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Friday, July 22, 2022

Fireside Chat on the Future of Taiwan with Mark Esper, 27th Secretary, U.S. Department of Defense

Moderator: Peter Baker, Chief White House Correspondent, *The New York Times*

Niamh King ([00:26](#)):

Okay everybody. Um, welcome back. Ready for our next session. Um, under secretary Newland may have gotten the award for the most circuitous route, but, um, Dr. Mark Esper, the 27th secretary defense actually flew in direct from Taipei. So we're expecting a lot of, uh, of new news out of there sleeping in Seattle airport for us last night, so he could get to Aspen on time today. So, uh, looking forward to thanks very much, Dr. Esper and he's, ably in the hands of Peter Baker, the chief whites correspondent at the New York times. And we're looking forward to hearing about the future of Taiwan. Thank you.

Baker ([01:01](#)):

Well, thank you very much and thank you all for, uh, for being here with us. Thank you. Such a Esper for flying in. He sent me a note. I think it was in three in the morning or something last night saying he was on his way. So he gets the award along with Toya Newland for the most arduous journey, I think, uh, to join us here today, we're very lucky to have you, and if you haven't read his book, a sacred oath, uh, it's just out right now. I think it may be on sale on the, uh, uh, in the, the book sellers, uh, as a great memoir of his time, uh, as secretary of army in the secretary of defense. So as we just heard, of course, you're just back from Taiwan. It's amazing. You're awake. Uh, you met with presidents ING. I'm not gonna pronounce that. Right. And you declared while you were there that you thought that the one China policy has outlived its usefulness. What did you mean by that? And what does that mean for us? What policy should we be pursuing? If not that?

Esper ([01:52](#)):

Yeah, no, thanks. Uh, Peter, and first of all, it's great to be here at Aspen again, uh, to, to chance to talk with all of you. So I, I spent a week there, um, met not just with the president, but with her entire leadership team, the defense minister of the foreign minister, econ minister, et cetera. And my message was, this was that. Yeah, I believe that the China one, China policy has run its course, you 2022, it's now 50 years old. And if you go back to the original language, the original language talks about Chinese on both sides of the straight. And it talks about, uh, them believing that Taiwan is part of China. Well, look, those two tenants are no longer true. First of all, a majority of people on Taiwan now identify as Taiwanese, not Chinese. And secondly, they longer ago renounced any ambition to returning to, uh, the mainland and claiming it.

Esper ([02:41](#)):

And then I think on top of that, the other piece of this is clearly China has been violating the unwritten. Maybe some would say unwritten rule. That is, uh, of course it's embodied in the Taiwan relations act,

but they would not use coercion to determine the final status if you will, of Taiwan. And clearly, uh, China has been upping its game. Now for years, these are these Taiwan in terms of intrusions by its aircraft, into its air defense identification zones, its Naval deployments and exercises, all kinds of things it's doing to coerce, uh, Taiwan to negotiate, which means basically accept their proposal for one country. Two systems.

Baker (03:21):

Is this a view you had when you were secretary or is this something you've come to lately? Is it what's changed your mind if you had another view before?

Esper (03:27):

My, my focus as secretary defense of course, was updating our China war plans. You know, we identified as part of the national defense strategy that we were now in the air of great power competition, our greatest competitor, competitor being China followed by Russia. And so I spent my efforts most of my time on that case and really, uh, gearing the department toward China, doing everything we could to focus the military. So I didn't take as much time to think about the larger policy issues stretch back to again, one China, the sixth assurances, the communicates, et cetera. But since then I've had the chance. And of course we, the, the world has changed as well. We, we saw what happened, uh, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine is terrible as it was proved that dictator ships, authoritarian, regimes are still alive and well. And then we've seen, uh, China again, continue to up its game. It's proclaiming that their system is better than ours in the wake of C. And uh, and now we have, uh, ping facing a party Congress that will likely elect <laugh> him to a third term as, as a general secretary.

Baker (04:27):

Well, we're gonna, I'm gonna ask you about Ukraine in a minute, but, uh, and the impact for, for Taiwan, but this is a really interesting week to be talking about Taiwan because, uh, we've seen reports that speaker Pelosi plans to go there next month. Uh, that has obviously agitated, uh, the folks in Beijing and the president was asked, president Biden was asked about that. He said the military thinks it's not a good idea right now used to be charged or the military. Is it a good idea? No speakers been there since new GERS 25 years ago.

Esper (04:56):

I do not think we should allow Beijing to determine where American officials travel or don't travel. And I don't think we should be rattled, uh, by whatever they say or do they get upset over so many things. I think if, if she wants to go and if they think it's appropriate, they being the ti Taiwan government, then she should go. I think it's important that, uh, American leaders and European leaders and others, uh, visit Taiwan, meet with the leadership and make their own assessment about what's happening on the ground. There, look, this is a robust democracy with a thriving economy and, uh, we've been friends and supporting them for a long, long time. And so this is where I get back to, I think we need to begin a national discussion about us policy toward Taiwan and China by extension of course, and ask ourselves, is this a strong enough incredible enough foundation upon which to build new strategies and likely make some tough decisions in the coming years? Because China is the greatest strategic challenge we face in this century.

Baker (05:53):

Well, as you know, of course, president Biden seemed to be indicating some movement away from strategic ambiguity, return his trip. Wait, he, he,

Esper ([06:02](#)):

He said three times,

Baker ([06:03](#)):

Three times that we

Esper ([06:04](#)):

Would come to the defense and, and I don't understand why, but then the white house walked it back, right. Three times I think president Biden spot on.

Baker ([06:10](#)):

Right. Well, what do you think? What, what do you think is going on there? Is he just, is he, uh, freelancing? Is he indicating something more general? And his staff is too cautious. Uh what's what's your interpretation?

Esper ([06:21](#)):

My crystal ball doesn't work that well, Jake, I think Jake Sullivan will be up later today. Can ask him, well, first of all, I'd say, look, people make mistakes, right? They, they say something, they shouldn't, we've all done that I've done that. But three times, if

Baker ([06:35](#)):

He says it three times, it means he means it.

Esper ([06:37](#)):

Right. Right, right. Uh, so I look again, I think his instincts are right. And I remember Joe Biden from my days on the foreign relations committee. He knows foreign policy. And I think he knows what's at stake. And, um, he's outlined clearly, as we did in, in our administration, that I see this competition now is on between the democracies of the world and the autocracies in the world. And we have, we, the west have to stand up and take on this challenge.

Baker ([07:03](#)):

We had a, um, a session earlier this week, while you were in Taiwan with the Chinese ambassador who came out here and talked and he gave a fairly robust, let's say some people thought pretty provocative, you know, set of comments in which he said the United States was hollowing out and blurring out the one China policy and implying that there would be a real cost to us. If we did that, what would you, if you were to change that policy, what should we do to prepare for whatever cost there might be? And, and, and can we do that at the same time? We're confronting Russia in Europe?

Esper ([07:32](#)):

Well, I, I'm not suggesting we stumble into a war with China. That's the last thing we want. That's the last thing the world needs. But again, I think our, our policy needs updated and revised be needs be based on our principles and take a look at the situation as it is, not the way that Chinese think it would, they want it to be, or they prefer it to be, they've tried for decades now to redefine one China to say that Taiwan is that the United States believes Taiwan is part of China. We, we never agreed to that. Number one. And I did see snippets of what he said about the win-win policies. Look, the bottom line,

everybody knows it. Nobody feels it more than the countries of, uh, uh, of Asia, the strong arm bullying the coercion. Um, the saber rattling of the Chinese. I mean, they, they have their maritime militia sh uh, uh, sinking fishing boats.

Esper ([08:19](#)):

They're conducting exercises, uh, uh, in the sankaku that are governed by the Japanese. They're making claims in the Philippines all across the, the nine dash line. They are the ones that are trying to reshape the international law, international rules and international order to their aims. And that's, that's what we have to deal with. I, I have no problem with China's rise. We should embrace it. We've tried to embrace it, but it can't be at the expense of a system that has brought, uh, hundreds of millions of people, uh, prosperity and peace for the last 75 plus years.

Baker ([08:51](#)):

What was the mood like in Taiwan and what did they think as they're watching what's happening in Europe, they're watching a larger country try to reabsorb a, a country, a part, a territory that it believes belongs to them in a very Imperial way as to Newland was just talking about how does that look to Taiwan? What lessons are they taking from Russia's war and Ukraine?

Esper ([09:10](#)):

There is a, uh, a, a clear heightened awareness, uh, a sobriety, if you will, about two things that have happened or will happen. First of all, of course, is the Russian invasion of Ukraine. And what's played out there and I can share with you here in a moment, some of my recommendations to them in terms of how they should respond. But the second is that, uh, they see the, uh, China's party Congress happening in, um, J ping will be elected to a third term. He may be elevated to the status of chairman. Uh, they expect that there will be leadership changes, but by the spring, they think that he, he will be free to do what he wants. Now, at the same time, we all see what's happening in China. You have, uh, growing, you have economic problems. They are probably a negative GDP territory, which is unusual. Uh, you have a banking system that seems to be collapsing in front of us because it's over leveraged, I think 260, some percent of debt to GDP. You have a real estate market. That's, that's broken. There are a lot of internal problems that are known and unknown that may suggest he may want to do something outside of China to distract the people. But I, I think the, the, the bet is that won't happen till next spring.

Baker ([10:20](#)):

And what should we be doing in terms of helping Taiwan get ready if that is going to happen? Because right now, of course, we're shipping a lot of munitions, a lot of arms to Ukraine at a certain point, there is a physical limit to that, that does that impact our weapons. Are they being shipped to Taiwan? The, they are particularly interested in the javelins and the stingers is the United States doing enough, what should we be doing? What should the United States government do to indu, to, in, to get industry, to make sure they're keeping that pipeline going? Yeah,

Esper ([10:48](#)):

The weapons issue is, is an issue, not just for them, but for many of our European partners as well. And, uh, their frustration is with the slowness of arm cells. And I told 'em, well, that's not unique. We've, we've always been slow in terms of arm cells. Uh, but that, that's kind of the, the immediate issue. I, I think, you know, the discussions we had, I came back or up with five recommendations to them.

Number one, they need to have a dramatic increase in their, in their defense budget. Uh, the 2.1% is just inadequate for the task they have ahead of them. Uh, number two, uh, they need to extend their conscription from four months to at least a year and make it far more rigorous. Uh, number three, they need to adapt their war fighting strategy to be an asymmetric approach, and then procure their capabilities associated with that. Number four, they need to really revitalize their re reserve mobilization system. It's just not where it needs to be. And then number five, and they, they recognize this as well. They need to be stockpiling energy supplies, food stuffs, uh, arms equipment, and they need to have resilient, um, and a resilient infrastructure such as telecommunications if they do those five things well. And if we and our European P allies can help them with that, they will be in far better shape for what may be coming down the road. Right.

Baker ([11:58](#)):

Well, what, what lessons

Esper ([11:58](#)):

Do and actually deter, I mean, the important thing here is we're trying to deter conflict. We want ping to wake up every morning and say, Hmm, not worth it today. Yeah. Right.

Baker ([12:07](#)):

What do you think ping has seen as he's watched what veteran Putin has experienced in Ukraine? Right. Because there was the expectation, again, as to Newland, just, uh, uh, talked about alluded to that the Russians would have a blitz Creek, like, uh, action in Ukraine and be much more successful than they have been at conquering territory. And top when the government has Shian ping, looked at that and drawn any lessons from it. Do you think?

Esper ([12:29](#)):

Yeah, he's the sense is my sense has been too, that he has seen what I hoped he would see, and that was while a little slow and a little mixed, a strong Western reaction and Western being, not just Europe, but also, you know, Korea, South Korea, Australia, Japan, and others, Western democratic reaction to Russia's invasion and a response with economic sanctions, financial sanctions, uh, the cut off of various supplies and supply chains, diplomatic isolation, all those things. Uh, he has taken notice of that. Now I suspect as well that he's probably taken notice of the poor performance of the Russian military and is probably asking his generals and admirals, are we really as good as you think we are? So, um, that would be my sense, but

Baker ([13:11](#)):

That make him more or less willing to try. Adventurism

Esper ([13:14](#)):

I think less willing. I, I think if, if he's gonna do anything he's gonna, he's gonna have to do quickly, but look, we always focus on the invasion scenario. There are, are other ways they could go about this, everything from gray zone activities to missile barrages, to cyber attacks, to a, a blockade, a simple blockade of Taiwan, which gets back to the stockpiling needs. So all these scenarios or scenarios that we talked about that, uh, I, I know that they're looking at, and I think all those things are critical to deterring the decision that might be, that might come out of Beijing one day.

Baker ([13:45](#)):

You, you mentioned that we're all surprised that Russia wasn't the 10 foot tall, giant that we had imagined it was at least militarily. Um, are you surprised by that? And why do you think we misjudge that we, the United States and the military and intelligence apparatus here, misjudge that we did, we overestimate their capacity.

Esper ([14:02](#)):

You know, I was surprised, frankly, I thought they would be would've performed much better. They seemed to have performed better in, in 2014 than they did today. And, you know, I, I was in an event, uh, last week with sector defense, Austin, and he, and I briefly discussed this, but I, I think it requires an assessment of our assessment with regard to how we, how we got that right or wrong. And, and what does that mean for China? Um, you know, at this point in time, um, clearly NATO has a military capability, at least at the conventional level that, uh, Russia's not gonna take on. And so that's a good thing that we can further deter any other bad behavior by them.

Baker ([14:36](#)):

Yeah. I mean, the one thing that the intelligence people did get right was his Putin's intentions. They did manage, I think, to surprise him by accurately forecasting, what he was doing and taking away his, uh, surprise and, and, uh, the false flag operations. Um, you mentioned the various ways that we could find ourselves, um, at odds with, with China just last month, according to Politico, a Chinese fighter jet had a, they called it unsafe encounter with an American special operations, one 30 over the south China, see there have been other incidents recently with Australia and in Canadian aircraft. Do you think that chances of conflict, whether they be sort of accidental or, or intentional are greater today than when you left office?

Esper ([15:20](#)):

Yes. Uh, and I was gonna say, and, and by the way, don't forget, we had, I was working in Congress at the time. Remember the famous encounter between a, uh, P three surveillance aircraft, uh, that, that, uh, caused a Chinese aircraft to, to, uh, you know, be destroyed. And we had to land on hunt on, so

Baker ([15:37](#)):

Secretary rice remembers that with great, uh,

Esper ([15:39](#)):

So this goes

Baker ([15:40](#)):

Pain.

Esper ([15:41](#)):

This bad behavior goes back, you know, over two decades. So, uh, yes, I am more concerned because again, I think, uh, we see Beijing getting more aggressive. I write in my book about, uh, in October of 2020, uh, my concern that, that Chinese may think that we're gonna try and do something. I didn't want a misinterpretation. I didn't want some type of provocation to begin in, which is why I was, we were back channeling to the Chinese about these things. But if you look at what's happening out there, they do seem to be upping their game pushing further. I mean, in the last few weeks, they, they declared asserted that the, the Taiwan Strait is not an international waterway. So that's a change, right? Um, they

were just laying claim to this. This gets back to their aim to change international rules and norms and laws to suit their own needs.

Baker (16:24):

What should we do about that? Do we test that theory? Do we send ships through the,

Esper (16:28):

We should continue. So we, we up the game in terms of freedom and navigation operations, uh, during my time in office, I think we're now at a pace of doing one a month through the Taiwan Strait. We should keep that up. We should not back down. Uh, we don't need to, we don't need to, you know, be provocative ourselves, but we should continue to, to assert, uh, the rights to fly, sell, operate anywhere international allows.

Baker (16:50):

So gimme a one to 10, five years from now, we're here at the Aspen security forum. What, what is that likelihood that we all have had some sort of a military encounter, if not an actual war with China, by that point? I mean, how, how, how much do we worrying about this?

Esper (17:06):

I'm I'm not sure we should worry about it, but we should be very conscious of it and do everything we can to prevent a, an unnecessary conflict or provocation. We, we do not wanna go to war with China for, for many, many reasons, right? We want to manage this relationship, but this managing the relationship doesn't mean we back down either. Uh, that's why when I talk about one China, I think we need to look at our policies and our approaches and make sure they are principled, uh, that they're realistic, uh, and that they are durable. And by the way, they have to be supported by the American people. That's why I think we need to have this discussion about, uh, Taiwan and China, what it means. The last thing we wanna do is to get into conflict with China. And then the American people are asking, well, where did this come from?

Esper (17:47):

You know, what's going on? I, I think we need to, to have that conversation. And it begins in places and forms like this, about what our policy should be. Look, there are 23 million people living on Taiwan. They've embraced democracy for 20 plus years. Uh, they believe they share our values. They love the things that we love. There's no reason, no reason why they can't participate in international organizations like the WHO or the, or ILO or other things. There's no reason why they, they have to struggle to get free trade agreements. I think our government should conclude a free trade agreement with Taiwan by the end of next year. Uh, those are ways by which we can send the message that we're adapting our policy. And then if we do that, then European governments can follow. And, uh, and, and those are just some ideas out there.

Baker (18:29):

So when I will take it, then when president Biden started this Indo-Pacific economic framework a couple months ago, that Taiwan should have been included in your view.

Esper (18:37):

Yeah, I think that was a mistake to exclude them. Uh, you'll keep, I think the administration has done good things in terms of embracing the quad early, the, the quadratic, the quadrilateral security dialogue

early, and then having meetings. But I thought that was a mistake to exclude Taiwan from, from that economic framework.

Baker (18:54):

Now, president Biden says he expects to speak with Xi J ping by phone, sometime in the next 10 days, if you were in his cabinet and he asked you, what would you recommend? He say,

Esper (19:05):

I, I look, I, my view is always, and I, I testified about the story in my nomination here, and we always lead with our values. And so we should talk about the importance of, uh, democracy and freedom and Liberty. And that is a clear, uh, uh, pathway to talk about Taiwan and, and our belief that again, the, the future of Taiwan should be settled peacefully without any coercion or compelled by Beijing. And it should be negotiated if at all, between Beijing and, um, and, uh, and Taipei, and then I would get into the other issues about, you know, China's, uh, adventurism if you will, in the south China sea, uh, look, when I was in office two, they restarted the conflict in the Himalayas with the Indians. So if you, if you go around the, the border of Taiwan, uh, of China, you can look at all the little flash points, uh, and what they're doing and, and how they're trying to really, um, um, move toward their aim of being the world's global power by 2049. They've been clear about that. They're doing everything they can to modernize their military, to, to, to, uh, dominate several technological sectors. We know about China, 20, 25. Uh, they have their Wolf warriors when it comes to diplomacy, the belt and road initiative, all these things are part of the grand plan to become the world's leading power by 2049.

Baker (20:17):

When you look back at president Trump's time in office, his comp his relationship with China was complicated, let's say, right. There were moments when he expressed great admiration, J ping. Um, I was with him in BU's and they had dinner together. And afterwards on the plane, he was just, you know, gushing about him. And then there were times obviously when it was great confrontation, right? The trade war and the terrorists and, and, and so forth, especially at the end when he, he, he, uh, uh, blamed them for COVID. When you look back on that, what lessons should the current administration take from president Trump's relationship with China? Is there something that you have drawn from that as a lesson of what to do, what not to do?

Esper (20:55):

You're great, given me all these great opportunities to plug my memoir <laugh> because I have a chapter on China in the book. Look, I, I think a, an accomplishment of the Trump administration is that finally consolidated a consensus within the United States government, that China is a strategic challenge in competitor, and that we needed a hold of government response. Uh, I give the NSC under, um, uh, HR McMaster and Matthew Poter credit for drafting that national security strategy, uh, DOD followed up, uh, and, and, and draft our, our own national defense strategy. And we went about implementing it. We being all the departments of government, um, that said, as I write in my book, president Trump never seemed to be fully on board with his own strategy. Now, certainly to him, the priority was the economics and that, that really focused on tariffs. But as you just noted, it wasn't till the end of his last year where he really upped the game.

Esper (21:46):

And that was after COVID and, and what, uh, the Chinese did with regard to COVID. So I, I think, I think the key thing was, and part of this was the relationships he was trying to build with Putin and ping and others, you can't person make the, the relationship so personal that your, your feelings toward the other guy, if you will, or the other, um, kind of doesn't afford you the ability to see the bigger picture and follow the strategy that is best for the country. And so that is kind of my takeaway, if you will, Baker ([22:17](#)):

Since, uh, we mentioned president Trump, or I mentioned president Trump, <laugh>, I think I'd be remiss not to at least ask you a little bit about the, the hearings. That's not about Taiwan, but pardon my, uh, my, uh, uh, intrusion into this conversation on this. But last night, of course, we had a, the last of eight hearings that Congress has held on, on the January 6th events. And I was struck by watching that, that you were very close to have been, you would've been in the Pentagon basically had you not left a couple months earlier on that day, I left you left, you left. You were, uh, you were, uh, you left, uh, well, let's, uh, we can talk about that. <laugh> uh, and if you wanna talk about that, feel free. Um, it's in my book, it's in your book, <laugh>, um, he may have done you a favor though, because you weren't there on January 6th and your success or acting secretary, Chris Miller was then in this position where, um, you know, the president United States was, was not in communication with him, not in communication with general Millie, not in communication, as we saw last night with anybody about what should be done.

Baker ([23:14](#)):

In fact, when the Pentagon tried to get him on the phone, uh, the answer was the president didn't want anything done. What is your reaction to that as a, as a Patriot, as a veteran, as a, as a, as a public servant? Um, how do you look at that today?

Esper ([23:30](#)):

Well, of course, I didn't see, I haven't seen many of the, the, the hearings, uh, I've been on planes and trains and automobiles, but, um, look, you're, you're, you're always shocked, but not surprised at these things. And, uh, it's been described as a dereliction of duty. In my view, it is a dereliction of duty. Uh, um, again, I'm not, uh, I'm not surprised by that, that being the outcome. Um, he had a responsibility, he had numerous responsibilities, right? People ask me, well, is he a threat to democracy? And I've said, yes. Why? Because it begins with challenging the election in the first place. I mean, it's, it's one thing. Every president has a right, and they should challenge any indications of fraud, but at a certain point, it was clear that there was no fraud. So to continue to challenge the election well into December to then say, to, to invite people, to come to, to DC on January 6th, uh, to get them spun up that morning. And then fourth to fail to call them off to me is a dereliction of duty. And it's, it's not in keeping with the best traditions of our country let alone the, the, the oval office. So, uh, I, I think they're painting a stark picture of what happened and what we need to avoid in the future.

Baker ([24:41](#)):

How much was the Lafayette square episode hanging over January 6th in the sense of the, the desire to avoid having us military forces, especially active duty forces in the streets of the United States capital, and yet on January 6th, it probably would've been useful to have them, right.

Esper ([24:58](#)):

I, I can't speak obviously about January 6th, but I can tell you from June 1st onward, when, you know, we were duped, if you will, in terms of, uh, the Lafa square March, and then the, the, of course, the president wanted to deploy active duty troops. It didn't end in June, as I written a book this continued throughout the summer, the, the eagerness, the inclination to deploy at least later national guard troops into the nation cities to suppress, uh, the, the peaceful protest or the protests. And so, uh, there was a reluctance to get involved in that my view was always, and I pushed back on the president to say, DODs, the last you wanna send. And, and first of the last would be, you know, national guard. It, our view was always sending local cops and then state and, you know, whatever the case may be.

Esper ([25:46](#)):

It's a law enforcement problem, not a military problem. And throughout the summer, and even later we would always get these rumblings. Oh, you know, so, and so's, this group is coming to town, we need guard. And, and we would constantly push back on that saying, that's, we're not gonna do that. We wanna see real reports. We wanna understand it. And why are we going first? So there was that mood, uh, that, that kind of sense that we had to be very careful because DOD is an apolitical organization, and I worked hard, fought hard, uh, usually successfully to keep it that way. And so there, there is that sense if you will. And that probably in one way, shape or form contributed to the, uh, events on January 6th. Look, the other part of it is it's, it's hard to, uh, call troops who are doing a traffic control mission in the streets of DC, and immediately pivot them back. Uh, re-equip them, uh, Rere them, do all those things and turn back around and put 'em into that very difficult situation on Capitol hill that day. So there, there is a that timing issue of all that that happens, happens, but there was that mood in DOD that we were very cautious about being used or played, or, uh, uh, being manipulated in some way. That became one of my four no's was that there would not be, I would not allow politicization of the DOD as one of my four no's.

Baker ([26:58](#)):

You just got back major, as we talked about, what is the impact you think of our crisis with democracy here at home, on our standing in the world, what is, what does that do for our foreign policy, whether it be in confronting China and autocracies you talked about, or in Europe, where is our own domestic trouble impacting our international relations?

Esper ([27:17](#)):

Well, I, I didn't get a sense of that in Taipei. I mean, they are focused on what they need to do and, and their big neighbor to the west. So I, I really got no sense of that, but at, at the time, you know, several, well, all the living secretaries of defense wrote an oped just two days before January 6th, and I had tweeted about it. And I've again, write about in the book. Um, look, we, we clearly lost credibility and stature on the world stage, the world's greatest democracy, oldest democracy to endure this. Uh, we lost, we lost something there. And, uh, we have to reclaim that. And, but at the end of the day, though, I'd say this much, we did prove the strength and resiliency of our institutions and those institutions with our cultures and practices and all that. And, but at the end of the day, look, an institution is really only as good as the people that, that are in it, that man, it, that run it, that staff it. And that's why we need good people to serve, uh, good people of character who put country first, not president, not party, not philosophy, but country first, that is what will allow those people and institutions will ensure that our democracy prevails.

Baker ([28:23](#)):

All right. Well, that's a good way to end this. Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary. I really appreciate your time. Thank you.