains a very close friend of the United States. One of the great values of the relationship between the United States and Singapore over the years is that Singapore gives us its very honest and constructive opinion on some of the difficult issues that the United States faces in the region. And Singapore has also helped the United States through what I would call our foreign policy blind spots. It has shown a light on some of those areas where we could do better or we ought to be considering. That's been a unique role for Singapore over the years. And I've got great respect for its diplomatic service.

Ambassador Chan Heng Chee was a marvelous representative of Singapore and the current ambassador is doing a magnificent job as well. Specifically, with respect to Prime Minister Lee's speech, I found that speech to be very helpful. It was timely. It was characteristic of Singapore. It provided advice to those who should be listening. And while I think there are some who felt that he was too direct with the United States, I didn't think so. I thought he genuinely sought to provide his best advice to both China and the United States at a very difficult moment in the bilateral relationship between China and the United States.

And as I did years ago when I was involved in the policy process in Southeast Asia or East Asia writ large, even before China had emerged in the region to be the force that it is today, one of

the central tenets of our thinking about policy in East Asia was never put our East Asian partners in a position where they're forced to choose. And United States and China should not put our East Asia Partners in a position where they have to choose. Because if we do, then both the United States and China have failed our friends and our partners in the region.

So Prime Minister Lee's points were important and while I would say that the conversation about how the long term U.S.-China relationship and its relations with our East Asia partners and other countries within the region will evolve over time, the United States should be very carefully listening to Chinese concerns. How much of a say they get, ultimately, in U.S. policy would remain to be determined and the president, whoever that person is, the president will make that determination. But I absolutely agree that as we move forward in East Asia, the United States and China having a close relationship and in constant conversation about the future of the region will be essential to all parties involved. And Prime Minister Lee, I think, did good service to both the United States and China by that speech.

STROMSETH: So, more generally, John, how do you think that the U.S. should be approaching the China challenge in Asia and beyond today? There's so much talk of a new Cold War. Do you see things evolving in that direction and how should we be managing the relationship?

ALLEN: I've been concerned for some time about the trajectory that we seem to be on with respect to China. We've said here at Brookings many times that there are certain things that we should be considering with respect to China. And we call it the Four Cs, which is where we can, it's in the interests of both countries to find areas where we can cooperate. But we should expect that there will be occasions, and sadly at this particular moment it seems to be dominant, where we will be in competition. And competition isn't necessarily bad. In fact, wisdom would have it that we should be seeking opportunity and competition and competition generates opportunity—we should seize it when we can. But, we have to manage competition to reduce those occasions where we find ourselves in confrontation with the Chinese, ultimately seeking as best we can to prevent the fourth C, which is conflict. So, cooperate; expect to compete; manage competition to prevent confrontation; and avoid at all costs conflict.

I worry that we seem to be on a road that looks for all the world as a policy of confrontation, and that's become more obvious over time more recently. But often, the challenges that we may face with China on particular issues or in particular areas are difficult to relate or map back to an overarching China strategy. We'll sanction ZTE and then we won't. We'll blacklist Huawei but now we can sell the Huawei. The Chinese are a partner with respect to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, but now we accuse the Chinese of being responsible for Kim Jong-un's intransigence moving forward. The South China Sea is an issue, which I think is a real and legitimate flashpoint for

our countries. But in the absence of what would appear to be, for all of those who are observing it, a comprehensive and coherent U.S. strategy with regard to China, these individual potential factors all create a potential flashpoint, because there doesn't appear to be, for many who are observing it, a comprehensive and consistent U.S. policy.

And I worry about the language we use. You hear China frequently described as a threat. We have recently had administration officials use the term that we are moving into an era of a clash of civilizations and we've even had some administration officials suggest that there are racial overtones to this apparent American policy of confrontation with the Chinese. I've had a little experience with conflict and that experience tells me that if you treat someone as an enemy long enough, they will become your enemy. And we need to be very careful about this. This is not a new Cold War. We could make it one if we choose to.

The Cold War with the Soviet Union was based upon a political environment where we were diametrically opposed to the Soviet system and the thermonuclear arsenals, which backed up our differences, created for us an existential problem. We can make a Cold War with the Chinese if we choose to. But this is not inherently a requirement. It is not inherently a self-fulfilling prophecy unless we choose to make this relationship with China a Cold War.

We have deep economic ties. Our two peoples, the American people and the Chinese, have deep relationships, which are generally, I think, very positive. We do have some great differences in trade and I applaud this administration's efforts to try to resolve those. In resolving those issues by this administration, it resolves them more broadly for the global economy. But we have to be able to separate those legitimate issues that require a strong and continuous bilateral conversation between the United States and China. Separate those from what would seem to be the desire by some to create a confrontational relationship with the Chinese. And I will simply tell you, this could spin out of control if we're not careful. The United States should not shrink from defending itself and defending the interests of our allies. We have enormous military power, should the United States choose to employ it. But this should not be the arena where we are constantly resorting to bombast and potential threats. This is an area where a conversation with the Chinese constructively over our differences can move us forward together in the interests of both countries and the interests of all of our partners as well.

STROMSETH: Well, let's carry forward with this theme somewhat. Before arriving in Singapore, you participated in a Brookings conference in Taipei that discussed possible pathways to great power war in East Asia and how to avoid them. The conference addressed such hotspots as cross-trade relations, security on the Korean Peninsula, and managing rivalry in maritime domains,

particularly in the East and South China seas. Which of these potential flashpoints concern you the most and do you believe current U.S. policy is on the right track to addressing them?

ALLEN: Well again, I'll come back to what I just said a moment ago, it's not entirely clear to me that the policy framework gives us the basis or the context or the depth to be able to manage these issues. The United States has a clear One-China Policy. We have reassured that in virtually every administration. However, in this administration, we seem ambiguous on the One-China Policy. I hope we are capable of restating that policy with respect to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. This is an issue that every administration has faced now for the last several. I applaud the Trump administration for attempting to deal with this.

But the truth, of course, is that 90 percent of what North Korea ultimately receives in terms of external support comes through China. China needs to be a partner for us in this. And the more we alienate China, the less we can expect from China in the kind of partnership that's necessary to resolve this issue. And North Korea, with a true intercontinental ballistic missile and weaponized nuclear devices—some number remains to be determined but it's not an insignificant arsenal—this is a real strategic threat to the United States and we should be looking for strategic allies in the resolution of this threat, which creates a special opportunity for the United States and China to cooperate.

Of the many things that you've just mentioned, the one that does worry me, and it worries me significantly, and that is the South China and East China Sea issues. And I've been clear to Chinese friends in the past that the Chinese maritime militia—which has much less discipline than the PLA Navy in its actions with respect to the United States naval forces and the Seventh Fleet and our allies in that region—we could see an incident occur out there which could spin out of control. And in an environment where we are inherently in an adversarial relationship or a confrontational relationship with China, some kind of an incident in the South China Sea could create for us a sequence of events, which might be very difficult to retrieve or from which to de-escalate.

So, I worry about the South China Sea, but I do believe that the policy framework is in place for us to continue to move forward on Taiwan in a reasonable manner. And I have hope that at some point, this administration and China can come to some form of a reasonable relationship on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

STROMSETH: So, another topic at the conference in Taipei was new frontiers in geoeconomic rivalry and collaboration, such as competition between Japan and China in the infrastructure domain and potential collaboration among like-minded partners, like Japan, Australia, the United States. How do you see this competition unfolding in the future? Do you worry about an evolution into rival

economic blocs, or might there be an opportunity for more economic engagement with China, including cooperation with its controversial Belt and Road Initiative?

ALLEN: Well, you know, there had been this moment where we all had great expectations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the TPP. And when the United States pulled out of that—and by the way I don't know whether either administration, we had the Trump administration, of course, won the election, but I don't know that a Clinton administration would have ultimately remained in the TPP—but I think that there was significant potential for the TPP led by the United States to provide a competitive economic engine in East Asia, not necessarily confrontational relationship with the Chinese, but a competitive relationship with the Chinese in East Asia. And with the United States having withdrawn from it, it is much less possible from my perspective.

Meanwhile, there are arrangements that are emerging with the U.S. and India, and the US and Australia, and the U.S. and Japan, and an amalgamation conceivably of all of those relationships together, which make good economic sense. And I think that we'll see us continue to pursue those. I don't know that we'll see economic blocs emerging necessarily. I would hate to see that, but I think that it could be a potential outcome.

And on the Belt and Road Initiative, what I would say is that there will be occasions where I believe that the United States can, in fact, cooperate with China on particular projects. I don't know that the United States would ever say that it is cooperating, necessarily, with the idea of the Belt and Road Initiative, the BRI, or the philosophy behind it because we do have some problems with that in the context of debt trap diplomacy and the fact that often, many of these countries where these infrastructure projects occur, little real benefit occurs to the society at-large. But I don't see any reason why there can't be U.S. participation in or cooperation with China on particular projects without having to sign up to an overall acknowledgement that the BRI is, in fact, a strategy for China.

STROMSETH: So, aside from the topics we've already discussed today, are there other issues in Asia that concern you which you feel say, deserve greater attention in U.S. policy?

ALLEN: Well, it could be that these require greater attention in U.S. policy, not just in China but more broadly. I continue to think that climate change is going to be one of the great challenges we face in the world in the coming decades. And whether it's the change in ambient temperature, or sea level rise, or inevitably, what will be a real problem for many of the countries in Southeast Asia, but in other places in the world, which is climate migration—this is something we need to start to think about now. And of course, the U.S. government has a very specific view on climate, which doesn't really support the kinds of attention and policy that we need to be pursuing in that region. U.S. leadership is very attentive to the obviously issues associated the climate. We're very attentive

to it here at Brookings. But I'm concerned that the U.S. government is not attentive to climate change as it should be in this regard.

We should be doing all that we can to provide support to the young democracies in the region. Democracy is just hard on its best day. And the more that we can be helpful to the emerging democracies—or those that exist in sustaining themselves in the context of remaining true to the rule of law and commitments to human rights, and to free speech and a free and independent press—this is an area where the United States can both set the example and provide assistance as well.

And of course cyber, it continues to be a challenge. And whether the cyber problems emanate from any particular state in East Asia or from non-state actors, cybersecurity and the cyber environment is one that we'll need to spend a lot of attention to as time goes on in Southeast Asia. The challenge between United States and China, economically, is probably going to force a number of not insignificant economic entities, business entities, to begin to move their supply chains out of China. And as we see some of those begin to migrate into Southeast Asia, cyber vulnerability will increase dramatically and I think we need to be ready to help our partners in Southeast Asia to adapt to that.

And then, of course, from my experience in the Middle East, I worry about the growth of the so-called Islamic State. We have seen that the Islamic State has declared that there are provinces of the Caliphate still in existence in Southeast Asia and there will be needs by our partners in Southeast Asia for our support as they continue to deal with these jihadist Islamic movements in those countries. And this is an area where the immediate security of some of these states may be at risk and this is an area we should be paying special attention to.

So, Southeast Asia remains I think an extraordinarily important place to the United States. We should be paying very close attention to it. It's potential, I think, has never been greater than it is now with the emergence of democracy and so many of these countries with the potential for economic progress—sadly, potentially, as a result of the challenges between the United States and China. But this is an area where the United States can be enormously helpful to our Southeast Asia Partners. I am confident that this is a good time in Southeast Asia for U.S. leadership, American leadership, and for a continued and deepened cooperation across the board.

STROMSETH: Well thanks, John. I wholly agree with you on the climate topic. It's really been a pleasure discussing these important foreign policy questions with you today based on our recent trip to the region. I hope we can do it again soon.

ALLEN: It'll be my pleasure. Thank you very much. Jonathan.

DEWS: Now, here’s what’s happening in Congress with Senior Fellow Molly Reynolds.

REYNOLDS: I'm Molly Reynolds, a Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution. As the House returns from its annual July 4th recess, news reports have highlighted potential divisions within the House Democratic caucus. Some of these—like objections to a supplemental border funding bill from, at different stages, both moderates and progressives—involve policy. Others involve Speaker Nancy Pelosi's leadership style. What—if anything—should we make of all this?

From the perspective of votes actually cast on the floor of the House, Democrats remain very unified. Of the votes taken in the House since the start of the Congress, on 94 percent of them have at least 90 percent of Democrats voted in the same way. Only 25 votes have seen fewer than 90 percent of Democrats vote the same way and, of these, several have been on a particular kind of procedural vote on which moderate members often break with the party purposefully in order to claim some independence from party leaders.

High levels of party unity voting doesn't mean that there aren't differences within the party, of course. Party leaders might, for example, decide not to bring a bill to the floor because of intra-party disagreement; as a result, we'd never see a recorded vote that would tell us how big that disagreement was. Indeed, we saw this back in June when Democratic leaders elected not to bring the spending bill providing funds for Congress's own operations to the floor in part because of differences within the party over whether it should include a pay raise for members. In another example, a vote on an increase in the federal minimum wage—now scheduled for a vote in the coming weeks—has been delayed by the need for leaders to engage in careful coalition-building to bring some more moderate members on board. But on most things that do come to the floor, however, Democrats remain united behind common positions.

To the extent that there are differences within the party, their effect on caucus deliberations about strategy is likely exacerbated by the fact that, for many Democrats, this is their first experience serving in a congressional majority. Roughly a quarter of the caucus are in the first term, and another third have been around longer, but never served while Democrats had the majority in the chamber. Being in the majority is a different experience than serving in the minority, with different expectations about what your party needs to deliver to maintain its majority status. In addition, it's much easier to ignore or paper over differences that do exist when your principal objective is to simply block what the majority is doing—which is often the objective of a congressional minority party.

Disagreements within the Democratic caucus are not, however, the most important dynamic for understanding the contemporary House; polarization is. While differences within the parties can, and have, made it difficult for majorities to rack up all the accomplishments they set out to, they

pale in comparison to the differences between the parties. Indeed, one of the reasons that Speaker Pelosi needs to minimize defections among her own party on issues on which Democrats may disagree is because it is difficult to attract Republicans to vote for the legislation Democrats favor. Take, for example, the annual defense policy bill the House is considering this week. In the recent past, this legislation has been bipartisan; since 2002, it's received an average of roughly 120 votes from members of the minority party on initial passage in the House. This year, however, Democrats are concerned that the bill will attract few, if any, GOP votes on the floor, largely because of concerns from Republicans that the measure doesn't authorize enough defense spending. Only two Republicans on the House Armed Services Committee supported sending the legislation to the floor, so Democrats' worries have merit. Reports suggest that Democrats have been working to smooth over differences within their caucus on the bill, but the pressure to do so successfully would be lower if the divergence between the two parties was not as large as it is.

In the coming weeks and months, Congress will have to tackle several must-pass items, including an increase to the debt limit and a potential deal setting new overall spending limits in order to avoid large, across-the-board cuts in the new year. Party unity among Democrats is likely to be important on these issues and depending on how negotiations proceed, Speaker Pelosi may need to accommodate objections from both the more liberal and more moderate members of her caucus. But, fundamentally, ensuring that Congress fulfills some of its most basic governing responsibilities—including avoiding a catastrophic default on the debt—will require cooperation between the parties. That's what will be happening in Congress.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, starting with audio engineer Gaston Reboredo and producer Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews, and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Our intern this summer is Betsy Broaddus. Finally, my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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