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THE US CONGRESS AND NATIONAL SECURITY: A CONVERSATION WITH REP. ABIGAIL SPANBERGER

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OPENING REMARKS:

SUZANNE MALONEY
Vice President and Director, Foreign Policy, Brookings

DISCUSSION:

MELANIE W. SISSON (Moderator)
Fellow, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology, Brookings

MICHAEL E. O'HANLON (Moderator)
Senior Fellow and Director, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology
Philip H. Knight Chair in Defense and Strategy
Brookings

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER (D-VA)
Representative, United States Congress

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SUZANNE MALONEY: Good afternoon to all those who are joining us here in our Falk Auditorium, and to those around the world, good afternoon and good evening. I'm Suzanne Maloney and vice president and director of Foreign Policy here at the Brookings Institution. And I'm delighted to welcome you to this event today on the U.S. Congress and national security. As you all know, the U.S. Congress plays a vital role in shaping U.S. foreign and defense policy as the war in Ukraine enters its 14th month. Congress has appropriated $113 billion in support of Ukraine and has an important responsibility to shape America's posture and the ultimate outcome of the conflict. At the same time, the Congress has the ability to assess and respond to the pacing challenge that is China. Congress also ensures that the Department of Defense and the intelligence community are equipped to execute the national security and national defense strategies. All of these are monumental tasks in a normal time and in the current context, both political, economic and the partisan context. This is particularly essential and complicated.

Before I hand the microphone over to our moderators to discuss these challenges and approaches, please allow me to offer brief introductions of our featured guest and my Brookings colleagues. It's my great pleasure to welcome and introduce U.S. Representative Abigail Spanberger. Representative Spanberger represents the people of Virginia's seventh congressional district in the U.S. House of Representatives and has dedicated her career to public service. She served as a federal law enforcement officer, working narcotics and money laundering cases with the U.S. Postal Inspection Service before joining the Central Intelligence Agency as an undercover case officer. Collecting intelligence to keep our country safe and inform policymakers in their national security decisions. First elected to the House in 2018, Representative Spanberger serves on the U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and on the U.S. House Agriculture Committee. She's also a member of the Bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus and received the Hamilton Jefferson Hamilton Award for bipartisanship from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for her work across the aisle. Joining Representative Spanberger today are my two wonderful colleagues, Melanie Sisson and Michael O'Hanlon. Melanie is a fellow in the Foreign Policy program Strobe Talbott Center for Security Strategy and Technology, where she researches the use of the armed forces in international politics, U.S. national security, strategy and military applications of artificial Intelligence and emerging technologies. Melanie has served in academia and in the private sector. And in 2020, she published a book, along with Barry Blechman and James Gibbons, titled Military Coercion in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Use of Force Short of War. Mike O'Hanlon serves as the Philip H. Knight chair in defense and strategy as senior fellow and director of the Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy and Technology, and as director of research for the Foreign Policy program. He teaches at Columbia, Georgetown and George Washington universities and serves as a member of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board. His most recent book of many, Military History for the Modern Strategist, was published just this past January.

Finally, before we begin, I'd like to remind you that we're live streaming this event and we're on the record. Our panelists will be taking questions from the audience toward the end of our conversation today. For those of you who are joining virtually, please feel free to send your questions to events@brookings.edu. Thanks. And over to you. Mike and Melanie.

MICHAEL E. O'HANLON: -- and thank you and congresswoman, welcome to Brookings. It's really been a day we've looked forward to for a long time. And you're a great American leader already. And also from our more parochial purposes within the Strobe Talbott Center. You're a member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, and I

really want to begin this conversation by asking you some questions about that. But maybe, you know, because this is maybe your first visit to the Brookings stage, if I could ask everyone to join me in welcoming the congresswoman. And so I wanted to begin, if I could, before we bear down on some specific issues, and then Melanie will ask a few and then we'll go to the audience in the remainder of the hour. I wanted to ask your take on the overall state of U.S. intelligence today before we get into the more again, case by case, issue by issue areas. It's, ballpark, a 90 billion a year budget. And you can correct me in a second, because I know that the overall number is now unclassified, even though everything else about the details are handled by you and Congress and by the executive branch, people with clearances and it has many tens of thousands of personnel, we can deduce that from the unclassified reporting. And it has 18 different agencies doing remarkably important work across the world. But of course, there are always ups and downs back and forth. And I just wanted to ask you for your take on the overall state of U.S. intelligence today.

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: I think the overall state is very strong. We have agencies that are focused on collecting information, analyzing information, and informing lawmakers, policymakers, the president, our military leaders, our diplomatic leaders. And the information that they provide is incredibly valuable, incredibly valuable in assessing not just facts and information that they provide or information that they're able to gain, but also just to understand the nuances, the challenges, opportunities that exist throughout the world, and help guide some of what's happening in the policy space or in the administration. And there's incredible people who work within the intelligence community who every single day know that, you know, they're doing something to keep the nation safer, to keep keep our leaders informed. And, you know, they'll go through their careers and eventually one day retire and then eventually maybe one day tell folks. And that's the reality, I think, of a really proud workforce that does tremendously good work.

MICHAEL E. O'HANLON: I wanted to ask you next about process and structure. So Congress's role, certainly how you feel that is going, but also the structure of the ICI with the 18 agencies. You know, I'm old enough to remember testifying about how we should respond to 911 and that, you know, that that whole debate in the early 2000 led to the creation of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence that Avril Haines now heads. And we made other changes in that period, like the National Counterterrorism Center. Do you think we got it right in terms of structure and also in terms of process, how the executive branch communicates with Congress, how it asks Congress for advice, for budgets, for oversight? Any other comments? Sort of one level down in granularity? From my first question.

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: I think for related to your first question, in terms of did you get it right with the new structure or I guess it's not new anymore. But I think generally speaking, the answer to that from my perspective is yes, there's meant to be coordination, there's meant to be kind of a holistic view. And that was the purpose in creating the the role of the of the DNI. I think that the there's always, I think, areas where coordination can be improved upon. I mean, that's true in every single function of just about any anything. But I think the basic principle of trying to make sure that there's always movement of information across not just different agencies, but different agencies that at times have very different focuses and very different means of collecting the information that they're utilizing, that they're synthesizing and bringing that all together under the DNI structure. From my perspective, is is an important one. And now on the intelligence side. So as a former CIA officer, you know, that's the construct under which I worked. And so it's what I knew as an intel officer and now watching it on the other side or being part of it on the other side as a

member of the Intelligence Committee, I think it's interesting in terms of the relationships between the House Intel Committee, Gypsy and the DNI and various different agencies. I think the structure of oversight is a strong one. It's certainly a role that members of Congress, particularly those on the committee, take very, very seriously. And and, you know, I've now been on the committee just a few months, but certainly there is a lot of direct engagement that allows for us to ask really important questions, maintain that level of oversight, not just of each individual agency, but, you know, at times the ways that they're engaging with one another and then how they're working within that DNI structure.

MICHAEL E. O'HANLON: So I realize this next question about Ukraine is going to partly deal with a period of time before you are on the HP sky. But I'm curious about what the CIA and the intelligence community in general got right and wrong about Ukraine. I think it's fascinating to think about both because what they got right. Clearly, they've received a lot of praise, as they should have, I believe, and President Biden as well for sharing this is that they predicted the war. They saw the preparations and they prevented Vladimir Putin from being able to somehow do a false flag operation and claim that he was provoked or that Ukraine was responsible for the conflict when it broke out in February of last year, again, maybe before you were on the committee. But nonetheless, I know you were watching already and had a professional background already in this. What they got wrong. To my mind at least, was that they thought the war would be quick and maybe that was always a distinct possibility. And it was probably because of the CIA watching so carefully and equipping Bill Burns and President Biden with information that he could share, they could share with President Zelensky that made it harder for the Russians to overthrow Zelensky in those opening days. But nonetheless, it's sort of a pattern of warfare over the years that people think wars will be quick and then they usually aren't. So I'm still a little befuddled as to why the intelligence community was so confident that Russia would quickly defeat Ukraine. So those to me are the two big lessons, one good, one bad about how the ICI handled the war so far. And I guess the third big piece is how much we're helping Ukraine tactically and operationally, knowing more about Russian movements, Russian general positions, at least even if we're not doing the actual targeting ourselves. So I wondered if you shared my assessment and broad brush and anything else you'd want to add about how the intelligence community has handled the Ukraine crisis and conflicts so far.

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: And so, as you mentioned, this was before I was on the Intelligence Committee, but this was at this point in time, members of Congress, across the board, were getting briefings related to the intelligence that we had regarding at the time of potential invasion of Ukraine. I also served on the Foreign Affairs Committee. And so we were getting a number of classified briefings as well. The different the difference being on the the House Foreign Affairs Committee. This is the information. This is what we know now on the Intel committee. It's a little bit more granular. I think it's really extraordinary what the administration chose to do with the release of some intelligence. Certainly, as a former intelligence officer, I was very, very surprised that that decision was made. I think it was an important strategic choice to get ahead of Vladimir Putin being able to create and carry on some false leg effort. I think it was also incredibly valuable in getting our partners and allies to understand the reality of how close, again, at that time we were to seeing Russia invade Ukraine. There was not a single briefing that I ever attended where there was ever doubt it was This will happen. It's a matter of one, essentially. And I think the level of seriousness, the level of clarity that they had in their reporting, in their analysis, is incredibly noteworthy. And and certainly I applaud every person kind of across the board who helped to put together those analytical assessments so that people really had a strong understanding so that we could help our Ukrainian partners, we could help

our our NATO's allies and others really understand what was about to happen at that time. I speak to the question about sort of what was wrong. You know, I won't even speak necessarily to actual intelligence assessments. I think there was if even if it was like the information that people were consuming, be it in the news, be it in kind of overall discussions, what was being discussed and assessed overall, separate from, you know, granular intelligence reports, was that this probably would be quick. And I have questioned how much of kind of a residual worry lived in the back of people's minds after Afghanistan. Certainly Afghanistan fell to the Taliban far faster than had been the the general assessment. And so I think even just in general conversation there adjacent to or at least in the halls of Congress, there was this overcorrection in worry about whether or not where we were going to see the same thing. And so I think that generally speaking, at least within the halls of Congress, there was some surprise that the Ukrainians I mean, now it's been more than a year that the Ukrainians continue to fight for their freedom so courageously and did so from the very, very beginning. And so watching how the intelligence community has been vital to our understanding of what's happening, I think has been really impressive as a member of Congress and certainly someone with oversight capacity right now. But then also, you know, as an American, proud of the ways that we've been working with and engaging with our allies, making sure that they were understanding, I think that was the biggest crux of what we really did very, very well at the beginning, is making sure everyone understood just how clear the intelligence was. This is going to happen. And then. Ultimately that we, you know, could bring people together in support of our Ukrainian allies.

MICHAEL E. O'HANLON: I know it's early days for you still on the committee, but I wanted to ask your sense of the dynamics. And, you know, it's a time when and I'm a former CBO staffer, so I'm proud of Congress and not everybody is. And so I wanted to I wanted to give you a chance to give your early impressions about to what extent your colleagues, you know, work hard on these problems at the House Permanent Select Committee and also how bipartisanship or lack thereof, but hopefully decent bipartisanship exemplifies itself and manifests itself. What are your first impressions?

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: I mean, my first impressions are very strong. Notably at our very first meeting. Speaker McCarthy and Leader Jeffries attended for the beginning of our meeting. Both spoke from the same sheet of music, talking about the purpose of the committee, the value of the committee, their expectations of the committee and certainly the chair and the ranking member of the committee have been very clear in their desire to have a committee that just does the work that it is meant to be doing that is, in fact endeavoring to kind of pull back to a place of bipartisanship and functionality and do the work that the American people need us to do. American national security priorities need us to do. And frankly, the work that we owe it to the intelligence community for us to be doing. And so far, I have been impressed. And I can say for anyone worried that, you know, maybe this behind closed doors, this isn't real. Behind closed doors it is. And so even in terms of some of the the visits and some of the briefings that we've been doing and will be doing, there's a major emphasis on making sure that all of the perspectives and that would be members who have been on the committee for longer, or certainly members from both parties are present at various different events and briefings and visits and the like. So it's I've been impressed and pleased to see that the commitment is really fulsome.

MICHAEL E. O'HANLON: So I just got one more question before handing off to Melanie, who I know has questions on everything from China to perhaps the recent disclosures from the airmen in Massachusetts to whatever else she's going to ask about. And I'm sure you all have good questions, too. But my last question is sort of still along these lines of

the people's side of things. And with your background at the CIA and in the executive branch as well as now in Congress, I wonder with a C-SPAN audience watching if you have a message to younger folks who might be thinking about careers as to whether the intelligence community is something they should consider, because a lot of times we hear about, you know, people are getting so down on Washington and the government that it's sometimes rare to hear anybody give a word of encouragement. And if you wanted to do that, I wanted to give you the opportunity.

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: Oh, I'm happy to take that opportunity. Speaking directly to the camera, young people out there, you know, the intelligence community is an extraordinary place. It's a place where you get to have the ability to answer some of the toughest questions and inform people that are making, you know, really important decisions. It's an opportunity to have adventures and to travel and to learn about people and places and their relevance to our country and our national security in a way that is so incredibly unique. It's a place where people are driven by mission. And so you can have a roomful of people of various different backgrounds and various different experiences, and you're united in this belief in something greater than yourself. It's an extraordinary career. You know, I was with CIA, but I think that generally applies to any of the other agencies. And so I would encourage anyone to recognize and and, you know, to see just there's just an extraordinary opportunity that exists in the intelligence community, whether, you know, again, CIA and the other agencies, but analyzing information, collecting information, being a practitioner or an analyst, all of the different career tracks, there are so many. And so certainly for any students out there, look at the co-op programs or the internship programs, it's such an incredible way to get a real feel for whether or not that life, because it is a complicated life, especially if you're living undercover. There's know a weird element at times to the life and to the way it impacts other things. But it's it's absolutely an incredible way to serve your country. And so I certainly recommend it.

MICHAEL E. O'HANLON: Thank you. Melanie, over to you.

MELANIE W. SISSON: Thanks very much, Mike and Suzanne. And Representative, it really is a delight to have you. Thanks so much for joining us. In her introduction, I think Suzanne admitted just one of the groups that you've been affiliated with since you're joining Congress. And it's. The badass women in security, I believe, and I'll just say that I am all in favor of bad in national security, but I'm especially in favor of women in national security. So I appreciate all of your encouragement to the next generation coming up as well. Mike did allude to the recent intelligence intelligence breaches. I haven't checked the news in the last 30 minutes, so I don't have all of the latest on what is still a very much in progress situation. I would, though, if you're interested, invite you to share how it is that you think about those events and how we as recipients in the public watching information come out about what happened and why. If you can help us to think about and to understand the breach.

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: Yeah. So I would begin by saying it's sort of at the most basic and straightforward levels. Dissemination or leaks of classified information are always detrimental to our national security if and for a whole host of reasons. First and foremost, the information that is leaked may indicate sources, methods, ways that the United States collects information, people who might have facilitated the collection of information. And that's kind of the most basic foundation, a very real reality that somebody somewhere might have put their life on the line in order to be able to inform the United States, in order to be able to ensure that our policymakers or our military or our, you know, the White House were able to make good decisions. And so the release of information at times can

put those people at risk. Additionally, you know, in this particular case, the leak provides information related to ongoing military actions and can, you know, certainly be detrimental that now Russia, Ukraine, other nations know the scope of what it is that we do or do not know, or at least what was in the information that was released. And it can also have just an overall impact on relationships. How challenging is it for Ukrainians fighting every day on the battlefield to know what information might now be out there that now they know the Russians have? And certainly there's also the reality that it can be challenging even for members of the Intelligence Committee or not the committee community, to kind of feel the weight of what happens when this information gets leaked out. And I think then, you know, certainly regardless and this is why I go back to my first comment, it's always bad to have leaks because as we start hearing people potentially trying to explain away, well, perhaps this wasn't this important or perhaps it was this or perhaps it was that or some of it we've already seen reported in the news. Any efforts that someone might undertake to downgrade or kind of put in some sort of lessened category, this particular leak, bless you, creates the potential, I think, risk that somebody else will say, no, it's not. You know, then people start categorizing information themselves. Well, this is the really classified stuff. This feels less classified. Right. The bottom line is it's all classified. And it's not up to those who are tasked with protecting that information to choose what they think is, you know, the information that they should guard with their lives versus information they should put online to curry favor. I think it also speaks to the very reality of what sort of ongoing counterintelligence efforts are occurring. And so when I'm thinking about, you know, the gravity of this leak, the beginning part of my comments is sort of how I look at it, like why it's always bad, why it's problematic. But then now, as a member of the Intelligence Committee looking forward, how do you identify the gravity of the leak? Because there are actual kind of real impacts with our partners, with our allies, potentially, you know, steps we might have to take to protect sources and methods. But but then there's also looking at how did this happen? How is it that some young man was able to take this information out of a secure facility? Did he have access to information he needed to have access to? And were there any ongoing counterintelligence efforts within his line of command that would look for suitability or vulnerabilities that he might have? And so certainly, as we learn more and more about this individual, it looks as though he openly expressed, at least in his online communities, opinions about the United States government that might have run contrary to him being able to obtain a security clearance. And so, you know, understanding all of the cracks or challenges within. The process by which he got a security clearance is one element of a series of questions I have. Then were there any flags once he was on the job from a where they were reviewing people within his unit? I mean, as a former CIA officer, we used to do polygraphs, regularly updated background checks regularly. Many things were in place to make sure that, you know, just because you received the the background check and the security clearance when you first started to make sure that along the way you still are in the role and appropriately behaving and handling the classified information that you have. So there are so many questions. And so I think anyone looking at this, I think it's there are so many questions about how this could have happened. And that should inform what sort of reforms or adjustments need to be taken in the future. And some of them will be kind of intelligence agency to intelligence agency, independent, because, you know, that's another issue is that not all organizations handle things the same, and that's a function of of how they work, but also where there are strong safeguards in place in one particular area, maybe perhaps making sure that those lessons learned or those safeguards can be applied elsewhere is something that we might need to institute in the future.

MELANIE W. SISSON: Thank you. That's a really helpful way to put the entirety in context and not just approach it from one angle. So thanks for that really thoughtful response. One

last question about your experience in the intelligence community and now in particular being on the other side on the Hill. What does good oversight of the intelligence community look like? And do you think that the community and the agencies in it and the Hill share that perspective? Are they aligned on what they think good oversight looks like?

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: Whether or not they're aligned on what good oversight oversight looks like. I'm not. I can't 100% answer that question. I think the answer is yes. But based on my assessment, they may not like that, but I think good oversight means that we're on the House intel side or my counterparts in the Senate that were pushing back and asking questions, Well, why are you doing this? Why are you spending this? Why is this important? Tell me about this. What's it like in the workforce? What are your attrition rates? What are your right questions? Questions, questions? And I think that in a healthy oversight standpoint, we're asking those questions because we want the intelligence community to be its strongest, be its best, attract the best, maintain the best, do incredibly good work, protect our people, you know, be a leader on the global stage and be strong protectors of the information that our allies and partners share with us, kind of all of those things. And so the questions that we should be asking and I think this is where we are right now at this current day, is aggressively making sure that. That that is that good decisions are being made and asking detailed questions because if you're doing the right thing, you should be able to withstand and answer those questions. And I do think and certainly this is something I learned in the intelligence community and the intelligence community, you can always like do something better. When I would go out before I would go meet with an asset, I could sit down with my chief of operations or other folks from my office, and I'd say, okay, what are you going to do? Well, this is my plan. This is how I'm going to do it. Or what if this. Well, what if that. Right. Like they used to try and shoot holes in my argument. Because then you think things through. If somebody else brings their perspective and challenges you, then, you know, perhaps you either make a stronger plan or perhaps you feel better and stronger knowing that, okay, when questioned, what I plan to do is indeed the right steps forward. So I think that kind of uniquely the intelligence community writ large is at least, you know, and speaking specific to my experience with CIA. There is a lot of questioning that happens within the agency as a way to make sure that you're always making good decisions or executing things well. So I think that some of the folks who come before hep-C are used to doing that in their kind of regular day to day function. But it should be a productive circumstance. And, you know, frankly, I think bad oversight or less than optimal oversight would come when members of the House just think, okay, like, oh, the Intelligence Committee, That's yeah, that's cool. So what are you guys doing over? Okay, keep going. Right. Like we're supposed to say, well, why? Why, how? And so far, that is routinely what I have seen in a productive, professional manner.

MELANIE W. SISSON: That's encouraging. You know, you have a very strong background in national security broadly, not just intelligence. And so let's talk a little bit about the national security environment today. Obviously, there is a lot of concern in Washington, D.C. and in other places as well about the People's Republic of China, activity in the Western Pacific. But beyond that, and broadly construed, there's a conversation ongoing about American competitiveness in the international environment. What do you think that the United States can and should do here at home? What domestic initiatives can we undertake that would be important to enhancing our ability to compete in the international environment?

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: So just last week I had a farm bill summit in my district where we had more than 100 different representatives, many of them producers and growers in my district, to others representing particular industries, soybean, cattle, etc.. And I was

speaking with a farmer who was saying, you know, a large amount of our product goes to China and I'm always watching on TV. Everyone's, you know, looking at all these challenges we face with China. So what are we doing to make sure that we have other markets? Because, you know, he's saying I can't expand market access on my own for the products that I'm selling. Like, what's happening to make sure that we're expanding beyond China being such a primary buyer of the product, I grow. And it was really interesting because he essentially, through his question, was in some ways answering yours, which is diversification. Right. I think that I am of the opinion that we should take a strong stance as it relates to China. I think we should recognize that China is investing in expanding in various places throughout the world. Certainly, everyone loves to talk about investments in Africa with Belt Road initiatives, investments in Central and South America. And at times, it seems like some policymakers want to talk about those things and say that's a problem. That's a problem. That's a problem. Well, what are we doing in terms of our aid dollars, in terms of our economic investments, in terms of, you know, through the Foreign Commercial office, through Department of, you know, various different departments, state Commerce, etc., helping other American companies either diversify where they make investments or importantly, where American products are going. Because as this farmer so correctly noted, he's heavily dependent on whether or not a particular country chooses to buy the product that he farms. And within the construct of what we're working on on Capitol Hill. If we are going to say we have this challenging level of competitiveness with China, then we should be thinking about and then we do X. It can't just be. Therefore we're cranky about China, right? It has to be. And therefore we do. X I do a lot of work in the pharmaceutical supply chain space, and certainly after COVID, we should be aware that we have certain real challenges within our supply chain. Right? We could not get PPE, nasal pharyngeal swabs and 95 masks because some of them are almost exclusively sourced to China, especially in 95 masks for a time. And so we started diversifying. We started having production in my district as well, localized production of a 95 mask. Fantastic. But what we haven't talked about, I talk about it, but on the national stage, you know, prescription drug sourcing back to China, back to India now. And some of this is an element of, okay, so we have some at times hard conversations or difficult relationships with China, but also, as we saw during a global pandemic, what happens when commerce just gets shut down, not because of any geopolitical issue, but indeed because of, in this case, a pandemic. And so what the pandemic should have shown us, and certainly I think many of us, this was a takeaway for us. Diversification of supply chains is incredibly important, not just in case of challenging relationships with, you know, political rivals, but also because it allows us to expand our engagement and expand our diplomatic ties, our economic ties. And it also creates resiliency in important supply chains like penicillin and basic pharmaceuticals that otherwise might be disrupted, you know, both because of a pandemic or because of the challenges that we might face in the future. And so I think that those are the kind of general answers I would give to your question. I think that also even, you know, I am routinely talking about how we can be more competitive or how we can be clear eyed about the competitiveness that we should have with China. And I think that some people jump that to like. A position where there's no nuance, a position where it's okay, we have a tough relationship with China. And so they just sort of like throw up the blinders. So we're not going to deal with China. Well, that's not possible. And in fact, that's not the way that we can either keep it steady or stay. That's not the way that we can make sure that we're not in some sort of escalating without intentionality. Right. Because circumstance. And so I think that at times there can be very reductive conversations occurring about how we can be competitive with China. But, you know, the answer is really, from my perspective, engagement economically throughout the world, U.S. foreign aid throughout the world, and a clear eyed view of why it is that China is making the investments and the diplomatic advances that they are. And, you know, we

should endeavor to not leave any spaces open. Right. Because if we're not there, somebody else will be. And if we don't like that, you know, China's openings entering spaces and making major investments in Africa and kind of taking strength in those relationships, then we should take a full eyed view of the places that we are making and investments and diplomatic engagements, etcetera.

MELANIE W. SISSON: So I understand that you voted in favor of the new special committee on China. What are your hopes for that committee? What would you like to see it do? What would you like to see come out of it?

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: And I voted in favor of this committee. And I will say one of the things I was pleased about is that it was made clear who was going to lead that committee before the committee was even created. Because I do think that there's a world in which a committee led under certain counterparts that I work with could have had that. There's a world in which that committee could have been in a not a serious endeavor focused on unserious issues. But Mike Gallagher, a Republican member of Congress, who, while I may disagree with him on a variety of different things, is very serious, very focused, very thoughtful. And I think that his leadership of that committee, generally speaking, is intended to be purposeful in examining many of the questions that I kind of discussed in my earlier answer. And so what I want to see that committee do is continuing on the path that it's on. I think both sides of the aisle, Democrats and Republicans, appointed very thoughtful members to that committee. That committee was not, from my perspective, created to be one of these lightning rod committees. And there are some committees right now that are lightning rod committees. Certainly, we see that today with the Judiciary Committee in New York. But my hope and expectation of that committee is that they will look at questions of U.S. competitiveness through the lens of we see what China's doing on the world stage. What's the United States doing on the world stage? Are there challenges that we face because of Chinese engagement throughout the world? Are there things that we could be doing to strengthen our diplomatic relations or our economic relations in various places throughout the world? And I think that that committee is doing the important work of kind of looking for places where we could strengthen ourselves, which I think importantly is something that we should always be doing. The fact that they're doing it kind of through the lens of what's our competitiveness, what are our supply chains looking like is I think it's a valuable endeavor. And I think that so far the committee has been functioning in a way that I think is meant to be really productive at a time when we do have challenging relationships with with China and particularly with the Communist Party.

MELANIE W. SISSON: Well, I'm going to ask one last question and then we'll turn it to the audience. So I'm sure they already have many questions ready. But just so you know, you're almost up. So if you've been scratching notes, now's a good time to refresh yourself on what it is that you'd like to ask, Representative. You know, you when you ran for Congress, it didn't seem that you ran. And largely for purposes of engaging in national security, in foreign policy, those weren't the galvanizing interests. I'm sure they were always present, but they don't seem to have been the things that really pushed you to want to to take on this role since you've arrived to the Hill. How do you now think about the balance of priorities of priority, or how do you work with prioritizing Congress's important roles and responsibilities in domestic politics and foreign policy and how those wax and wane together? And if you see an increasing convergence, that's a lot of questions all in one. But about generally speaking, you know, how do you manage? All of the different facets of these policies and their intersections.

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: So when I first started or when I was campaigning along the way, frequently on the campaign trail, people would say, Well, what committees do you want to serve on? In my answer at the time, and luckily I got on the committees I wanted was I want to serve on the Agriculture Committee because my district is majority agricultural and landmass and and it's know ag is the number one private industry within Virginia. And then I went to serve on the Foreign Affairs Committee because I have a background in national security. So one is a question of how can I bring my constituents voices to Capitol Hill and how can I advocate best for things that matter to my district? And then as long as I'm on Capitol Hill representing what's a skill set that I can bring and best utilize my skill set on Capitol Hill. So that was the balance of why I was interested in foreign affairs and agriculture. And now I'm on the Intel Committee in Agriculture for that same purpose of a balance. And so what I have found is, while not always top of mind, issues of national security are important in my district. Certainly when I was running, that was about the same time that we started United States started a trade war with China. And I have a lot of soy soybean farmers in my district. And so the impact on them was tremendous. And so even in a space where not immediately and not immediately of a top of mind foreign affairs related issue, you know, out in some parts of my district, they were talking about trade relations with China when maybe in my more populated suburban areas, it wasn't kind of within their frame. And so it's been interesting, certainly along the way to see what issues of national security or foreign policy do percolate up in my district. I also have a little bit of a unique district compared to maybe some of my colleagues from other places in that I represent a lot of people who at one point in time either currently or, as you know, are now retired, have served in the intelligence community, have served in the diplomatic corps, have worked kind of in the space surrounding it, or are active duty or active duty military or veterans. And so issues of national security, issues of foreign policy are very personal at times to folks in my district. And and so I think that there's also of never and I can't compare it to other people's districts, but certainly I hear about issues of national security or foreign policy within my district. And so, you know, between constituents who have served in the space issues that always matter. And then, frankly, I have many newer Americans who still have ties to their countries of origin, large diaspora communities. And so at times some of the foreign policy issues are people will come to me concerned about their friends or relatives or people they grew up with, you know, in their country of origin who are facing, you know, particular challenges, be it natural disasters that have impacted them or government oppression, etc.. And so some of the work that I do related to human rights or even some of the immigration related policy, like TPS links back to diaspora communities within our district, that while very proud Americans are very close to some of the challenges that still are ongoing in their countries of origin.

MELANIE W. SISSON: Well, thank you. I now would like to turn the microphone over to members of our audience to ask some questions. There's a a young woman up here and a black and white dress. There's a microphone coming to you, and I'd ask you to keep your questions brief. So I will put a little bit of a timer on you to make sure that we give the representative the full benefit of time to respond. So please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. Thanks. This is Daniella Breslow with the Wall Street Journal. Congresswoman, when you look at the discord leaks, what does it say about intelligence sharing following the 911 Commission, the new arrangement or fairly new since then? What would you do now? And a second question. Any thoughts on how to get through the debt ceiling impasse in a bipartisan way?

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: So as it relates to the leaks. I will probably have a far more fulsome answer for you in coming weeks. I think at this point in time, still understanding

how these leaks occurred, how they went undetected, how this man had such a variety of information that he was able to leak. I want to get answers to those first before kind of making any prescriptions or suggestions as to what changes need to be occurring within our our own processes. But I think you brought up in your question an important element of it, which is, you know, this is really challenging for our allies and partners who are, you know, many of whom might have provided some of the information that's been leaked out. So in my conversations with the administration. They have been aggressive in doing outreach to our allies. That might have been the source of some of the information or allies that might fear that their information could get leaked to make sure that that they know the seriousness with which we are or they, the administration folks are looking at this. But I think I will have far more finite ideas and assessments on this as we move forward and see how this might have occurred. As for the debt ceiling, I think there's there's two separate pieces. The Wall Street Journal said, I don't have to tell you, you know, debt ceiling is an issue of paying our bills. We should be having important conversations about our spending moving forward that can occur through the budget and the Appropriations Committee. Those conversations can happen in tandem or complementary. But I think it's incredibly dangerous to hold, you know, the nation and our economic stability hostage for the purposes of, you know, forcing certain appropriations or budget related changes or cuts. The. I'm a member of the Bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus, and we've been working on developing a bipartisan framework that will be ideally and I know this is on the record, so I hope I'm correct in this information, ideally pushing out very soon meant to be a framework to help continue the conversations. And, you know, we've we've done a lot of internal work, Democrats and Republicans, about how do we move forward with the immediacy of needing to address the debt ceiling, but then long term, in a way where, you know, anyone, Democrat or Republican, who's focused on long term fiscal issues, how do we set up the framework where we can have that conversation outside of this political brinksmanship? That's certainly not good for anyone, but particularly not the American people.

MELANIE W. SISSON: See, there's a gentleman green jacket, it looks like. Right over there. Yep. That's you, sir.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: During the Cold War, the United States sponsored programs such as Radio Free Europe and Voice of America that seemed to be very effective in getting a different point of view to the Russian public. Is there anything similar going on now?

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: So the United States still maintains educational, and this is kind of out there publicly educational efforts to kind of bring information to a foreign audience. The challenge, very realistically speaking, is the fact that. In an age of 24 hour digestible news, some of which am not air quoting Voice of America. I'm air quoting like Facebook and Twitter and things, information that might be viewed as news where it's so easy to push out disinformation and it's so easy to just try, you know, certainly American sourced news information kind of to the United States. I think that we continue to see challenges in a different way than at the Cold War time frame in terms of making sure that the target audiences we would want to see or the target audiences that we want to have that information available to them. There are a lot of preventative efforts occurring so that, you know, once there's the US hand is clear, people don't necessarily take it. They may not be taking it as objective news sources because there's been a lot of efforts, particularly as it relates to Russia, to undermine the legitimacy of American news and American sourced information.

MELANIE W. SISSON: There's a gentleman in the back part of this back right there. You got him.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Congresswoman, I wanted to ask, in the context of the Russia Ukraine conflict, there are people on both sides of the aisle who have called for increased pressure on the Ukrainians to negotiate some kind of an outcome, even though it's the only feasible way, at least as of now, for there to be an outcome would be for the Ukrainians to cede part of their territory. What would you say to your colleagues on both sides of the aisle who kind of advocate for that? And what is your position on increased funding and more military support for Ukrainians such as F-16s and or long range precision munitions?

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: So I'll just change your question slightly. What have I actually said to colleagues who hold this opinion as opposed to what would I because I have had these conversations? Ukrainians are the ones who are on the battlefield every single day fighting for their freedom. It is their country. It is their democracy, is their the fight for their very existence that is happening on that battlefield. And it's up to the Ukrainians for them to determine and decide what the constraints of going to the negotiating table, what a negotiation looks like, what they are willing to give up or not give up. And that is wholly up to them to decide. The United States should always be very clear that at any point in time, if they want us to help negotiate, we're there. If they want us to help create parameters for a negotiation, we're there. But that should only be in a scenario in which they are asking for that. I don't think it's appropriate for American legislators to say, Well, you can just lose this part of your country. That should be fine, and certainly not ever something that they would accept if the idea of like, well, we'll just lop off these few states, that's fine is great. Like, and once you relay it in that sort of way, how, how very silly it sounds. Makes sense. I think there's differences certainly on the Democratic side of the aisle. Some of the desire to see this end as a desire to see war end certainly on the far right side. It is a more of an isolationist view at times, even a pro-Putin view, not across the board, but certainly there are some elements who are pushing Putin's talking points. But in any case, the idea that we would decide for the Ukrainians when enough is enough is is not appropriate. And, you know, frankly speaking, some of my Democratic colleagues put out a letter a number of months back. And when some of us said, let me, you know, let us walk through why this is really problematic, you know, they they pulled back their letter and were very clear in sort of pulling back from that position. So, you know, I think that sometimes just having those conversations, again, there are some differences, but particularly on the Democratic side of the aisle, just saying, even though you want it to be over, as long as they're fighting, we have to we have to be there. Supporting them is usually a conversation that people are very amenable to having. In terms of what I support. I support giving the Ukrainians anything that they need to win this war, and that includes F-16s. I've been very clear on that. I think that we have saw in the very early days what I don't think this is true in the very early days. You know, the administration and I think rightly so, was hesitant about kind of what's the point in time when we might do something that would trigger Article five? But we are at the point now where we are continuing our support, they are continuing their fight, and we have increased the scope and the size and the type of support that we are either giving directly or we are facilitating the transfer of. And at this point in time, I think that we should have a very clear view of the fact that the Ukrainians are doing the hard work of fighting. They're an incredibly motivated military force and very talented and dedicated and and have made really good use of it sounds terrible the good use of what we have provided them. And so I think that we should make sure that they have the tools that they need to win this war.

MELANIE W. SISSON: Let's go to the gentleman here in the tan jacket, please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. Thank you, Congresswoman, for sharing your insights. Have I have a question also related to the leaks? So it also revealed, allegedly that the United States is still continuing the conduct of eavesdropping on its allies. And I'm wondering, what is your comment on those allegations and if they are true? How do you think America should explain to your allies and how to suit their concerns? Thank you.

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: I'm not going to comment on anything specifically that was leaked because doing so would be commenting on something that is classified. And so I won't comment on any specifics, but I will say that I think the administration has done a good job and needs to continue the work of outreach to our allies about our commitment to safeguarding the information that we collect and our commitment to safeguarding the information that they collect and provide to us under any circumstances.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Let's take another question, please. I think there's a young lady in the back and a denim shirt there. Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, Congressman. My name is Laurel Schwartz. I recently returned from Beijing, where I was the principal of Canadian Chinese schools, and I'm a columnist for the China Project NCAA.com. There has been a lot of conversation in this town about what should not be happening with China and what China should not be doing. What would success look like vis a vis our bilateral relationship with China?

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: I think that and this is my perspective, others may or may not share it, but I think our success would look like a strong US purpose and function of making investments and engagements throughout the world so that when we are looking at a China that's doing that, that we are the partner of choice, that we are trusted on the world stage, that we are a world leader in so many ways, be it economically and human rights matters in the strength of democracy, so that when there are countries that are on potentially the receiving end of Chinese investments, that they might make economic choices. But ultimately they're not doubting whether or not they have to choose, do we pivot towards China or do we pivot towards the United States? We should be in a position where investments with engagements with China might be a choice that they make, but that very kind of depth and foundation of our strength as a as a leader in democracy issues, human rights issues, economic investments, diplomatic trustworthiness, etc., that that's never in doubt. And so I think that how you create that is by making sure that we're building up resiliency in our supply chain so that we don't necessarily, from an American perspective, have worries that, you know, we are facing any challenges because, you know, China is the sole provider or the sole vendor of X or that we are in this constant sort of back and forth. I think it's you know, there's always going to be competitiveness on the global stage, but it needs to be in a healthy, stable place where we are coming at it from a point of intellectual or diplomatic strength as opposed to like a real concerted worry because we may not be making the sorts of investments or diplomatic relationships or economic choices that that would allow us that position of strength.

MELANIE W. SISSON: Well, unfortunately, we are out of time, out of respect for your schedule today. We'll have to leave it there. I really want to thank the Brookings audience both here and virtually for joining this conversation. And on behalf of the Brookings Institution, please join me in thanking Representative Spanberger very much for joining us today. Yeah. We certainly hope you'll come back. And and to the Brookings audience,

please remember to check the events page so that you can continue to join us for really wonderful conversations just like these. Thank you all and have a wonderful night.

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER: Thank you.