

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

A FIRESIDE CONVERSATION WITH
U.S. AMBASSADOR TO CHINA R. NICHOLAS BURNS

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Introduction:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. MALONEY: Good morning to those of you in the Washington, D.C. area and good afternoon and good evening to those of us joining us from other parts of the world including our featured speaker here today. I'm Suzanne Maloney. I'm vice president and director of Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution. And I am honored and delighted to welcome you to today's on the record, virtual public event featuring the Honorable Nicholas Burns, U.S. ambassador to the People's Republic of China. Ambassador Burns is joining us virtually from Beijing.

Ambassador Burns and the entire mission in Beijing are at the forefront of America's most consequential and complex bilateral relationship. Over the last decade, strategic competition between Washington and Beijing has grown sharper. Areas of tension have intensified and channels of communication have narrowed. Recognizing these trends, the Biden administration has called for setting guardrails to prevent stiff competition from spiraling into confrontation or conflict.

Today's event offers an opportunity to take stock of how the U.S. policy is progressing. Similar to our Brookings conversation with National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan last November, today's event will open a window into how the U.S.-China relationship is fairing in practice. With us to make sense of this moment is Ambassador Burns, one of America's most distinguished diplomats. He leads the U.S. mission in China that includes public servants from 47 U.S. government agencies and subagencies. He oversees the mission's interaction with China on the full range of political, security, economic, commercial, consular, and many other issues that shape this critical relationship.

In his very distinguished career in the U.S. government, Ambassador Burns has served six presidents and nine secretaries of state in very senior positions. Ambassador Burns is on public service leave from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government where he founded the school's Future of Diplomacy project and served as the Goodman professor of

practice and diplomacy and international relations.

Thank you so much for joining us here today, Ambassador Burns. I am very pleased to turn the floor to my colleague, Armacost chair and senior fellow at the Brookings Foreign Policy program, Ryan Hass, who will moderate our discussion. Ryan, over to you. Thanks.

MR. HASS: Thank you, Suzanne. And Ambassador Burns, it's just a delight to have an opportunity to be with you today. I want to get your sense of the mood on the ground inside China and talk a bit about U.S. policy and where you perceive the U.S.-China relationship policy heading. But before we move into those topics, I'd love to get your sense, as a three-time ambassador, of what is the role? Help our viewers understand how you conceptualize the role as ambassador.

I think that we're working through some technical issues, but we will get online here shortly. We were speaking a moment ago. So, Ambassador Burns is with us and we will have him online very soon.

As Suzanne mentioned, Ambassador Burns has had a distinguished career in the foreign service and academia and we're very fortunate that he's back serving our country again in China, leading the mission in China, one of the biggest diplomatic missions in the world. And as we will talk about over the course of our discussion today, he has really played a pivotal role at major inflection points in America's diplomatic history over recent decades. And so, it'll be a great opportunity to hear his reflections and how they relate to the current moment that we find ourselves in.

MR. BURNS: Ryan, I'm back if you can see and hear me. I'm here in Beijing.

MR. HASS: Wonderful. It's great to see you. I was just getting ready to ask, how do you conceptualize your role as ambassador?

MR. BURNS: Well first, Ryan, I want to thank you for moderating this panel.

You're so well known here in this mission as a veteran of this mission and so admired for your expertise in China. I'm really pleased to be with you and thank you for your scholarship and your thoughtful analysis. And I just wanted to thank my friend, Suzanne Maloney, too. We served together, did a lot of work on Iran together many years ago, and I have huge respect for Suzanne. So, I'm delighted to be with you and your audience from -- good morning to everybody and good evening to those people who might be watching here in China.

Ryan, I'm going to give you an answer that's going to sound very kind of classical and maybe even academic about the role of an ambassador here. But I think it does fit the times here. My principal responsibility is to represent President Biden and the entire Biden administration and to make sure that the government here in China, the People's Republic of China, understands our positions very clearly, understands our interests, understands what we can and cannot do in this very complicated relationship. And that's the job of any ambassador. That's the definition of ambassador even, you know, several centuries ago.

But it also includes helping Washington to understand the strategy, and the priorities, and the mindset, and the motivations, and the culture, the political culture of China itself, at a time of rapid change in China. A time of nationalism. A time when we've seen the PRC government highly aggressive in this region against aggressive, frankly, towards a lot of our friends and allies in this region. So, that's another important priority.

And I guess a third would be this. Any ambassador, and I certainly take this very seriously, needs to connect with the people of the country to which you're accredited. It's hard to do here certainly through social media because of Chinese restrictions on social media because of censorship. But it's possible to do if you get out. Of course, we're living in a time of COVID. We're living in a time of lockdowns in Shanghai, lockdowns in Beijing. I've been here three and a half months. I quarantined for three weeks, my wife and I did when I arrived.

I hadn't been able to break out of Beijing until last Sunday when I able to go by

train to Wuhan. Spent three days there. And it was a breath of fresh to get out of this town and to see people there. I went to a university campus, met with students, met with the president of the University of Wuhan, which is one of their top-10 universities. That was a really good experience. We hadn't had an American ambassador on a university campus here in many years.

I met with the Governor of Hubei Province, which is a very important province, businesswise, economically. Had a full discussion with him. Went to Catholic mass. I'm Catholic and so, I wanted to show support for freedom of religion, frankly. And see what church is like in this country. It was a really good opportunity to meet a lot of people.

And so, whenever the COVID storm has passed, and who knows when that's going to be, I think COVID zero, zero-COVID is with us for a long time. That's also a part of the job of an ambassador to get out and meet people, to represent the business community, and there's plenty to do in this country, as you know.

MR. HASS: Right. Well, thank you for sharing with our viewers that appraisal of the role of ambassador. Now, how about for yourself in your current mission, what are your priorities?

MR. BURNS: Well, certainly my priority is to represent the president and his priorities. And he's clearly outlined them. You saw in the very successful trip that he made to this region where first he hosted the ASEAN Summit in Washington. And then his trip to South Korea. We have a strengthening relationship there. To Japan, I think probably historically strong relationship there. The Quad Meeting, the inauguration of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework Agreement. This has been really a five-week period where the president has outlined the fundamentals of our strategy in the Indo-Pacific, I think, in a very effective way.

So, my strategy is to make sure the Chinese government understands this, the PRC government, understands this. And to do what Secretary Blinken said in the speech he gave a couple of weeks ago at George Washington University. Help our country, of course, invest in

our internal strength. And that's something that the administration is doing with a lot of determination.

We need to be aligned to our partners and allies. And I think one of the big changes that President Biden has brought to the White House in his time in office is to reassert the primacy of our alliances. And out here in the Indo-Pacific, it's with Australia, and Japan, and South Korea, with the Philippines, and Thailand, our treaty and security alliances with New Zealand. Our priority partnerships with India, our strategic partnership with India in the Indian Ocean region and the Western Pacific. And, certainly, very close friends, Indonesia and Singapore, and many other countries in this region, we're part of that. We play that role here in Beijing diplomatically.

But, frankly, the third thing that Secretary Blinken said in his speech in describing the strategy of the administration, we want to invest in the strength of the country, align with our allies. We also need to compete with China. And this is really a time of competition. Competition in the economic and trade realm. Competition for technological primacy. And that's critical in the 21st Century in the digital age. Competition strategically in terms our military power and positioning.

And you'll recognize this from your own time here, Ryan, competition, self-confidence in American values, and our belief in freedom, and our belief in the rule of law, and the belief in our individual liberties that are the hallmark of our country. That's a very attractive part of America in many countries in this region. And so, helping the United States to, if you will, conduct that competition in a way that is going to be effective in this country in a way that's going to provide for stability at the same time.

And, of course, you know, we want, as Secretary Austin said in his speech in Singapore last week, as Jake Sullivan and Secretary Blinken have also said in their public remarks, we want to do this in a way that we can limit the possibility of confrontation or conflict with China. We want to build in guardrails as Secretary Austin talked about last week in Singapore.

And we want stability in the relationship. That takes connecting with them.

And so, we've had two very important meetings this week. Secretary Austin in Singapore at Shangri-La with the Chinese Minister of Defense and our National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan with Yang Jiechi in Luxembourg. They had a meeting, the two of them, on March 14 in Rome. They had a meeting last autumn as well. And now they've had a third meeting. And that's a very important channel for us as is, of course, the channel that Secretary Blinken has with Foreign Minister Wang Yi. And, of course, our ultimate channel is the channel between our two presidents.

So, we're conducting intensive diplomacy out here on behalf of the United States. And we're very proud of our men and women of our mission to do that.

MR. HASS: Well, there are a lot themes that I want to pick up as our conversation goes on that you just described, including the reaction to Secretary Blinken's speech. But I would like to just start where you finished, conducting intensive diplomacy. Because my sense is that mission China plays a very unique role now relative to previous periods, in part because China is largely closed. There is not the typical flow of senior level administration visitors, not the flow of senior congressional visitors. And it really, a lot falls on your shoulders and the shoulders of your mission to carry America's diplomacy forward inside China.

And so, given the unique circumstances that we find ourselves in with China largely closed, I wonder if you could help us sort of understand a few aspects of life inside China right now. Because another feature is that there are fewer international journalists inside China relative to previous periods. And it just increases the importance of the role that you and your team are playing. So, what's the mood like inside China right now? What are the top issues that are animating conversations and driving discussion inside China?

MR. BURNS: Well, you're right it's an unusual time. We have not seen anything like this really in the past 50 years since President Nixon's trip to China in 1972, and then the

normalization of relationship in 1979. We've always had plenty of visitors, as you know. Every cabinet secretary of the United States would visit. American presidents would visit. Lots and lots of business leaders would visit. We had lots of American students here. None of that's happening right now. We have very few American students in China because the Chinese are not giving out student visas.

We have no visitors from the administration to Beijing, certainly. We've had just a few administration officials, John Kerry, Wendy Sherman, last summer into Tianjin, southeast of here. The Chinese are not letting -- they're not hosting visitors in Beijing. So, it does put a lot of emphasis on our role here as the U.S. mission as you said -- Suzanne said, 47 U.S. government agencies out here to be the connecting point with the Chinese leadership. And we are doing that.

We're carrying on intensive dialog, an intensive set of meetings with them. That's our job. And we'll do that to the best of our ability so that we can keep the governments talking and make sure that, for instance, this past week we had two major meetings happen outside of China because they couldn't have happened in China. It's difficult to convince any of my colleagues in Washington to come here if I tell them that when they do it they've got to quarantine for 14 days before they can have a single meeting. And I understand their unwillingness to do that.

We need members of Congress to come out here. When I was undergoing confirmation last autumn, I was really struck by the degree of bipartisanship on many aspects of our relationship with China. That's a real strength for the United States. I want members of Congress from both parties to travel here. And we don't have the business leaders traveling here. The CEOs and chairmen of a company that you would have had, you know, by the multitudes in years past.

So, a very difficult time imposed by the zero-COVID policy, by the lockdowns. Shenyang up north, Shanghai, of course. The closure of the port of -- for a time of Shanghai for a

time. And rolling lockdowns in Beijing. Just to give you an example. We were essentially locked down here for the better part of a month. Couldn't leave the city environs, city limits. Couldn't go to restaurants. Couldn't, for a time, couldn't even walk in the parks. They were all closed. The city opened up for about five days and then there was just, I think, 60 or 70 infections at the end of last week and things began to close down again.

So, I think we're going to have to live with this for a long time. My own assumption is that we'll see the continuation of zero-COVID probably into the beginning months of 2023. That's what the Chinese government is signaling. And it does put a premium on our ability in this particular mission of the United States, our diplomatic mission here in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenyang, and Wuhan to be on point for the United States. And so, we're working hard at that.

MR. HASS: And how is it working for the business community? I know that you in your job you've made a real priority of engaging with American businesses operating in China. But as you described, it's very difficult to travel and there's obstructions to supply chains. So, what effect is it having, if any, on business decisions by U.S. companies in China?

MR. BURNS: It's had a major impact. The Shanghai lockdown in particular, given the importance of that city in that region, in terms of industrial production, is where a lot of the American big manufacturing plants are located. You think of Ford and Tesla and GM to give you a couple of examples in that region. We figure before COVID there were about 40,000 American citizens, private American citizens living in the Shanghai, what we consider Shanghai consular district that we administer from our consulate general. And I think, you know, we don't have exact numbers, but lots and lots of those people have gone home. And in conversations with the Germans, with the French, and others, the Indians, the Japanese, a lot of their nationals, their private businesspeople have gone home as well because life's really been hard for them.

It's, of course, the major part of this has been just disruption to the supply chain.

We feel that back in the United States because of the labyrinth of the supply chain throughout China. Supplier parts that come into those big manufacturing plants. And that's interrupted international commerce and, of course, Shanghai is one of the critical, if not the critical port in the world for the global supply chain. And we've seen the interruption and the consequent economic problems all around the world, including food security problems.

And so, we're quite cognizant of the need. I think the Chinese government is quite cognizant of the need to try to get back to a situation of normalcy. What we're hearing from the American business community and from the European business community, and there are two interesting reports coming out from the American Chamber of Commerce and the European Chamber of Commerce, you know, this is just too important a market for countries to leave. And so, we don't see a countries -- a lot of companies -- excuse me -- we don't see a lot of companies leaving lock, stock, and barrel.

But from the results that I've read, and the conversations I've had with lots of business leaders here, I think there's a hesitancy to invest in future obligations until they can see the end of this. And as I say, I think most people don't see the end of this in terms of the restrictions imposed by zero-COVID until 2023.

And a lot will also depend, Ryan, on the direction of the People's Republic of China's economic policy. You'll remember last summer and last autumn the backlash against the tech community by the government here. There's been a back-and-forth quality over the last two months or so. Are they cracking down or are they not? Are they more status or are they more market oriented? And I think that the muddying of the waters about the future clarity of what their economic strategy is also, I think, just given people pause here.

We have a very important economic relationship with China, \$650 billion in two-way trade last year. About 1,100 American companies operating in this country and many, many thousands more are trading. And so, obviously, given China's role in the global economy and

given our own, there's a real premium on trying to see a return to normalcy. But I think that's going to be months into the future.

MR. HASS: That's fascinating. I know that you've spent time consulting with your counterparts from Germany, Japan, and elsewhere who also have a major business presence in China. Are you hearing a similar story from them about how their companies are approaching the China market?

MR. BURNS: Well, yeah, we're in touch with -- obviously, I'm in touch with a lot of my colleagues from the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere here. And I can't speak for them. But if you look at these major trendline reports, where these two chambers have interviewed hundreds of companies here, I think the trendlines are pretty clear. And I explained, I think what some of the major takeaways have been.

You know, China, as you know, Ryan, very well, the extraordinary performance of this economy over the last 40 years was built on rational economic decision making. On careful planning. And, of course, you know, that's obviously what the government here wants to do. But we see a strengthening of the party. We hear different voices.

And, obviously, it's been a difficult time for the PRC government and the Chinese people having to live with a considerable lockdown in many different cities. At one point, of course, Wuhan for 76 days at the very beginning of the crisis, two and a half years ago. Shenyang when I got first got here was under lockdown. Our consulate general up there had a wonderful leader, Nancy Abella, who pulled us through that crisis up there.

And Shanghai was really the crucible of it. And at one point we had 80 American consular officers between our consulate in Shanghai and our embassy in Beijing working round the clock shifts just to take phone calls from American citizens who wanted to get out, needed water and food, needed medical care. These are real life human dramas that we took very seriously. It's our fundamental responsibility if you think about it of an American embassy and

consulate is to represent the Americans, to help the American people here. And we were working around the clock for a good month on that.

So, it's been quite a ride since my arrival three months ago, three and a half months ago. And again, you know, we're a full-service operation and we're trying to help the American business community, American citizens get through this as best we can.

MR. HASS: I appreciate the efforts of you and your team on that. If I could, you mentioned Secretary Blinken's speech a moment ago. I'd love to ask you about that. How has the speech been received broadly? And also, how have your official counterparts in Beijing reacted to it?

MR. BURNS: Well, you know how it is here. I thought it was obviously, I thought it was a very fine speech. It was comprehensive in its analysis of the situation we're in in this complicated relationship that we have. But also, its prescription and its clarity that we talked about at the beginning of this interview. We're going to invest in the strength of the country because that's what we have to do in America. We're going to promote our alliances and partnerships align. And then we're going to compete where we have to compete. And we'll engage as Secretary Blinken said and there are a number of areas we can engage and should engage with the PRC government.

But you know the story is you get, you know, we were called in, and lots of complaints about the speech, unfortunately. And I was really disappointed in this. Not surprised, but disappointed. We put the speech on Weibo and WeChat and it was censored in about two and a half hours, just taken away. But it was interesting in that two and a half hours, we had lots of people in this country looking at that speech. And then three days later, we put it back on Weibo and WeChat. It was censored in about 20 minutes.

So, that's the game that they play. And, you know, we don't censor the president of China's speeches or the foreign minister of China's speeches in the United States. I mean, God

forbid. We would never do that. Never could do that. Don't have the capacity to do that. It's against our values. But I had heard a lot of interesting comments in private discussions, mainly with people outside the government, obviously, because people inside the government are going to be very stolid in representing the government's views.

I think people noticed that there was an honesty in that speech. We are in a competitive framework, the two governments, in all of the areas that I mentioned at the beginning, economics, technology, security, values. And Secretary Blinken was very clear about where that competition is and how it needs to be prosecuted. Why it's in our interest to make sure that we succeed in the competition.

But what did he also say? We're not in a cold war. We're not trying to change China. That was a very important line in the speech. And he also outlined a number of areas where we can engage and should engage. In fact, we are. Climate change, where John Kerry, I think, has done a really, really constructive job of working with his Chinese counterpart. Look the at the Glasgow Declaration that they issued together at the end of Glasgow Climate Conference last autumn.

We have a major, I think, common interest in working on counternarcotics. As you know, Ryan, a lot of the precursor chemicals that go into the fabrication of fentanyl, the synthetic opioid, fentanyl, are shipped not by the Chinese government, but by Chinese black-market companies into the narco-traffickers in Mexico and Central America. And that's where the fentanyl is produced. And we lost 110,000 Americans in a 12-month period between 2021 and 2022, and 70 percent of those deaths were from fentanyl.

So, you know, I've approached the government here and asked them to work with us to make sure that we can interrupt the flow of those precursor chemicals. They can interrupt the flow of the precursor chemicals into Mexico and Central America. The government here took a positive action three years ago. They classified fentanyl as a controlled substance. They've

created a database to try to track the flow of precursor chemicals. Those are positive steps. So, I think, you know, we would want to work with the government on counternarcotics. It's so important to our county.

And certainly, we're working in agriculture pretty well. Last year, American farmers and ranchers sold \$38 billion worth of American agricultural products to China. One-fifth of all American agricultural exports go to China. Soybeans alone, \$14.1 billion worth of soybeans sold by American farmers to China. This is something that China absolutely needs is something very important for our farm and ranch community and economy back in the United States.

So, there are places, areas where we can engage. It takes good will. It takes connectivity and it takes a two-way street. And Secretary Blinken was clear about that in his speech. So, you know, I'm giving you a very longwinded answer. I apologize. But I think it's a very important question. We are in a largely competitive mode here. And we have made no secret of that in our government. But there are areas where we ought to be engaging with each other and one of my jobs, along with a lot of my colleagues in Washington, is to find those areas and try to push it forward -- push those areas forward to resolution.

Public health's another area. You know, we were very disappointed and remain disappointed that the Chinese government was not transparent with the rest of the world at the beginning of the pandemic. The WHO is now on its study and just issued an interim report in the early part of June about its findings. We have encouraged the PRC government, the People's Republic government here to work with the WHO to share the data that they have about what happened at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. That's important too.

And so, you know, there are about a thousand issues that we're working on throughout the spectrum of this relationship.

MR. HASS: Another issue that Secretary Blinken touched on what students. The fact that the United States continues to welcome Chinese students. In your impression being on

the ground, is there still a strong appetite amongst Chinese students to study in the United States?

MR. BURNS: I think there is. Pre-COVID, you know, we figured we had about 375,000 students in our universities, in graduate school, and even some in high schools, in private schools in the United States. I don't know what the accurate figures are now. But last summer, we issued from this mission, our mission in China, about 100,000 student visas. I went down to our visa line a couple weeks ago and watched our young consular officers in action and this big, long line of people, of young people here in China applying for student visas. We'll know in a month or two what the overall number is. It'll be a very healthy number. I just don't know whether it's going to approach last year's or not. It's too early to tell.

But that does tell me that a lot of young Chinese understand the importance of education in our country, the opportunities they have. That was another important part of Secretary Blinken's speech that we want young Chinese to study in the United States. You know, obviously, we have a line here. If people don't tell the truth in their visa application, or if we think a student applicant is connected to the Civil-Military Fusion complex here, they're not going to get a visa. But that's a very small minority of the visa applicants. And we're granting lots of visas. And I think it's very healthy for our students to be studying together.

I was in Wuhan on Monday afternoon at the University of Wuhan. As I said, we hadn't had access to a university campus here in a long time. I met with 20 students for an hour and a half. You know, they were humanities majors, economic majors, computer science majors. I taught, as you know, at the Kennedy School for the last 12 years. They seem a lot like our students there. Really eager to learn, really eager to work with other students around the world.

And so, this is healthy for the relationship. You know, we don't want to be in a relationship where we're completely cut off from each other. It's not healthy. It's not good for the long-term of the relationship. And we certainly want young Chinese to understand our country up close and the values of our country up close.

MR. HASS: I'm really happy to hear you say that. It makes me recall a comment that Wang You Shuo (phonetic) made recently. He's a imminent scholar of the United States inside China and he said, I'll believe that the United States is in decline when there is no longer a long line outside of the U.S. visa application window. Which I thought was a pretty powerful statement in rebuttal to some of the assertions that are made occasionally inside China about American decline.

But if I could, ambassador, I wanted to ask about something else. You've recently made a comment that the United States-China relationship has hit its lowest point since 1972. And that obviously drew attention in the United States, both for its observation but also for the tactical utility of calling the bottom in the relationship. So, why did you make that statement?

MR. BURNS: I think it's a true statement. I think it's a true reflection of where we are. It's an honest assessment of where we are. It doesn't mean the bottom has fallen out of the relationship. But if you track, I mean, you're a scholar of China, and plus a diplomat, you track our relationships since President Nixon's visit 50 years ago this year, you know, we had periods of intense involvement in the 1970s and early 1980s in every respect with the government of Deng Xiaoping.

President Clinton, an administration in which I served as a foreign service officer, had a strategic commitment to help China come into the world and join the international system. President George W. Bush, another administration I served in, thought about China. You remember the phrase of our Deputy Secretary of State at the time, Bob Zoellick, we want China to be a stakeholder in the international system. President Obama was dedicated to that.

So, we now have a relationship where I think the Chinese have produced by the behavior of the government here in Beijing, a lot of concern in this region. Think of the aggressiveness of the People's Republic government against India along their long border in the Himalayas over the last three or four years. Think of the bullying of both the Philippines and

Vietnam in the Paracels and the Spratly Islands, the South China Sea. Think of the conflict that the PRC has with Japan in the East China Sea in the economic realm, the dumping of the use of state subsidies. The unfair competition that they subject our companies to.

I think this has produced a counterreaction both in our own country by both Republican and Democratic administrations. And in the parliaments and the government ministries of many of our allies and partners in this region. So, it is a very unusual time. And I don't think we've had a relationship in the last 50 years that is similar to this in the degree of intensity of that competition.

But, you know, we're, I think we have a view that if we wage that competition peacefully, and of course, we want to do it peacefully, but effectively and with determination on our side, and if we try to engage the government here in those areas that you and I have already talked about, you know, the United States can be better off. And our position in this region is going to be stronger as a result of this. And so, that's what we're determined to do.

MR. HASS: Yeah, I think you made a very important point. It's not just the United States that's experiencing a strained relationship with China right now. You know, if you survey many countries around the world in Europe and Asia and south Asia, there is a pattern to the relationships that exist with China now. And a lot of it traces back to the menu of issues that you just described.

But when I talk with Chinese counterparts, they often say, no, that's not the case. What really is the case is the United States' anxiety about a shrinking gap in relative power that as China rises and the United States either stagnates or declines, the gap shrinks. And that causes the United States to become more aggressive in seeking to suppress China's rise in order to preserve its privileged position. So, why is that line of argument wrong?

MR. BURNS: I don't think it's accurate. I don't buy it. I think it's an excuse. I've heard the same argument from people in the government here and people close to the

government. And it's wrong because just look at the behavior of the United States in recent years. President Obama worked very effectively with the government here on climate change. The Paris Agreement that he worked out led with President Xi Jinping. Think about the JCPOA, the Iran Nuclear Agreement of July 2015, worked out with China as one of the countries on our side of the negotiating table against the Iranians.

And look at the degree of economic engagement that the United States government in the past, as well as our private sector have had. We're not acting like a country that's trying to keep China down. I think what's changed is the newly aggressive behavior of the Chinese government, of the PRC government over the last five to ten years. And you've seen a counterreaction to that. Not just in our government, but as you quite rightly said, in Europe. Think of the poor state of relations between the European Union and China. The April 1st summit was anything -- it was not a resounding success. It was, in fact, the opposite of that.

Look at the strengthening and the depth of concern in Japan, for instance. And so, I really think that an honest assessment would say they've been too aggressive in too many areas. You know, we haven't talked about Taiwan. But Secretary Austin, I think, put it very clearly in his speech. The aggressive posture, the aggressive language that we heard last weekend from the Chinese Minister of Defense. And, you know, we are for a peaceful resolution of that dispute. And the People's Republic of China has committed itself for many decades to a peaceful resolution. And, obviously, that's the standard that should apply here. So, I just don't agree with that argument that you and I have heard very frequently from people.

MR. HASS: Well, I appreciate your candor. I share your view on that. But I do have to acknowledge, sitting in Washington, that there is a fair degree of pessimism right now about whether there is space or opportunity to improve the U.S.-China relationship, at least in the near term. And I wanted to get your sense of do you think that the degree of pessimism that you see in Washington is founded, justified? Or do you think that there are opportunities that are being

underappreciated?

MR. BURNS: Well, certainly not a type of optimism. But I think we have to be realistic. You know, the relationship is what it is right now. As we say, we have said since the beginning of this administration, we are in a competitive framework right now. And so, that competition need not be confrontation. That competition can be carried out in a mature way by both sides in a way that does not affect the security of this region. And that's the responsibility of both governments and we, of course, take that very seriously. We talked earlier about building in guardrails to make sure that there's no possibility, or we drive down the possibility of an unintentional conflict. And so, that's very serious and we take it very seriously and we're working at that.

But, you know, I know that there are people inside the government here who don't like the word competition. But that is a word that accurately describes where we are. But the engagement word in the limited areas, but they're important areas that we talked about, that's also part of this relationship. So, I think to be realistic, we can't get our hopes up too high. We know that this is going to play out over a long term.

The president's talked about the fact that this is a critical decade for the United States for us to strengthen ourselves at home. For us to reengage with allies and for us to put our best foot forward here in the competition and in those areas where we engage. And I feel as ambassador here, I have very clear instructions from the president, from the secretary of state, Secretary Blinken, from our entire national leadership. And so, our job is to carry out those instructions. It is to be on point here. Is to understand what's happening here so we can gauge our policy appropriately and we're hard at work at that.

MR. HASS: Well, you were in a important role when September 11th happened and the United States and China were able to find each other in that moment. The global financial crisis, the United States and China were able to find each other and have a certain degree of

coordination that helped resuscitate the global economy. On climate issues, the United States and China were able to work together to bring about the Paris Climate Accord.

There has been a break in that pattern though with COVID-19 and now with Ukraine. The United States and China really have not been able to find each other in common directions or common cause coordinated efforts. As you look to challenges that are approaching us, whether its food security, Iran nuclear issues, others, do you think that there is still muscle memory available for the United States and China to find each other and if not cooperate, work in a common direction on parallel tracks?

MR. BURNS: We'll see. We would certainly hope so. It remains to be seen. We're going to have to see how this all plays out in the next couple of years, maybe the next couple of decades, ultimately. I think the big test, Ryan, will be can we continue to work together and with the rest of world on climate change. That is an existential challenge for the entire world that China has about 28 percent of global emissions. We're well below that but we are the two leading carbon emitters. And we are the leaders, along with Japan and the European Union and others in this major, major global challenge.

And so, if our two governments can work together on that, then we'll have proven that despite the competition between us, we can engage in big issues. There's the issue of food security, which is so important to the world right now, given the disruptions in global supply chains, given the war, Russia's brutal war in Ukraine. And those are two. I mentioned the fentanyl issue. It's not a global problem, but it's critical for the United States and it's critical for China to play a role in the resolution of that.

So, you know, we're going to have to -- we're testing these areas. And we're hopeful that we might make some progress. But, you know, we're realistic as well. These things sometimes take time in this very complicated relationship. So, we need to be steely eyed about things.

And I think, you know, as I reflect on 9/11 and even the period after the 2008 financial crisis, it's very important for the United States to lead. And I am so proud of our president. I'm proud of serving this administration because the president has brought us back to the World Health Organization, to the climate effort, to UNESCO. But more importantly, strengthen the NATO alliance. Strengthen our Indo-Pacific alliances here with the countries that I mentioned. And put out some challenging ideas that can unite a lot of countries from a democracy summit, to the COVID summit, to this nascent, but I think very important Indo-Pacific economic framework.

I think countries are responding very positively. And I'm closely in touch with my allied ambassador colleagues here from all these countries. We talk all the time. I think they're reassured that the United States is back in the game as the international leader. And as I reflect particularly on 9/11, it's so important for us. We're still the largest economy. We're still the most powerful military. And we're the leading democracy in the world.

And so, countries look to us for leadership. I've been out of government quite a while and it's been really reassuring for me, just as an American, to feel that sense of confidence in our country out here in the Indo-Pacific, not necessarily in the government to which I'm accrediting that sense of confidence, but certainly in our allies. And so, that's a very strong point.

And I'd say that self-confidence is going to be important for us. And we have a president and Cabinet self-confident about our future and about who we are and what we're doing in the world. That's important that the American people, despite all of our troubles at home, this is a difficult time now, that we feel self-confident about the role we're playing in the world.

MR. HASS: I think that's an incredibly important point. You mentioned Russia a moment ago. If my memory serves me correctly, your arrival in China coincided with the escalation of tensions in the invasion by Russia, Ukraine. How have you watched the China-Russia relationship evolve during the time that you've been on the ground in China?

MR. BURNS: Well, we're watching it closely. That February 4th statement on the morning of the day the Olympics began between President Putin and President Xi Jinping, you know, that was a weighty statement. I think it was a wakeup call for a lot of people around the world to see that these two authoritarian powers have a very different view of how the international order should be shaped. We have a very specific view. The international order should be protected. And the democratic basis, the human rights concerns, the freedom that's embedded in the founding documents of the international order post World War II, they're precious. And they have to be preserved. And it's been, I think, it's been invigorating to see how many countries are rallying to that.

So, you know, we're watching that relationship closely. Of course, we're watching. And we were very clear in the Biden administration about the inadmissibility of China supporting Russia militarily in this war. We have not seen that happen. I think you're heard that consistently from White House spokespeople even in the last couple of days. We've not seen that. But, certainly we're watching that very closely.

And what I'm feeling is a lot of countries in this part of the world wanting to see the United States do what we're doing. Strengthen our relationship with ASEAN, with our treaty allies. Have an economic component, which we have, of course, to our policy out here. And have a very realistic view of our relationship with the People's Republic of China.

MR. HASS: Yeah. Well, I have so many more questions that I want to ask you. But our audience is streaming in with questions of their own and I want to give them an opportunity to pose questions directly to you. So, I will convey them on their behalf.

MR. BURNS: Sure.

MR. HASS: But before I do so, I would just note that you played a pivotal role in the White House during the fall of the Berlin Wall. You played a pivotal role in the government after September 11th. I think that it gives me comfort to know that you are on the front lines of the

most consequential relationship that we have at a very pivotal moment today in the U.S.-China relationship. So, I just before we move on I did want to acknowledge that point and express my appreciation for you being in Beijing at this time.

MR. BURNS: Thank you.

MR. HASS: Eu Wen Lu (phonetic) asked how is your very effective social media being received? Are you getting uptake for visiting a forbidden city and engaging with Chinese people? What's the reaction?

MR. BURNS: Well, you know, in addition to my work, obviously, my primary job is to be a connecting point for our government with the PRC government. Obviously, we want to connect with the Chinese people. So, my wife and I, Libby and I, you know, we're intrigued by Chinese culture. So, we had a fascinating visit to the Forbidden City. And, of course, we put that out in social media. My wife's an avid gardener. We went to the Botanical Gardens. They have a world class botanical gardens just on the outskirts of Beijing. In Wuhan the other day, just to interact with students on a university campus, to speak to the Governor of Hubei Province. He and I didn't agree on everything. In fact, you know, we noted the large number of issues where we disagreed. But we agreed on climate change, for instance.

So, I think it's very important that the Chinese people have an accurate view of who we are and what we stand for and our genuine interest in keeping the doors open in terms of the interaction of our peoples. And we do that for students. There's too little of it right now because of COVID. A lot of our foundations and NGOs can't operate here because of COVID. And, you know, frankly, we want to see more American journalists here. That's a big part of who we are, freedom of the press. And there are too few American journalists here.

So, we are carrying out a social media campaign. We're on Weibo, WeChat, every social media platform we can find. And it's a challenge but it's something that we're determined to continue.

MR. HASS: We have a question from Gordon Davis, who's retired from the National Democratic Institute. He asked how concerned should we be about Taiwan? How are your interactions with your Chinese counterparts on this issue?

MR. BURNS: I think Secretary Austin expressed our concerns publicly and as Secretary Blinken did in his speech two weeks ago. Our policy has not changed. We are for a peaceful outcome to the conflict across the Taiwan Strait. And, of course, we are concerned about the level of the increased decibel levels of the PRC rhetoric against Taiwan. We're concerned by the harassment on the sea and in the air of Taiwan by the PLA.

China committed to a peaceful resolution of this dispute. It has for decades. And I think that's the standard to which the government here in Beijing has to be held accountable. This is a very active discussion that we have underway privately. And we'll keep most of it private. But certainly, publicly this is what we have to say and this is what you've heard our cabinet officers and our president say very consistently, peaceful resolution of this dispute. This is no reason to resort to the force of arms or to intimidation or coercion here against Taiwan.

MR. HASS: And another hot button issue is North Korea. We have a question from Eunjong Cho from Voice of America. She asks why is China vetoing UN Security Council resolutions on North Korea after the recent tests?

MR. BURNS: We were disappointed. I think our ambassador, our great ambassador, my friend Linda Thomas-Greenfield, was clear about that. Very disappointed by the veto by both China and Russia over a Security Council resolution that should have passed given the actions of the North Korean regime. And so, you know, we want to work with China closely on this. We have a conversation with the PRC government.

But there are times when the international community has to speak. And for decades now, the United Nations Security Council has been able to put together votes to clearly call out the North Korean regime when they've acted in such a way either with ballistic missile

tests or in the past, nuclear tests, that are inimical to peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula. We have an ally, the Republic of Korea. A very important ally to the United States and obviously, we're going to maintain our commitments to that ally. We want to see peace and we hope that the government in Beijing will join us in that effort to produce peace in the Korean Peninsula.

MR. HASS: We have a question from Brian Kline at Richpoint Global. He asked about Hong Kong issues. There's been an exodus of ex pats from Hong Kong over the past year. How do you see this affecting the business environment and how do you see the business environment in Hong Kong developing going forward?

MR. BURNS: Well, one thing to note, you know, the United States has an independent consulate in Hong Kong. Has had for a very long time, will continue to have. And so, Hong Kong is not part of my responsibilities here. I have colleagues in the American Foreign Service who in our consulate general there. But, obviously, the United States is extremely disappointed at what's happened in Hong Kong let's say dated back to 2019, when so many people demonstrated peacefully in the streets of Hong Kong. I was actually in China as a private citizen during that time. Watched from Beijing, Shanghai, Shenyang, as I was traveling around China, my wife and I, those extraordinary, an extraordinary outpouring of democracy in the streets of Hong Kong and to see the result now is very disappointing for all of us. And we've been very clear about our views on the national security law on the repudiation of the rights of the people of Hong Kong.

You know, we have an active human rights agenda here. It concerns Hong Kong. It concerns Tibet. It concerns Xinjiang. It concerns the genocide against the Uyghur population. I met with over 150 American companies two days ago along with colleagues from Washington from the Department of Homeland Security and from our CPB officials in Washington. And we took the American companies through the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, passed by the Congress last December, signed by the president, which goes into effect next week on June 21st.

And we want to make sure that American companies understand that law, which is very specific and which sets a very high standard about making sure that anything produced or sold or transferred from Xinjiang to the rest of the world is not -- does not employ slave labor. It's a very high bar to prove that it isn't. And we really want -- we want and need the American business community to be fully understanding of that law and its requirements and we've got a week to go. We'll be meeting with more American businesses to go through that.

So, our human rights agenda here is part of our tradition, part of American interests in the world and values in the world. And you saw Secretary Blinken, the president, Jake Sullivan, and all of us have talked about how important that is.

MR. HASS: And how have the conversations on human rights evolved over time? Is it an issue that you're able to actively engage your counterparts on today?

MR. BURNS: We do. We don't come to any agreement. But we, you know, we're very specific. We talk about people who are being held unjustly. We talk about Americans who are being held unjustly. We talk about people on trial. We're very specific in terms of Tibet and Xinjiang and Hong Kong and others here in China who are being held, we think, unfairly. Detained, imprisoned for speaking their mind, exercising rights that most of the rest of the world are fully normal and rights that make life special. And those rights have disappeared here largely. So, this is an important part of our agenda.

MR. HASS: Yeah. We have a question from Joeson Cho, at California State University who asks if you see the current trendlines extending into the future and China becoming increasingly closed, or if this is a temporary aberration due to COVID related issues?

MR. BURNS: I think it's a very intelligent question. And it's a key question here. You know, another thing that Secretary Blinken has been saying is we're not seeking to decouple our economy to untangle it somehow the millions of threads of interaction from out of China. But we have seen China pull back. There's a big movement here led by the government for

sustainability, secure their own supply chains. President Xi has been saying that, you know, Chinese rice should be in Chinese rice bowls. Part of it is understandable. They want to have food security. That's understandable here. Just as we do. Other people around the world do.

Part of it, I think, is maybe a reaction to what they're seeing. Russia's paid a great penalty for what it's done in Ukraine in terms of the sanctions that the European Union, and Japan, and the United States, and many other countries have levied on Russia. And so, we see signs of the People's Republic government pulling back. That's for sure. There are areas where the United States for a long time if you think has not wanted to see continue. You think about the restrictions we've placed under CFIUS, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States over many administrations to restrict the ability of Chinese investors to invest in technologies or companies critical to our national security.

So, we're taking appropriate measures to rebuild some of our own supply chains. But in general, there's a lot of American trade with China in areas that don't impinge on our national security. I think if anyone in the relationship is pulling back, it might be the Chinese right now, the Chinese government. So, that is something to watch.

It's unclear to me, frankly, whether this is going to continue post-COVID. I think the government here understands that a lot of their wealth and future prosperity depends on interaction with the rest of the world. They're the world's largest manufacturer and largest exporter. And they're inextricably bound up with the rest of the world and they've made a lot of intelligent decisions over the last 20 years. We don't agree with all of those decisions but they've worked for China. And so, let's see. Let's see what they end up doing. But we're clear eyed about the challenge.

MR. HASS: Ambassador, you've mentioned several times during our time together that it's important for competition not to veer into conflict. We know that President Biden raised the importance of establishing guardrails during his previous interactions with President Xi.

How are those conversations developing?

MR. BURNS: Well, there's not a lot I can say, obviously, about those conversations. You'll appreciate that, Ryan. They're private conversations. We prefer to keep them private for the time being. But I can tell you that you heard Secretary Austin talk about it in his speech. You know that our National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, our Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, have been focused on that. They'll continue to be focused on it. I certainly am from my position here in Beijing. And it's important.

You know, we talk about competition. It doesn't mean confrontation. It doesn't mean collision. Far from it. We don't want that in this relationship. We want a peaceful, stable relationship. We have a lot of differences that need to be carried out. That's the competition part of it. But both of us have an interest in peace in this region and between us. And you've heard it from our president. We're clear eyed about our -- clear in his instructions to us that that's the kind of relationship that he wants us to help produce for the United States and we're determined to do that.

MR. HASS: We have a question from Kristin Shi-Kupfer from the University of Trier and her question is about the American dream. Does the American dream still have purchase in China? Is it still a source of inspiration on the ground in China?

MR. BURNS: Well, you know, it's hard to generalize it but it's a very good question. I thank you for it. It's hard to generalize about a country of 1.4 billion people. But, you know, my sense is, you know, we get out and talk to a lot of people here and we've got five different units of the four consulates and the embassy throughout a major part of the country here. I think, you know, getting beyond the competition here and the disagreements that we have government to government, I think there is a respect for the United States for what we've accomplished as a country. For our standard of living. For our successful economy. For, frankly, in private conversations, our democratic freedoms. For the way we acquit ourselves in the world.

And so, I think there's a window here where Americans, if we talk respectfully, they want to be respectful with the Chinese people and with the government too. You know, we can make some inroads to make sure that the Chinese people understand who we are. That's really why I went to Wuhan. Most of my interactions were with private Chinese in all walks of life. Business and students and meeting the bishop, the Catholic bishop of Wuhan, things like that. And just letting them know that we're for peace. And we're for a peaceful relationship. But, obviously, we're also going to stand up for American values and American interests. And I think people, you know, understand that.

It's hard for me to generalize because it's also a time of intense nationalism here. And it's fueling sometimes the self-confidence that we see and maybe even the aggressiveness of the Chinese government. And so, you know, we have to be mindful of that as well. But I think breaking through, connecting people to people, is a very important part of what we want to do in this country as guests.

MR. HASS: Well, ambassador, you've been incredibly generous with your time and your insights and your thoughts. I think that our audience has been enriched by the opportunity to hear your on the ground perspective. It's very clear to me the importance that you've associated with having self-confidence and a steady, principled, firm, clear approach to this relationship. And I just want to thank you for sharing your thoughts with us. I also want to give you the final word before we wrap up.

MR. BURNS: Well, the final word is to say thank you, Ryan, to you and thank you to everybody who joined this Webinar today. I just think we're on the right track in the administration's policy towards China. I think we're on the right track because it's a policy that is designed to last well into the future. If you think about investing in the country, building our alliances, competing with the People's Republic of China's government, and then engaging where we have to engage for our interests and global interests, this is a policy that we need to have for

this decade into the next decade. And if you have the framework right, and if you have goodwill on our side, and we do have goodwill on our side to be a productive partner, as well as a competitor, I think we've got the right ingredients for a long-term, successful, and effective strategy out here in this region. And so, we feel good about where we are, but we're also cognizant of many, many challenges ahead.

So, thank you, Ryan, for this. Thank you for your scholarship and, you know, I read what you write and value it very much. And I hope that when the COVID storms disappear, the clouds disappear, we'll see you out here.

MR. HASS: I look forward to that. Thank you so much, Ambassador Burns.

Good night.

MR. BURNS: Thank you, Ryan. Thank you.

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