THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

SAUL ROOM

THE UNITED STATES, CHINA, AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Tuesday, June 3, 2025

INTRODUCTION

SUZANNE MALONEY
Vice President and Director, Foreign Policy, Brookings

FEATURED SPEAKER

R. NICHOLAS BURNS
Roy and Barbara Goodman Family Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Relations, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University
Former U.S. Ambassador to the People's Republic of China, NATO

MODERATORS

JONATHAN A. CZIN
Michael H. Armacost Chair in Foreign Policy Studies and Fellow, John L. Thornton China Center, Brookings

PATRICIA M. KIM
Fellow, John L. Thornton China Center, Brookings

* * * * *

MALONEY: Good afternoon. I'm Suzanne Maloney, vice president and director of Foreign Policy here at the Brookings Institution and I am delighted to welcome you to today's event on the United States, China, and the war in Ukraine, featuring a fireside chat with Ambassador Nicholas Burns, who has served in many important roles, but particularly as US ambassador to Beijing, as well as Washington's envoy to NATO. Ambassador Burns, welcome back to Brookings.

Today's discussion will examine how the United States and China might influence the trajectory of the war in Ukraine, and more broadly, how Washington and Beijing can navigate rising strategic tensions. Our conversation here is part of a series on rivals and responders in our Global China project, which focuses on how the United States and China intersect around global crisis management. Before we begin, let me please introduce our featured speaker today. Ambassador Burns is the Roy and Barbara Goodman Family Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Relations at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Until January of this year, he served as the US ambassador to the People's Republic of China since 2021, where he led public servants from 48 US government agencies and oversaw the full range of policy issues, shaping one of the most critical bilateral relationships. Over the course of his truly distinguished career, Ambassador Burns has served six presidents and nine secretaries of state in crucial roles. A few of the many highlights include his service at the National Security Council at the end of the Cold War, first as director of Soviet affairs under President George H.W. Bush, and later as senior director for Russia-Ukraine and Eurasian Affairs, and special assistant to President Clinton. He later served as U.S. ambassador to Greece and to NATO as undersecretary of political affairs at the State Department during the George W. Bush administration. Ambassador Burns, it's really an honor to have you here with us today, and we're all really looking forward to your remarks.

Let me also briefly introduce our colleagues who will be moderating the discussion. Jon Czin is the Michael H. Armacost chair at Brookings Foreign Policy and a fellow in the John L. Thornton China Center. He is a former member of the senior analytics service at the CIA where he was one of the intelligence community's top China experts. Dr. Patricia Kim is a fellow with a joint appointment in Brookings China Center and our Center for Asia Policy Studies. Pattie has just completed a book manuscript on Chinese foreign policy, and she co-leads our Global China project. I'd like to thank the Ford Foundation, who has made this event and our Global China project possible. As with all of our supporters, the Ford Foundation respects Brookings' absolute commitment to scholarly independence, and this event reflects only the views of the speakers themselves. A final reminder that we are streaming live and on the record. Please send questions by email to events at brookings.edu or via social media using the hashtag globalchina. A Q&A session will conclude the event, and staff will come around the room with microphones. Thank you so much for joining us here, Ambassador Burns and Pattie and John. The floor is now yours.

KIM: Great, Suzanne, thank you for that introduction. Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Pattie Kim, and I'm delighted to be moderating this event along with my colleague, Jon Czin. Ambassador Burns, it's a real privilege to welcome you back to the Brookings stage. We last had you here in December 2023, when I moderated a fireside with you and my colleague Ryan Hass, and this was a few weeks after the Woodside Summit. And a lot has happened in the U.S.-China relationship since then and across the broader international stage. And so it's a real privilege to have you back here today to discuss the state of U. S.-China relations with a specific focus on how it relates to the conflict, the war that's going on in Ukraine. As folks know, the Ukraine war is dragging on well past its third year. Efforts to end the conflict have stalled. Just yesterday we saw

Moscow and Kyiv meet in Turkey for their second round of bilateral talks following major Ukrainian drone strikes on Russia. But it seems like the conflict is set to perhaps intensify rather than de-escalate over the coming weeks and months. And amid these developments, China continues to position itself as a neutral player. Beijing has said that it supports a peace deal, that the two sides are, that agreed to. But at the same time it's not really directly involved in negotiations to end the war and Beijing remains a key partner to Moscow and so in light of these developments, perhaps we could start the conversation, ambassador, by getting your sense of where, you know how do you assess China's role in the war in Ukraine so far. And what would you say are the strategic risks and the potential benefits if the war continues to drag on for China or if it comes to a resolution?

BURNS: Thanks for the softball questions. Appreciate it. Pattie, thank you. And Jon, thank you. I'm really delighted to be back at Brookings with two friends and two people I admire very much. I'm looking forward to a good conversation. I wanted just to say I've worked with Suzanne for a long time. And I can't help but remember in 2005 and 2006 at the State Department when we were being led by Secretary Condi Rice and we really had a sense that we might make a breakthrough with the Iranians. We formed the P5 plus Germany group. We began to try to talk to the Iranians. We hadn't had a relationship with them since November 4, 1979, when they took over our embassy, when they imprisoned our diplomats for 444 days. You can see it's right there. And then those dreams were dashed. I thought we put our best foot forward, but the Iranians never could make the key decisions to get us there. But I wanted to pay tribute to Suzanne. She's a tremendous, tremendous analyst, historian, interpreter of the Islamic regime in Iran, and so really great to be with you as well, and with Mike O'Hanlon, my friend of long standing.

So, China, and Russia, and Ukraine. I don't think the Chinese have ever been serious about being a mediator or an honest broker. They haven't developed a peace plan worth its name. And I think, you know, despite their protestations publicly and to me, when in my million conversations with them about this subject, they're not neutral. They're in Russia's corner, diplomatically, economically, and militarily, and they have been since the beginning of the war. And I thank if anything, I think we've seen Chinese support for Russia intensify during the course of the war. You'll remember the bar that President Biden set in late February, early March of 2022, shortly after Putin's ill-fated invasion of Kyiv and of Ukraine, that we would, our red line was Chinese lethal support. We were thinking of military systems to Russia. And I left four months ago. We thought they had never crossed that line. But they've done something probably equally or more important. And specifically in 2022, 2023, and up until January 20th, when I left, when I resigned as ambassador, they were providing micro-electronic support to the Russian defense industrial base, which was critical to rebuilding that base during the war and to allowing President Putin to continue the war. I would even say that it might not have been possible for Russia to continue of the war at the intensity level that it has now without Chinese support.

We in the Biden administration, and it's good to see that President Trump's administration has continued this, have been sanctioning hundreds of Chinese companies for their involvement. And of course, in the kind of dysfunctional, and I have to say it's really a dysfunctional in many ways relationship that we have government to government with the Chinese, when we would put the facts in front of them, just complete denial. You know, we'd say the sky is blue and they say, no, the sky is black, etc. So a dialogue of the death. And the idea, I know a lot of people have had the idea, well, could China help push Russia towards a ceasefire agreement? We've never seen China do that. President Xi had the opportunity just a month ago when he was there in Moscow for the 80th anniversary of

the end of the Second World War and didn't do it. In fact, the body language, the statements, the Chinese support for Russia publicly was as strong as ever.

And I guess I'd finish my answer to your very good question by saying, and that's the heart of it. The heart of is this relationship strategically between these two people, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. It's a real relationship. I think that was their 53rd meeting, I believe it was, since President Xi took over as president, they met when President Xi was vice president. They've called each other best friends. And these are not two leaders that emote about best friends and kinship and bros and all that, but that's what they say. And of course, the famous February 4th, 2022 statement before the invasion of a no-limits partnership. It really has become no limits. We see that China has acted as a protector of Russia at the United Nations when the United Kingdom and France and the United States have continually tried to bring this issue to the Security Council. They've done that in the General Assembly. They've done it with the critical dual-use technology that Chinese companies are selling that I've mentioned before, and there's been no break in that. So I don't see China as an honest broker. I can't see China being effective at this point in pushing Russia towards a ceasefire decision. And I don't believe that they would be, if there was a general negotiation, a true negotiation, over the terms of a cease fire, terms to protect the sovereignty and statehood of Ukraine, I wouldn't trust the Chinese at all to be at that table. So you can see I've got pretty strong views on this issue.

KIM: Ambassador, just to follow up on one part of my question, do you think China benefits if the war continues?

BURNS: I think they've benefited, and I think they've also lost a lot. So they've benefitted because they've proven decisively to Moscow that they're in Moscow's corner hook, line, and sinker. And that's part of the larger fabric that many people have written about, I think most notably, probably, Bob Gates' first in Foreign Affairs, coming up on two years now, I believe. I think it was the autumn issue in 2023, if I'm not mistaken, where Bob Gates, for whom I worked at my earliest incarnation at the NSC, essentially said in the pages of Foreign Affairs, this condominium of sorts, Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, he thought was a stronger and more pernicious threat -- these are my words, the adjectives, I can't remember exactly how he termed it -- a stronger threat to the United States than the old Soviet Union was in the old Cold War. That was quite an opening couple of paragraphs. And that's what we see we see it with North Korean troops, now in the tens of thousands, are on the battlefield inside Ukraine and in occupied territories. We've seen it in the unstinting support, we've see it in the way that China has approached Iran to avoid our sanctions against Iran, China buying up most of Iran's energy at below-market prices. We've seen it in -- and what here's what's missing from when Suzanne and I started out in Iran. We had Russia and China with us in sanctioning Iran. We negotiated four Security Council Chapter 7 resolutions against Iran, and China and Russia were with us, and now they're not. So I don't see any evidence that the Chinese are going to break with this. In fact, I think you've seen an intensification of this relationship.

CZIN: So given this tightening entente that we see, and I think it's fair to call it that at this point, between Russia and China, what opportunities do you think there are to shape China's behavior towards Russia in a positive direction? Is there any way to steer them towards a constructive role? Or on the flip side, what opportunities or ability does the U.S. have to steer China away from these more destructive impulses?

BURNS: You do still find -- you know, we used to read the academic articles, Chinese universities -- some Chinese professors are still allowed, in a highly repressive,

increasingly repressive environment within China itself, to write about the unequal treaties between the Qing, the weak late Qing dynasty and the Romanovs, where the Chinese still believe that, you know, Russia got, that Russia is holding land that is historically Chinese. That's true not just of Mongolia and the way that Mongolia emerged in the 1920s, this goes back to the 19th century. That's interesting. Nothing happens in China by chance. So if we were to look out beyond Xi Jinping and Putin, and I think they're relatively young men. They're in their early 70s. I'm 69, so I say that for that reason. But if you look out, beyond their chronological lifetime as leaders, I think there's still more than a kernel of concern in China, that those treaties, that should be addressed at some point, but that might be 20 or 30 years out. For our time, this is a relationship where they are twinned together.

We heard early in the Trump administration some talk, never from, I think, the president himself, but from people talking to reporters, well, could we pull a reverse Kissinger, a reverse Nixon? And I see. I would say 0% chance of that happening for two reasons. It's not in Xi Jinping's interest as he sees his interest. I think his big strategic concern is that the United States strengthened over the last four or five years in our security relationships with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia. The Quad strengthened. We redeployed more of our military forces to the Indo-Pacific. And that is a big challenge to the Chinese. So he wants to offset that with this unlimited partnership with Russia, with building up the BRICS, building up the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. But it doesn't represent the equivalent of our treaty alliances. So I think that's first and foremost in his mind. Putin, I think, would simply never trust an American offer. Well, if you would just delink yourself from China, you can have a trade relationship, and we can do big deals together. He's a cynical intelligence officer, and he's very smart. And he's the most experienced leader in the world today, of any major state, or minor state probably, longest serving. And he just is gonna understand that the United States could not be relied on given the alternance of power 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, as we march forward in our system. I think that's just not gonna happen. And so we're stuck. Whether it's President Trump, President Biden was stuck with this, and President Trump's successor will be, with a relationship where China and Russia are twinned strategically, it's their ambition to kind of cut us down to size and reduce the influence, particularly of Japan and the United States, and of NATO and the European Union.

And here's where we get into Mike's territory, where he knows 100 times as much as me. If you look at the unclassified Pentagon reports that we issue annually, unclassified, about China's non-transparent buildup of its nuclear weapons force, it looks like about 10 years from now, for the first time since 1945 in the atomic and hydrogen age, the United States will be outnumbered in its nuclear weapons stockpiles, as opposed to the two now authoritarian powers that are our competitors in the nuclear weapons realm. This is a big strategic challenge and I was really with Bob Gates -- I mean with them psychically and agreeing with him -- when he wrote that article and I think that everything that has happened in the two years since has been borne out. We're facing this quartet -- it's not completely united, the quartet, but I think Russia and China are -- and they have a strategic aim and we have to deter them from accomplishing that.

KIM: Ambassador, as the Trump administration ramps up trade tensions globally, China has been presenting itself as a reliable partner in contrast to the United States, to many parts of the world, especially to Europe. But at the same time, Beijing faces its own hurdles in Europe, given its support for Moscow. And so I'd like to ask, how would you assess the state of China-European relations, and what implications does that have for the United States?

BURNS: China's support for Russia has driven a wedge between Beijing and the European Commission and the NATO allies. And boy, did I feel that in China, because one of the things I, of course, was doing is working very closely with the EU ambassador, Jorge Toledo, great ambassador, and the ambassadors of all the allied countries. And for them, and I think for us, what the Russians are doing in Ukraine is an existential issue. He's re-dividing Europe. He's disrupted the peace of 1989-91. And for the Europeans, that is existential. And the Europeans have been very, very difficult for the Chinese over the last couple of years. They've joined us in most of the sanctions that we've placed on China. And so I think that's a reality that the Chinese were surprised by. I would say this: I was so impressed by the professionalism, the knowledge, and sophistication of the Chinese diplomats with whom I dealt on a daily basis.

But I think they kind of have a, if I can say this, I don't want to be too judgmental, but almost a blind spot when it comes to how NATO works and how the EU works. They're accustomed to dealing with nation states. And they were surprised in 2022 and three and four by the degree to which the Europeans were really unhappy, angry, and were willing to sanction them because of what they were doing in Russia. And it took a while for the Chinese to conclude that they'd really dug a hole for themselves with Europe as they'd built a strategic relationship with the Russians. So I don't see that ending very soon. And as the war continues in Ukraine, and unfortunately in my judgment, the United States is giving up its leadership role in supplying Ukraine militarily, and we'll have to see what happens at the NATO summit three weeks from now, but I'm worried about a scenario where, you know, the United States becomes the biggest problem for NATO, as the former leader of NATO. So the Europeans have had to rise up and try to fill that void. So I think Europe is disaffected from Beijing in a strategic sense because of Russia.

CZIN: You know, I'm really struck by your point that it took a while for Beijing to register how much ire they had provoked in Europe with their support for Russia's war. But I think it's really interesting if you pair that comment with what you said earlier about how locked in Putin and Xi are on this trajectory and how entwined they are. So my question for you then is, do you think from China's perspective, even though there's been this tag team of sanctionings on China, do they feel like they've paid a real cost with Europe or a sufficient cost to change course? Because it doesn't seem like they have so far.

BURNS: The Chinese have been focused on the fact that more European members of the EU parliament in Strasbourg and the national parliaments, the Bundestag, the Assemblée Nationale, more of them have gone to Taiwan than to Beijing on their version of, you know, our version of congressional delegations. That's certainly true with members of Congress. Before I arrived, before the pandemic, we would have had 40 or 50 or 60 members at the U.S. Senate and House in China annually. In my three plus years, we had one delegation. And we had lots and lots of members of the House and Senate travel to Taiwan. So the Chinese were really worried about that. They're worried about the drift in their relationship with Europe. The Europeans joined us in sanctioning those Chinese companies delivering dual-use technology to Russia. So, suddenly, for the Chinese, they didn't have to contend with Japan and the United States and South Korea and Australia, and in in large part, India, too on the issue of Taiwan, they had to deal with Europe. And so that was not expected. I think that was a real, that has been a real cost for the Europeans.

I should also say, maybe to both of your last questions, trade has become a very divisive issue. And here I want to say something in support of President Trump, sincerely. There's a reason why President Trump, maybe not to go to 145 percent, but a reason why

he's been so tough-minded, and that is if you kind of measure trade over the last 25 to 30 years, China's been by far the most disruptive actor in the international trade system. The Europeans and the Japanese and Koreans have the same problem we do, forced technology transfer, our businesses, intellectual property theft, and as Janet Yellen said publicly when she visited us 13 months ago, the massive, massive dumping of Chinese manufactured products on the global market. So Secretary Yellen said when she was in Guangzhou and Beijing 13 months ago, China is producing two to three times domestic demand in EVs, solar batteries, solar panels, lithium batteries, steel and robotics, just to name five categories, selling them, dumping them on Europe, as well as in other countries in the world. And the Europeans felt that acutely. They identified with what we were going through and President Biden, by the way, raised tariffs a year ago to 100% on Chinese EVs, 50% on semiconductors, 25% on lithium batteries. So, and President Biden implemented all of President Trump's first term tariffs on China. So there's been a lot of Chinese complaints, every day, -- and I monitor what they say in the foreign ministry -- that we are somehow the troublemaker.

It goes back to China and I think President Trump has every right to try to be tough-minded in these negotiations and the Europeans identified with that. Now they identified with it as long as, when Joe Biden was president, we were not trying to pick fights with Europe or with South Korea on trade, South Korea or Japan, and I think the problem we've got now is we would've been much more effective in trying to leverage the Chinese on trade if we had not imposed high tariffs on Seoul, Tokyo, Brussels. Because we took away the leverage on our side of the table. And we used to think about it in these terms: if we could just get Japan and the EU and the U.S. together on any issue – you remember this, well you both remember this – we thought that was about 60% of global GDP. And we could then outweigh the Chinese at the negotiating table. Well, President Trump, I think, because of his inattention to our allies, and maybe even worse, his sometimes his acrimonious behavior towards allies, has given away that leverage. So that's been divisive in the U.S., just in the last four months, the U.S.-EU relationship over China. And I felt, the day I left, maybe our strongest partner in trying to deter China was Europe in many, many ways, and we've given that away in the Trump administration, which is a real shame.

KIM: Ambassador, you alluded to sort of the strengthening of ties between the Indo-Pacific partners of the U.S. and European partners, especially in the wake of the war in Ukraine and about Europe playing a key role in deterrence against China. Can this continue on without U. S. leadership? If the U.S. isn't playing that leading role, bringing these two communities together, or does it continue on or where does it go?

BURNS: I think it continues with great difficulty. The reality is, if you look at the NATO alliance, where I was ambassador for George W. Bush, the United States is primus inter pares, just because of the weight of our military might, and because of positioning of American strategic forces in Europe since the close of the second World War. And if you take that away -- and I know that Trump administration has to make some big decisions coming up -- do they believe that we can be fully involved in Europe, as well as in the Indo-Pacific? If you look at Secretary Hegseth's speech in Shangri-La just last week, it looks like there's gonna be a real pivot, and one reads that they're considering significant U.S. troop drawdowns in Europe. I can't see how we do that in the middle of the most significant crisis in Europe since the second World War, and certainly since the end of the Cold War, where Putin is literally trying to divide Europe again. Everything we fought for, from Truman, President Truman, to President HW Bush was to make, in the words of HW Bush, Europe whole, free, and at peace. You remember that rhetoric. Some people old enough in this room remember that rhetoric, but it was not just rhetoric, it was reality. And

at a time when Europe needs us, when even if they get to 5% of GDP defense spending next decade, even if they get there, they're going to need us, and Ukrainians need us.

And here we get to some of what the Chinese might be learning from the Ukraine conflict. If Putin gets away with his crimes in Ukraine, if there's an unfair ceasefire agreement that rewards him, if he has an open road to attack Ukraine a third time, maybe at the end of this decade, then China's going to think, I think, the Chinese will think, well, then what price would we pay in a cross-strait invasion of Taiwan? If the Europeans and Americans and Canadians won't stand up in their strategic arena in Western Europe, why would they stand up on Taiwan? That's one lesson they could learn. The other lesson, conversely, if you reflect on Operation Spider Web over this past weekend, I'd love to know Mike's views on this, and what the Ukrainians did, which was just extraordinary. If you look at the map that was published, attacking two sites just east of Moscow, attacking Murmansk, or bases outside, and then all the way east of Irkutsk on the Amur River, which is just north of the Dongbei, the Chinese northeast. That was a big statement. And the Chinese now have to worry about the fact that Taiwan is much more devoted to an asymmetric military future, that Taiwan is much open now to drone warfare, so that a much smaller entity can hold off a bigger army. That's probably conversely the Chinese nightmare that comes out of the Ukraine war. So those two lessons are, we'll have to see which one predominates.

CZIN: So I wanted to shift the geographic focus a little bit and talk about the fallout effects for China and its diplomacy, not just with Europe, but more broadly globally. And where did you see the fall out, particularly with the quote unquote Global South countries, as imperfect as that phrase is?

BURNS: Well, to be objective about it, I'm not sure the Chinese have paid a high price in the Global South. What they did, and again, I am just going to be very frank; I can be more frank than last time I was here, when I was in government. This cynical Chinese-Brazilian so-called six-point peace plan from 2023, a year into the war, it was just a piece of paper with nothing on it. But what they did was they shopped it around the General Assembly. And, you know, China has been so effective with the Belt Road Initiative, about a trillion U.S. dollars worth of aid and projects into the Global South, that they convinced a lot of countries around the world to sign up to their peace plan, which was not a peace plan. It was just a piece of paper because China didn't want to devote any energy or commitment to actually doing the work of a mediator. But it allowed the Chinese to paint the U.S., President Biden at the time, and Europeans as the warmongers, as they're fueling this war. And I think objectively, unfortunately, the Chinese had some success with it.

We tried to combat it, but the Chinese have become, if you think about regions, leading trade partner of all the southeast -- ASEAN countries, with the exception of Singapore, or I think we're the leading investor, but still China's leading trade partner. I don't believe that the United States is the leading trade partner -- I could be mistaken -- with any country in sub-Saharan Africa. And when we were flying into Lima just past November for President Biden's last summit with Xi Jinping, the New York Times published a map, two maps. First map, I think, was 2001. And it depicted that the United States was the leading trade partner of nearly every country in South America 23 years ago, 24 years ago. And that now, China's the leading trade partner of every country in South America, with I think the exception of Colombia. So what does that mean? It answers your question. Because the Chinese have been so strategic and so consistent in

pushing out to help, in their judgment, Belt Road, these countries, well, those countries support China on big strategic issues.

There's another way that manifested. We obviously were trying to highlight Chinese human rights violations in Xinjiang against the Uyghur population there. We tried in the last two years to take China to the UN Human Rights Council. We lost both votes in 2023 and 2024. It killed me. It killed a lot of us that we lost those votes. I mean, this should have been, it is so apparent that the Chinese locked up, imprisoned, over a million people between 2017 and 19, and yet we couldn't get the votes. And it struck me, one of the things an ambassador does is, any country, is you try to work with the other ambassadors. And since I had a Middle East background, I tried to work with the Arab ambassadors. Not a single Arab country stood up for the Uyghurs. They all voted the Chinese way, because China has such a big economic relationship with the world. I mean, that's sad, it's tragic, but it's power politics. So, long-winded answer, Chinese are very effective, not in Western Europe or Eastern Europe or not in North America, but very effective in the Global South, where these votes count.

KIM: So on this peace paper that Beijing released, the one concrete commitment that they made was that they would contribute to the reconstruction of Ukraine. And so is this, when we get to that point, is this something that the United States should welcome?

BURNS: I think it depends. You'd have to see what the nature of the peace is. Can we live with the peace? Would we have been one of the backroom authors of the peace? Would we want the Chinese to be deciding exactly what they do or don't do? I think the Chinese should be asked by the Ukrainians. The Ukrainians have kept lines open to the Chinese throughout this period. They've not treated the Ukrainian representatives in Beijing well. They are very closely aligned with the current Russian ambassador. But they often, for months at a time, won't see the Ukrainian ambassador. They play power politics, hardball. But the Ukrainians, of course, are looking towards the Chinese because, before the war, Ukraine's leading trade partner was China. I think $15.5 billion worth of Ukrainian exports in the year before the war started. So I think the Ukrainians believe China is part of the picture here. But I think, the rest of us, if we are involved, and again, I hope under President Trump, we will commit ourselves, if the ceasefire occurs, to securing Ukraine and doing what's best for Ukraine. Not having China call the shots is what's best for Ukraine in my judgment, but having China be asked in a very targeted way to help the Ukrainians rebuild, certainly. That's something I think that the Ukrainians would welcome and we theoretically should welcome.

CZIN: Should we open it up to…?

KIM: Maybe, I have one last question. Ambassador, during the Biden administration, the China policy was sometimes described as three Cs. We should be competitive where we need to, cooperative when possible, and confrontational when it's necessary. Given the state of U.S.-China relations today, do you think there is a viable pathway for cooperation between the United States and China? And are there lessons from the past that we can draw upon on how the two countries might collaborate on issues like Ukraine or other regional and global crises amid what looks to be a long few decades of strategic rivalry that's ahead?

BURNS: Really good question, I'll try to be very brief because we could take this, we could argue about this for months. I guess, as I reflect on my time there, this relationship is highly competitive and will remain competitive between China and the

United States because we're structural rivals. Two biggest economies, two strongest militaries, the only two countries with true global reach, I would say, right now, are China and U.S. completely different theories of the case about individual liberties and human freedom. And so on the competitive end, which predominates, and I figured I spent about 80% of my time on the competitive edge over three plus years. They're our strongest competitor for military power in the Indo-Pacific. They're are strongest competitor in the tech competition which is now center stage on AI, quantum computing, biotechnology. They're a very difficult but very important trade partner and President Trump is working that right now. So I think competition, no matter who's in power here, is gonna predominate.

Having said that, there are times, there are some issues where our interests align. One of them is climate change. And I was really proud to work with, under Joe Biden's leadership, President Biden's, leadership with John Kerry and John Podesta, our two climate negotiators. And we had some differences, methane, nitrous oxide, China still building coal-fired plants. But for the most part, we were trying to work together in the Paris context. I'm a climate acceptor of the science, not a denier. And so there is an issue. Fentanyl is a second issue because the majority of the precursor chemicals that make up the synthetic opioid come from China, not from the government, black market. Global health; despite the fact they still have never come clean with the World Health Organization about what really happened in Wuhan. And they haven't helped the world organization to try to trace the origins of the virus. So that's a downer, it's a negative point, but they have such great capacity if we look towards future epidemics and pandemics, we should try to work with China.

So I think there's a cooperative element. It's the minority of issues, but it’s important. And then the third thing that President Biden would say and certainly Secretary Blinken and I, Tony Blinken and I said quite frequently is, we have to live in peace with China. We're not trying to drive this into a conflict. That would be both irrational and catastrophic, potentially. And so we made every effort in our administration to drive down the probability of a conflict while we were competing, which made the relationship so complicated. It's complicating to try to, and we all participated in this, to try and manage that relationship on a daily basis so you're defending where you have to defend, engage where you can engage, and yet in a way that the two superpowers never collide. So we spent a lot of time at the very end of the administration, and President Biden was able to convince President Xi Jinping in Lima just six months ago that our senior military commanders, and ours is Admiral Sam Paparo, he is the Indo-Pacific commander, senior officer in Honolulu, that he should be meeting with the southern theater commander and the eastern theater commander of the PLA. We had denied that for years, and suddenly, Admiral Paparo had two such meetings. So that third point's important. We have to live side by side with the Chinese. We have share the earth, if you will, in a very uneasy, difficult, competitive relationship, which makes this one of the hardest, most difficult challenges for us, I would say, in our national security strategy.

CZIN: So I think at this point we'll pivot then to questions from the audience. Antoine. Yeah, somebody's coming, mic's coming.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador, that was fascinating. I don't need to be convinced of the fact that China is not an innocent actor. But I still wonder, there are areas, it seems to me, and you alluded to some of that, where we seem to be shooting ourselves in the foot, when it comes to tariffs, when it come to visas, all things that the embassy has played a role in. I was particularly struck when I went with

the two people here to China recently, about what we heard about a closing of the visa office in Shanghai, at least for a period of time that was unclear and caused a lot of people there a great deal of concern. I also was kind of surprised about the reaction to the white paper on fentanyl that the Chinese did, which was kind written off by some as kind of very general. I read it, I didn't think it was so general. So on these two particular points, could you tell us something?

BURNS: Well, on fentanyl, and we worked this very hard, and we were dealing with Minister Wang Xiaohong, who's the minister of public security. He's a combination of FBI director, attorney general, DEA, and DHS. I mean, he's a very powerful person, and has been connected to President Xi for four decades. I think the Chinese, after the San Francisco summit, that was November '23, actually did some good things. They arrested, I think, over 300 people involved in the black-market trade. They took down online platforms. They classified certain precursor chemicals as prohibited for export. They began to work with our law enforcement agencies. This is when I was ambassador. And I thought we were heading in the right direction. You know, I don't want to just tee off by any means on the Trump administration. These are hard issues, and I don't want to be too judgmental, but I thought that when the new administration, President Trump's, came in, they immediately said, China is not doing anything on fentanyl. Well, they were doing something. So the question was, do you continue on that path or do you ask them to do more? So what I read now is that Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent wants to include fentanyl in the tariff negotiations. No problem there. If they can get more cooperation from the Chinese on fentanyl than we did, I will publicly applaud the Trump administration and welcome that, obviously. So that's on fentanyl.

On visas, this is a real concern. We in the Biden administration implemented a Trump first term executive order from 2020 that essentially says in so many words, if you're a Chinese student, applicant, and you appear at our visa window in Shanghai or Guangzhou or Beijing, and you have an affiliation with the People's Liberation Army or the intelligence services, and you say you wanna study nuclear weapons design at CalTech, you're not gonna get the visa. And that is a small percentage of the overall applicants, but there are such people. And we know that the Chinese try to secret people into our country, so we thought that that was a very positive and constructive executive order by President Trump. We implemented it, that was under my charge oversaw these operations, and I felt that we were very, very watchful on that point. So it's unclear what Secretary Rubio meant last Friday or Thursday when he said we're gonna now massively revoke Chinese student visas. One of the examples that some of the White House people gave were members of the Communist Party. There are 99 million members of Communist Party, some of them should not be getting visas to the United States. If they're human rights violators in Xinjiang, they won't get visas. If you're the party secretary in Xinjiang. But if you're a young person, maybe you joined the party for career reasons, but you're not affiliated with the intelligence or military side and you wanna study public policy at George Washington University. I mean, really, you're going to keep people like that out? And I left thinking that our competitor is the government of China; it's not the 1.4 billion Chinese citizens, and if we if we decouple the two societies and say no more tourists, no more business visitors, no more visas for Chinese students, we drive it to the psychology of the old Cold War, whether it was Mao's China or the Soviet Union, where the two societies are separated and you can see the fears begin to be provoked between them, I really think it's terribly important that we keep the door open to Chinese citizens applying for student visas who are not part of their military intelligence apparatus, of course.

Joe McCarthy's here. He's former dean of students at Harvard Kennedy School. He and I are real good friends. Marina McCarthy is here as well. I teach global politics at Harvard. I can't imagine teaching that subject, great power politics, without Chinese students in the classroom. They are the other great power. And what do our students get? Our American students get an intense familiarity with people that they study alongside or become friends of, they sometimes even learn the language when they come to China. And that generation of Americans has to understand the other superpower. And so there's something positive. The other thing that I see is, and I tried to meet almost every American CEO who came through China, the CEOs want those really smart young Chinese graduates of our universities, Carnegie Mellon, UT Austin, University of Illinois, to stay and work for them. And a large percentage of the people stay, become green card holders and eventually citizens, or they form the Silicon Valley or Boston biotech firms that are leading our tech revolution. So I think it'd be a great mistake to close our doors to the Chinese traveling public, tourists, or to students, for all those reasons. And while we're at it, I want to speak up for my university. At the Kennedy School, as Joe knows, a little over half of our students are international by design. We have 90 countries represented. We want the environment there to replicate the world as it is. And for the Trump administration to say that somehow Harvard cannot have any international students, and that's about one quarter of the entire university student population, is completely unjustified. Harvard has now taken the Trump administration to federal court. As we've run two decisions, it now needs to rise up to the appellate level and maybe even beyond that, but it is misguided. It's punitive. It's unrelated to the other problems that we've had at Harvard that our president and corporation have been very open about. And I was proud last week, when we had our commencement, to see the unity on campus, to see the pride at Harvard that our administration has stood up for our First Amendment rights and our constitutional rights as a private institution. And I just can't imagine a phenomenon where they've now frozen what you're referring to as visa applications worldwide. As they try to figure out who they're gonna give visas to and who not, do we really wanna close the United States? Do we wanna have a period of time where no one can come to this country? I think this is a massive mistake, if that's what's happening. And we'll have to see how they implement these new rules. Forgive me getting on the soapbox, but I did wanna represent my university.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yeah, but this is...

BURNS: You should, you should get a mic.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: The 57% of the students at the Kennedy School now are a direct legacy of our friend the late Joe Nye. This was purposeful on his side and I did what he told me, like a good soldier.

KIM: This gentleman in the second row.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yeah, thank you very much. My name is Jim Mullinax. I'm a diplomatic fellow now at the Library of Congress Kluge Center and also a Kennedy School graduate. And one of the reasons I came to the Kennedy School is because of the international diversity of the student body. It was really one of main draws for my attendance there. I wanted to ask a question about the use of sanctions and other types of economic tools to increase pressure on Putin to come to the negotiating table with a more constructive attitude. You mentioned that China has been supporting Russia's war effort through a variety of including international diplomacy, but also through international trade and support for oil, through oil purchases, supporting Russia's economic viability. There's

been quite a bit of discussion about using sanctions tools to increase pressure on China, financial sanctions against financial institutions, for example, cutting off oil shipments from Russia through sanctions policy. How do you think the Chinese would react to both of those? Methods of increasing the pressure on Putin, and are there ways that we could work with them to convince the, I'll tell you, I'm a skeptic, but are there are ways that we could with them to work with them convince the Chinese to take a more productive approach in that regard?

BURNS: It's such a good question and such a thoughtful question. I've obviously thought about this a lot as I sat there in Beijing working with the Chinese. I don't think we can convince them not to give full-throated support for the Russian war machine. They've made their choice, and they've even doubled down on the choice. If you look at what we put out publicly in the Biden administration in the last year, particularly the last six months, about the degree microelectronics for the defense industrial base. I thought we made a compelling case factually of what was happening. I don't think we can convince them otherwise.

And there is this intriguing bill. I saw Senator Blumenthal on Morning Joe this morning talking about the bill he and Senator Lindsey Graham have. That would be maybe not a nuclear option, but a very tough option against Iran and China and India. And you know, here I wanna be respectful of President Trump and his team. For the president or secretary of state or secretary of the treasury to agree to that, it's really, it's not just a strategic question, it's a tactical question. When do you do it? You're in the middle of a very tough trade negotiation. We obviously need to have a trade deal between Russia, excuse me, China and the United States by this autumn. It's important for us, it is important for the Chinese economy as well and for what Xi Jinping wants to do. So, to deploy that, would it hurt the Russians in the short term? It probably would. Would there be workarounds, as the Russians and Iranians and Chinese are champions in that? Probably. So you'd have to gauge, if you're President Trump or Secretary Rubio, how much value does it really bring us, and how many headaches does it cause us on the other things we're trying to do. So I want to be respectful of them. I've been out for four months. I don't have the touch right now that I might have had six months ago, just the knowledge of what those trade-offs would be when it comes to China.

I have thought, I know there's been some work done on this at Brookings, I remember Jack Lew's speech in 2016 when he was President Obama's Secretary of the Treasury and he warned us in a speech about the overuse of sanctions by the U.S. and its allies. I think his speech was more about the dollar as reserve currency, the long-term effect on that. Sanctions can be a pretty blunt instrument and the overuse of sanctions can cause other problems. The issue that we had in the Biden administration was that seemed to be the most direct way to punish and we hoped deter the Russian war machine. They certainly suffered under the EU, Japanese, American sanctions, but they survived too. And that's the same thing as you look at Hamas or Hezbollah or some of these other, Venezuela, they tend to survive, you inflict pain and I think this is, reflecting on the use of sanctions, a very good Brookings topic. When it works and when it doesn't, and drawing the lessons, I'm not smart enough to write that myself, but some economists would be, and I think that'd be a worthy enterprise, as a result of what's happened in the war over the last three and a quarter years.

CZIN: Why don't we take it way in the back? Yeah, by Allie.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, Linc Smith, retired Navy, thank you for a wonderful discussion and your service to the United States. Two questions. First, I think it was in 2018 that China approved the removal of the two-term limit on the presidency. Can you reflect on that a little bit? How is it different with this president and the future viability as a result? And secondly, to a silent majority perhaps in China, amongst the population. Is there one that doesn't support the current regime? And if that's the case, could you give us a percent on how many?

BURNS: OK, so we can write an entire book on that question. Really good questions. On the first one, I guess I'd say this, maybe try to put it a little bit of perspective. I first went to China in 1988 with Secretary Shultz. I was a very junior person, really working on the admin side of the trip, not the substance. First time I went. But we met Deng Xiaoping on that trip. I went back with President Bush in '89. And President Bush spent a lot of time with him. What was his great insight? He had a lot great insights. But one of them was that Mao nearly destroyed China during the Cultural Revolution. So Mao's peers, who succeeded him, led by Deng, said, no more one-man rule. We have to have collective leadership. And it was that collective leadership through Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and maybe into the first year or two of Xi Jinping built modern China. The extraordinary growth in the economy, lifting people out of poverty, China became a great power. The Chinese are back to one-man rule. And I think when the historians write the time, 2012-2025, and whenever it ends, it's going to be about one man becoming completely dominant in the Chinese system. The party rising so far, and Jon would know this better than me as a real student of Chinese history, that the party has eclipsed all the governing structures.

And I would say, and I've gone back and forth to China since '88, had never lived there until 2021, ‘22. And it is a fearful place. The level of repression is really pronounced. In many conversations that you have, like in a restaurant or you're talking to students at a university, people won't even say his name. They'll point, or they'll say number one leader. The surveillance society, the absolute crackdown on dissidents. You remember late November 2022, at the end of when those very courageous, mainly young female students stood up with blank pieces of paper in 25 different cities in China on one night. And that led Xi Jinping, he listened to it, to end zero COVID, the quarantine system. But if you look at the press reporting, from the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Washington Post, most of those young people were then arrested. It is a more repressive society, far more repressive in every way than it was 20 years ago. But Jon would have some thoughts on this, but I think would be good for us to hear. So that's a big change.

So what do we think about doing away with the two-term limit? That was another Deng Xiaoping's insight. Two terms, 10 years, that's it. Alternates of power. That's over. Xi Jinping in some ways might be more powerful than Mao because he leads a more powerful China. And the instruments of suppression, if you think about surveillance society, AI-enabled surveillance is so much more effective, probably, effective in the very negative sense, of how to control people. So this is a big issue. And I don't think we should see much change.

Short answer to your second question. I really would like to hear Jon speak about this. I'm very, I think we all should be humble about our understanding of what the Chinese people think, because it is an entirely closed place. You know, there's no access to the Internet, there are no reliable polls of Chinese public opinion, and for all the people I met who may have signaled or even said, I'm unhappy, I met a thousand other people who would say to me, I'm living far better than my parents. And certainly my grandparents and

great-grandparents who went through the Japanese occupation. My standard of living is much higher. I have an apartment. I went and studied at, you know, a Tsinghua or a Beida or Stanford. And so I'm just, I don't think we have any reliable data that would allow us to know if there's a silent majority or not. I'm trying to be accurate here and not to engage in wistful thinking. But you might have a much better view of both these questions.

CZIN: Yeah, I'll offer a couple of comments, and then I see we're approaching the end of time. I think the point about our understanding about what's going on on the ground in China, I'm sure you got a feel for this being there in the embassy, is that for U.S. officials, we're very straitjacketed in our ability to gauge what's really going on on the ground. And I think one of the really striking things to me during our most recent trip to China was the fact that we've met with some of our U.S. correspondents who are the ground. It is a preciously small school of people. Yeah, of journalists, right? Yes, exactly, right. We're talking about a couple dozen folks who are trying to give us in the U.S. and worldwide a feel for what's going on in a country of 1.4 billion people. And you mentioned zero COVID. I mean, I think this is the moment where it really came home to me, right, we had, there was a lot of press about those protests, number one, that were happening in the big cities and about the demise of the zero COVID policy. But then after that, there was very little about the fallout of that, right? And I think it was very hard to gauge what was going on in Ningxia province, or in Qinghai, or in these outer places. And so it is kind of this paradigmatic example of my mind of a tree falling in the woods, right. We don't really know what the full social and even psychological repercussions were for the country about what happened in the wake of the demise of zero COVID, right. So I think it inculcates a great deal of humility, even when you're on the ground there, can be very hard to see those things, right? Beijing is just one place within the country.

I think when we talk about Chinese politics and the succession problem under Xi, I'll just offer one comment. I think it is really striking. You know, I always call it that, say that Xi has kind of created a Henry VIII problem for himself, right, whereas Henry VIII was always preoccupied with who was gonna succeed him. Xi has done the opposite. And what he's done in many ways is that he's purchased his own power at the expense of the system. They were the only communist regime that has figured out some kind of stable mechanism, maybe aside from Vietnam. They had it figured out and he took that away in order to aggrandize his own power. So it's a real quandary. I strongly suspect that you're right. He thinks of himself, he looks at other global leaders, he thinks of him as a young man and that he's got plenty of runway before he has to figure this problem. They're probably underway for preparing for the next party Congress, but I think you're quite right. And I think when you think about Mao or Deng, they had to contend with other people who were great revolutionary figures in a way that she does not, right? He has made the Politburo Standing Committee, it's all of his longtime buddies who were in a different environment. Who all work for him, right, and so the system now is wired not for revolution as it was in the Mao era, and it's not for reform either, it's for control.

KIM: Well, ambassador, we are running right up to time. This has been a fascinating conversation. And I guess what I would foot stomp is, I think China has changed so much under Xi Jinping. I was a grad student before his time, and I got to spend a lot of time inside China, traveling, doing research. And I don't think you just have the same opportunities there anymore. And so it's a real loss for experts, for future experts who need to understand this country. As you say, we need to live side-by-side in the same world as two superpowers. And so this is where I couldn't agree with you more. We need more, you know, people-to-people contacts. We need Chinese students to come here to understand us so that we could understand them. And so I couldn't agree with more on

those very important points. And I just want to say this has been a fascinating conversation. I think we could go on for two more hours, but we are at the top of the hour. And we couldn't have asked for a better speaker to launch off our new series for this Global China project on sort of how the U.S. and China could manage to work together on global problems, even amid strategic rivalry. So thank you so much for joining us. Thank you to everyone for joining us in person and online.

CZIN: Thank you so much.