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Friday, July 21

9:00 - 9:45 AM

Fireside Chat with **Antony J. Blinken**

Antony J. Blinken, 71st U.S. Secretary of State

Moderator: Andrea Mitchell, Chief Washington Correspondent and Chief Foreign Affairs Correspondent, NBC News

Andrea Mitchell

Good morning everyone it's wonderful to be back in Aspen and especially after such a great program this week, and most especially to be with Secretary Blinken. Tony Blinken, of course you all know, I think this is your first time here since becoming Secretary. That is, that is a wonderful treat for all of us. It's not as though a lot has been happening and you have been traveling all over the world, around the world several times and just in the last two weeks, and you're about to depart again. So we're glad we caught you in between. Let me ask you a couple of quick things about things that have been breaking. Most recently this week. We've all heard about private second class Travis King in North Korea. And I want to know if there's anything new about where he's being held. Have there been any new communications between us or allies who have better communications with Pyongyang about his conditions and how they're treating?

Antony J. Blinken

Andrea first. It's wonderful to be with you. As always, I think we've been together literally around the world, but it's particularly great to be back in Aspen security forum with the Aspen Strategy Group. I've spent many happy formative hours here. So many friends and colleagues together today. So thank you for that. With regard to Private King unfortunately, I don't have any further information to share. We are very concerned of course about his well being. We'd like to know his whereabouts. We've communicated to North Korea seeking that information. I don't have anything more at this point.

Andrea Mitchell

We all saw the tragedy of Otto Warmbier there. Are there concerns that he might be tortured

Antony J. Blinken

There are certainly concerns based on what we've seen in the past and the way that North Korea has treated. Those it's detained

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Andrea Mitchell

And North Korea has so rapidly increased their missile and nuclear program. When was the last time we had any communications with them as they violate multiple UN resolutions?

Antony J. Blinken

We have channels of communication, we've used them. And we made clear going back to early in this administration that we were prepared to have negotiations with North Korea on the nuclear program with no preconditions. We sent that message several times. Here's the response We got one missile launch after another. Now. We've not stood still the partnership the alliance that we have with Japan, and with South Korea has grown even stronger, even deeper. And we've taken further steps to make sure that we could defend ourselves, defend our allies and partners deter any aggression coming from North Korea. So in effect the response that North Korea has elicited with these repeated provocations is only going to solidify the work that the United States Korea and Japan are doing together to make sure we can defend ourselves.

Andrea Mitchell

There was a time not that long ago when China was actually helpful Behind the scenes when an American Crossroads the Chinese border is there any hope now that China with relations, not that close might be helpful.

Antony J. Blinken

So this is a conversation I've had directly with my Chinese counterparts, particularly what China's role could and should be in helping bring North Korea to the table on its nuclear program. Helping us advance a shared vision for denuclearization on the Korean peninsula. And what I shared with Chinese counterparts is this. We believe that you have unique influence and we hope that you will use it to get better cooperation from North Korea. But if you can't or if you won't, then we're going to have to continue to take steps that aren't directed to China. But that China probably won't like because it goes to strengthening and shoring up not only our own defenses, but those of Korea and Japan and a deepening of the work that all three of us are doing together. We've seen, I think an extraordinary relationship developed over several administrations now on a trilateral basis among the United States, Japan and Korea. That's only gotten stronger and everything that North Korea does, and China's inability to help us do something about it. We'll continue to move things in that direction.

Andrea Mitchell

Speaking of China, the Chinese hack now China has hacked Nicholas Burns our ambassadors, unclassified emails and envoy to Asia's emails, as well as we've previously learned the

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Commerce Secretary. And I am told reliably by former cyber former cyber officials and other experts that 90% of the government's business is done on the unclassified in the unclassified space, so they were able to learn in a novel way, which is very alarming, a lot about our business. Is there some indication that this was going on for quite some time because of how novel their approach was, that they could learn our strategy as you were approaching your important reestablishment of relations and on your big trip to Beijing.

Antony J. Blinken

So first, you're exactly right. I can't speak to the direct impact of any particular incident. I can say that incident question, affected only or unclassified system as soon as we actually at the State Department at the unclassified system. We now have an ongoing investigation that will determine the impact as soon as we detected it, which goes back some time we took immediate steps, both to make sure that we were strengthening our protections and defenses, of course, reported immediately to Microsoft to make sure that they were doing everything possible. And as a general matter, I've had, you know, opportunities to speak directly to Chinese counterparts about the deep concern we would have over any thing targeting the US government, targeting US companies targeting US citizens. And the fact that we'll take appropriate action, if we need to in response.

Andrea Mitchell

Are you concerned about our vulnerabilities here?

Antony J. Blinken

This is a constant effort, as you know, as we all live in cyberspace, so much of our life in cyberspace, of course. It's a constant concern. And there is an ongoing effort, quite literally every single day, to make sure that all of our systems are as strong and protected as they can be.

Andrea Mitchell

Isn't this a basic attack on our sovereignty? Where do you draw the line?

Antony J. Blinken

Again, what we've had occasion to share more than once with with China is the concern that anything targeting the government targeting citizens, targeting companies is a real concern for us. And we have we have in the past, we will in the future as necessary take appropriate action there's look I can't say more than that. At this point. especially since we have an ongoing investigation. We need to learn the full impact even as we've taken steps to make sure that our information is protected.

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Andrea Mitchell

Speaking again of China, Secretary Kerry, the envoy the President's envoy has just completed his mission and has failed to get China to agree to any reduction in emissions. In fact, President Xi gave a speech while he was there, saying that not only would they not reduce emissions, they wouldn't close any of their coal fired plants. This makes it clear that before the big global summit in the Emirates in November, there won't be any progress towards the goals that are much delayed.

Antony J. Blinken

So Andrea the first the purpose of John's trip was not to get an agreement was not to get some concrete deliverable. The purpose was to renew the conversation the dialogue we've been having with China, on climate. They're the world's largest emitter, we're number two. It's the only place where I'm happy to be number two to China. And they,

Andrea Mitchell

they alone are emitting more than all nations combined,

Antony J. Blinken

Which only underscores the importance and the urgency of China taking action, urgent action to deal with deal with emissions. And I think what what Secretary Kerry what John conveyed was that sense of urgency look, we're in a position now where every g7 country the world's leading economies, every g7 country has adopted plans that if implemented, would hold warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. The same cannot be said of the G 20. The G 13 beyond the g7. And so one of the things that we have to do and that we're working on is to help countries encourage countries prod countries to make the necessary progress to adopt the necessary targets and plans and then to implement them. We've made the single largest investment in history in combating climate change through the through the IRA, the inflation Reduction Act, we've demonstrated that we're serious about this. And we'll we'll have the tools to make good on our commitments. Here's what I think. When it comes to China, if it wants to be seen as a responsible leader, globally, it has to be responsive to demand signals that he's getting from the region from around the world, one of those demand signals, and certainly that's that'll be the case of cop 28 is for it to take the necessary actions, to curb emissions and to do what's necessary to get to 1.5 degrees Celsius. This is an ongoing conversation. I think it was very important that John went and renewed that dialogue but also conveyed the sense of urgency. Now, last thing I'll say is this. I think if you're sitting in in Beijing shoes, you're looking at this challenge on the one hand, and on the other hand, I think the imperative they feel to focus on growth on economic growth. They have not had the rebound that they anticipated getting out

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of COVID. I think for for China right now, that is job number one. But there is a real tension between that and the absolute imperative of dealing urgently with the climate challenge,

Andrea Mitchell

which we're all feeling here in the US and all over Europe and all over the world now it's become it is reality. Let me ask you about what Russia is doing bombing grain silos, canceling the grain agreement. This is going to increase famine around the world. Food prices are going to go up. And there's real concern now about Russia claiming a false flag as they mine the Black Sea harbours and blaming Ukraine. Is there anything that we can do? I know the UN is having meetings today, but Russia has a veto there. Is there any way that can NATO escort ships through how do we get the grain out quickly, even while we try to help the with overland routes?

Antony J. Blinken

So Andrea first, let's put this in perspective. Of course, this never should have been necessary. The Black Sea grain initiative never should have been necessary in the first place. The only reason it had to happen was because Russia invaded Ukraine and then having invaded Ukraine is decided to blockade its ports, the leading port of Odessa for export to the world of wheat and grain and other food products. And so the United Nations, Turkey helped initiate this this effort. The result over about a year was to get 35 million tonnes of food products out to the rest of the world, predominantly to the developing world. 50% of the food products at least going to the developing world, two thirds of the wheat, that meant people were getting food on the table. It meant that even countries that weren't directly receiving the food products from Ukraine were getting lower prices because it's a world market. Russia by weaponizing food is doing something truly unconscionable throughout this period when the initiative was working, that 35 million tons equates to about 18 billion loaves of bread. Imagine what that means every single day to people living throughout the developing world. So I hope the world is watching this and seeing how Russia is cynically manipulating food in order to advance its objectives in Ukraine. Now, to your question. We're working with allies. We're working with partners who work in the Ukraine to look at other options. But I have to tell you, I don't think it's possible to make up the volumes lost by ending this initiative through through other routes. So we're going to do our best but this has put a deep chill on the shipping insuring and by the way, in the four days since they have ended their participation in this in this arrangement, What have they done Russia? They bombed every single day. The Odessa port, they've laid more mines, they've threatened shipping. In fact, they did an exercise just yesterday that they very deliberately publicized Where they simulated an attack on a ship. What does that tell you about their intentions? What does that tell you about the lack of any basic decency when it comes to getting food where it needs to go?

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Andrea Mitchell

So now there's no way that commercial shipping can proceed. I mean, I'm sure

Antony J. Blinken

it's very I think it's very, very difficult. Because for the shippers for the insurers, given the threats, more than the threats of the action that Russia has taken over the last few days, it would be very hard to operate in that environment. That's why we are looking for alternatives. Were looking for options. I just don't think we can make up the volume.

Andrea Mitchell

What about the false flag?

Antony J. Blinken

Well, we we've raised real concerns about that. I think you've heard Bill Burns, talk to that John Kirby from the White House podium. Again, this is something that is part and parcel of the Russian playbook. We said before the the aggression against Ukraine started. I was at the United Nations a couple of weeks before we laid out in detail the very kinds of false flag operations that they would conduct in anticipation of the attack. That's exactly what they did. We call them on it. The world knew about it. We want to make sure that people see what this is, if it happens for what it is.

Andrea Mitchell

How concerned are you about the counter offensive which is bogged down by Ukraine's own admission?

Antony J. Blinken

Look, these these are still relatively early days. We've said from the start, we've known from the start that this would be hard going you've heard a number of people talk about that. The Russians have laid significant and serious defenses when it comes to mines. Initially, the Ukrainians are working their way through that I believe they have what they need to be very successful. And as they deploy, and as they actually put into this effort. All of the forces that have been trained in recent months, the equipment that we in some 50 countries have provided them. I think that will make a profound difference. But here's what makes the ultimate difference. The ultimate difference is unlike the Russians, they're fighting for their land. They're fighting for their country. They're fighting for their future. They're fighting for their freedom. That is the single biggest difference maker that I think we've already seen. As they taken back

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more than 50% of the territory that Russia initially seized. That's the difference maker going forward too.

Andrea Mitchell

how we can do things Vladimir Putin is by the boarded rebellion.

Antony J. Blinken

You know, it's hard for us to know for sure, and it's hard to and probably wrong to speculate. I think what we can say safely is that we've seen cracks emerge in the facade. The fact that Prigozhin made a direct challenge to Putin's authority. The fact that he questioned publicly, the very premises that Putin has advanced for the aggression against Ukraine that's playing out and will continue to play out. We've seen the ongoing drama too have Where is Prigozhin what is the arrangement with with Putin? We've seen their forces the Wagner forces moved to Belarus, very bad for Belarus because wherever Wagner goes, exploitation, death and destruction inevitably follow. We don't know how this will play out. You know, if I were Mr. Prigozhin, I would remain very concerned. NATO has an open door policy. Russia has an open windows policy needs to be very focused on that.

Andrea Mitchell

I may ask you about Evan Gershkovich and Paul Whelan. Are there any signals from Moscow that they're open to a trade prior to the inevitable conviction on false charges and sentencing, which would be months and months to come? Evan Gershkovich been held already and Paul Whelan has been there almost five years more than five years.

Antony J. Blinken

One of the things that we found not just in dealing with Russia, but dealing with a number of other countries that have arbitrarily detained Americans is that even when we have fundamental differences, fundamental disagreements, and almost by definition, the countries that engage in this practice are countries with which we have profound differences. We're still often able to work discreetly and separately on efforts to bring Americans home. Since President Biden's been in office, we brought 29 Americans who are being arbitrarily detained home from about eight or nine different countries, all countries with which we have very difficult relations. This is something that we continue to work irrespective of anything else that's going on in the relationship will continue to do that.

Andrea Mitchell

Is another country offering someone now that might be helpful in a trade?

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Antony J. Blinken

we are constantly looking on what it might take what it might involve, to get the result that we want. I can't go any further than that. But all I can tell you is this is something that we're doing. Day in day out. Our determination is to bring people home.

Andrea Mitchell

The House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Mike McCaul is calling for President Biden to appoint a special envoy for peace talks for Ukraine now. Are You open to that?

Antony J. Blinken

If we saw any evidence that Russia was interested in having meaningful peace talks, we would be the first to jump on it. Well, maybe the second because I suspect the Ukrainians would be first. No one wants this war over more quickly than the Ukrainians. They're on the receiving end of Russia's aggression every day. Unfortunately, I see zero evidence that Russia is interested and the fundamental problem is this. President Putin believes continues to believe that he can outlast Ukraine, and that he can outlast all of Ukraine's supporters. It's vitally important that we disabuse him of that notion that goes to the support that so many of us are providing Ukraine right now. But it also goes to something very important that we did just a couple of weeks ago, at the Vilnius summit and at the end of the summit, countries came together, including g7 countries and a few others to say that they were going to make a long term commitment to Ukraine's security, help it build up over time, is to turn in defense capacity so that Russia couldn't repeat this exercise. That sends a very strong signal to Vladimir Putin that we're not going anywhere. Ukraine is not going anywhere. And it will have the means to defend itself. If there's a change in President Putin's mindset when it comes to this, maybe there'll be an opening right now. We don't see it.

Andrea Mitchell

On Israel. President Biden has made a very public statement by inviting Tom Friedman into the Oval Office, and basically saying that Prime Minister Netanyahu should not pass those Supreme Court changes. While there's such deep divisions in this country that I should point out Air Force reservists, are for the first time not even showing up for duty. Something that's never happened. Before, and that he should think about the threat to Israeli democracy with so much of a divide. Why was it so important for President Biden to make such a public appeal to the prime minister?

Antony J. Blinken

The president is saying publicly what he shared privately on several occasions with different leaders in Israel. I've had the opportunity to do the same thing. And we come to this from a

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place where of course we have a unique relationship, a unique partnership with Israel spanning back decades. President Biden, more than anyone I know, is in his gut, committed to Israel's security, and that will never change. But as such close partners and friends, we share the concerns that we have with with Israel, and I think it's also born of our own experiences as democracies. This is what joins us together fundamentally, as democracies, we know that when you're making or trying to make major changes that are going to have a big societal impact. The best way to do it is by trying to build consensus by trying to build the most support possible. If you want those changes to be durable. So that's really what he's sharing. I think we've seen Israeli democracy in all of his vibrancy it's it's telling a remarkable story right now, that's that's playing out and I'm confident the system will be able to, to deal effectively with it.

Andrea Mitchell

You know, when we first went to the that first NATO meeting and President Biden message was America is back. And now we see such divisions and so much partisanship, and no longer the bipartisanship that I grew up with on foreign policy. As you look back on what you've accomplished, in the first two years plus, and we look forward to doing this in election climate, what are your your overall goals, the bigger goals?

Antony J. Blinken

Well, first, let me say from from my perspective, in terms of our strength at home and our standing around the world, we are unquestionably in a much better place than we were a few years ago. The investments we've made at home on a bipartisan basis, whether it was in infrastructure, whether it was in our technology and chips, whether it was in the technologies that will power the 21st century economy, including on on climate those investments have resonated not only in the United States, they've resonated literally around the world. Every place I go, people see the United States doing what's necessary to strengthen ourselves at home, to sharpen our competitiveness, to make sure that we are a leading country going forward into this 21st century. Second, we've spent a huge amount of time especially in the first year, working to reengage to re energize to rejuvenate our alliances and partnerships because we're convinced that for all the unique strength we bring to bear. Most of the problems that we're trying to solve that affect the lives of the American people are best and most effectively solved. If we can build partnerships and coalition's to deal with them. We simply can't do it as effectively alone. Now, having done that, we've seen the benefits play out in real time over the last year or two, the coalition that we built to deal with Russia's aggression against Ukraine. That is a product of that initial investment, the work that we've done to build convergence in a very practical way and how to approach China. That is the product of that initial investment. So going forward, you're going to see I think, all of those investments pay off in our efforts to deal with the two big geopolitical challenges that we face that is Russia and its aggression against

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Ukraine, and the challenges it poses more largely, and, of course, the incredibly complex question of how most effectively to deal with China. Putting that aside, there's a whole other subset of problems that are critical to our future and to the well being of the American people. And that is a series of transnational global issues that have a huge impact here at home. And in each and every one. We have either used existing alliances or partnerships that we've rejuvenated, or we've created new ones fit for purpose to tackle them. We started with COVID. We got 671 million vaccines to the rest of the world. 115 countries, free of charge, no political strings attached and we built a group of countries to make sure that that plan was implemented effectively. We've done this with food security, building a global call to action, and we put significant resources into that and had the right countries coming together not only to deal with emergency situations, but also to help countries build their productive capacity. We've done that most recently on the number one killer of Americans, aged 18 to 49. synthetic opioids, fentanyl, just think about that for one second, the number one killer of Americans aged 18 to 49 is fentanyl. So we've taken the responsibility, not just for the work we're doing at home, to try to reduce demand, increase treatment, increase care, not just the work we're doing on our border, to make sure that the drugs that are coming in the synthetic opioids that are coming in 95% of which are coming through legal ports of entry, and we have technology to help detect that not only in the work that we're doing bilaterally with Mexico, on enforcement on taking down the criminal enterprises. We've now globalized this. We put together the State Department put together with other agencies in the government, a global coalition to deal with synthetic opioids. We had our first meeting about two weeks ago. 100 Almost 100 countries joined in this effort and international organizations to make sure that we're cooperating, coordinating, acting together around the world, particularly to prevent the diversion of illicit precursors. Or in this case, in many cases, actually illicit precursors that is legal chemicals. That are diverted into the illicit production of synthetic opioids to make sure that that doesn't happen to share best practices. These are just a few examples of where in different ways, we're creating new coalition's new partnerships to actually tackle the problems that are having a real impact on the lives of our people.

Andrea Mitchell

What I hear from foreign leaders, though, is their concern going into the election, that this could be a detour of by multi-lateralism, and that there could be a real return to isolations depending on who gets elected.

Antony J. Blinken

Well first happily in this job, I don't do politics. But look, here's here's what I can say. Do I hear that concern? Sure. All that those of us who are engaged now in this moment in this work can do and say is look, we have to do the best we can possibly do in the moment that we have. And

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if we do that, if we demonstrate that we can achieve results, that we can make life better for our fellow citizens, then the likelihood goes up, that they will want to sustain that approach they want to sustain those policies. That's the best that I can do in trying to make sure that the work we're doing continues.

Andrea Mitchell

I want to ask you about the artificial intelligence, meaning that the rich there is an agreement today at the White House in the private sector. Seven big companies on standards. How are you doing on your goal internationally with other governments on achieving some standards, especially going into elections in a number of countries, not only ours, where misinformation become a major factor and just look at what happened in 2016 Without AI.

Antony J. Blinken

So this is an urgent goal for us. Right now. The first thing we wanted to do is to try to get our own house in order we have a special responsibility because the companies that are leading the way on AI, particularly on generative AI are American companies, American hardware, and the work that we've done and the work that the White House has done in particular on getting the foundation platforms to agree on a voluntary basis to some some some guidelines for how this technology will be developed, particularly trying to take steps to ensure that it's safe, that it's secure, and that it builds trust with users. We are now taking that and in effect going global. So you'll see in the weeks and months ahead. A lot of work in the first instance to expand the voluntary commitments internationally, to work with g7 countries in the first instance to see if we can develop codes of conduct for companies and regulatory principles for countries to then broaden the conversation even more particularly with other countries that are very sophisticated in AI to see if we can come up with a common assessment of risk. And then what are the best things that we can do together to limit those risks and finally, making sure we have the voices of developing countries. And finally, and this is also a product of what the White House has done with the foundation platforms. We want to make sure that AI maximizes its potential for the extraordinary good that it can do around the world. This is going to be the foundational technology for virtually every kind of progress. We want to see whether it's dealing with disease, whether it's dealing with climate whether it's expanding opportunities and access to education. I could go down the list. The more it's channeled for good, the more we're able to mitigate and control it for the negative consequences it can have, the better off we'll be the United States will be leading that effort around the world. You'll see that play out in the weeks and months ahead.

Andrea Mitchell

Do you have anything on on the calendar right now in terms of an international meeting?

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Antony J. Blinken

Stay tuned. We have actually G7 meetings coming up. The UK is doing an important conference in the fall on AI safety. I suspect you'll see work done around the UN General Assembly as well.

Andrea Mitchell

Now, I have personal experience. I believe we were in Romania. Last time we saw what you would call football what we would call soccer when it was the US versus around. And I've never seen such single focus. And as we watched that match, I mean,

Antony J. Blinken

I remember that well. So I think I aged 10 years and that.

Andrea Mitchell

you're now headed to Wellington, New Zealand. You're going to watch the women play against the Netherlands to see whether they can threepeat and it's Megan Rapinoe's last hurrah. There's a lot at stake. You have a young daughter and Megan Rapinoe and our women have done so much for equal pay as well as bringing such glory to America. So talk to me about women's soccer and your hopes as you head to New Zealand, Australia and this next big trip next week.

Antony J. Blinken

So first, let me be very clear, we have a vitally important strategic dialogue with New Zealand that's taking place next week. Coincidentally, the World Cup. If I'm able to scalp a ticket, you know, maybe we'll get there. I've watched the women's national team for decades. It's one of the most exhilarating exciting things I've seen in any sport. I remember the last World Cup final with the US women's team being really at the edge of my couch. And actually my wife, every line in the cabinet sector of the White House was actually at that match.

Andrea Mitchell

I seem to remember something when we were negotiating the JCPOA it was Secretary Kerry and I was watching it in Germany and Austria.

Antony J. Blinken

One of the big mistakes we've made in the past I remember this actually and I think it was during the last Women's World Cup or maybe I guess it was last one being in the White House situation. And as you know there are television screens and someone made the mistake during a meeting and projecting the game on mute. In the situation. All I can tell you is to

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the extent we were doing any productive work, it stopped. But I'm really looking forward to seeing that it's cheering them on. We then actually go on to Australia from there and this is also I think a very significant because of the partnership relationship that we've been building in remarkable news, new ways in Australia with with Lloyd Austin. The Secretary defense will be there for work with our we call it Austin ministerial meetings between the foreign ministers and defense secretaries to further the partnership with the alliance with Australia. And we'll be stopping in Tonga. We've been spending a little bit of time in the Pacific Islands. We'll be doing doing more of that we'll be opening a new embassy there

Andrea Mitchell

And all this has a lot to do with China of course.

Antony J. Blinken

Well it also has a lot to do with the relationships we're trying to build with these countries that have in the past and a little bit neglected.

Andrea Mitchell

And has a lot to do with soccer. How would you make women team

Antony J. Blinken

it's the challenge they face is they go in his favorites there's also there's always that additional pressure but there's I think no better team in terms of his combination of experience and new talent at the same time. I think they blended together are remarkable cast of players. I have a lot of confidence.

Andrea Mitchell

In addition to football in your misspent youth. You spent so much time as a musician. I've heard you play . And on a somewhat sad but incredibly memorable note. We've lost a great American Italian American musician today. Someone I heard live here in Aspen many years ago. Tony Bennett. So I wanted to ask you your thoughts about the extraordinary career of Tony Bennett?

Antony J. Blinken

Well, that's just it, Andrea, what what an incredible career that is that spanned decades and that rejuvenated in many ways in the last couple of decades of his life. With these incredible collaborations with with new artists. Lady Gaga obviously comes to mind. There's no greater champion of the American Songbook at this Gershwin if it's Cole Porter if it's Rodgers and Hammerstein. That's Tony Bennett. And the wonderful thing about what he what he did is

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connected people so powerfully through what I think is the greatest connector music, and something that will endure those recordings of forever

Andrea Mitchell

certainly was timeless. Well with that. We have some great American young leaders here as well as others in the audience. I want to leave time for questions. And in the front row. Yes, ma'am. We have a microphone coming with our friends from Aspen.

Audience question

Thank you so much for being here. My name is Shannon Payne. I'm a Public Diplomacy practitioner. I work on the International Visitor Leadership Program in that regard. And I have a question about the Foreign Service officer exam in the staffing of the Foreign Service. I know that adjustments made to the exam process over the last couple of years to try to make the Foreign Service more diverse and representative of the United States. Are we seeing results in increased equity and diversity in the Foreign Service at this time? Do we still need a little bit more time to see the results of those changes?

Antony J. Blinken

Thank you for your own work and for your engagement. Just to quickly put this in perspective before coming to this specific question. We are working to build a State Department that actually reflects the country that represents for two reasons. First, it's the right thing to do. But beyond that it's the smart and necessary thing to do. We are operating in the most interconnected and diverse world that anyone can imagine. One of the greatest strengths that we bring to that world is our own diversity, to be able to bring different experiences, different perspectives, different ways of solving problems, to the challenges that we're facing. If we leave so much of that on the sidelines, we're shortchanging ourselves we're shortchanging our foreign policy. We're shortchanging the country so that's why I've been determined to try to make sure that the State Department truly reflects the country that we represent. Part of that is making sure that we're attracting people to the department. And we want to make sure that, for example, when we're looking at their qualifications, we're taking everything into account, not only the work that they do on the Foreign Service exam, which anyone who's taken it knows is a pretty unique beast. So in terms of results, there's a lot that we've we've done and that we put into motion. I think you'll see this play out though over a number of years, not just a number of months. But we now have in place, the plan that we're implementing, to make sure that we have a genuinely diverse, effective department that's attracting people, but also retaining people. One of the things we've experienced over the years is that we get people to the C Street doors, but then some folks disproportionately from underrepresented groups leave. So if we're not able to retain them doesn't do much good. If we bring them in. And we want to make sure

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that the most senior ranks of our department reflect who we are. All of that is happening. And I am convinced that as you look out over the next five or six years, you'll see that play out in the real way. Last thing is this. The most gratifying thing to me is we have more and more people now coming and taking the Foreign Service exam kind of went through the floor for a few years. It's now built back up. We've had the two largest entering classes of Foreign Service officers the last couple of years and we've had the decade.

Andrea Mitchell

Another question from our friend group. Yes, sir. All right, man, you've got a great head start. We love the Foreign Service.

Audience question

I'm Mr. Secretary. I'm actually in state ops right now that I'm a Foreign Service Officer and rising leader

Antony J. Blinken

Thank you for connecting the calls.

Audience question

I wanted to just kind of get your take on what are your concerns with Iran these days? There are unprecedented protests there over the course of six months or so. I just kind of wanted to get your take on how do you see that playing out domestically, and in their connection with Russia and the ongoing war with Ukraine.

Andrea Mitchell

If I could add on should be should the US do more to help the women of Iran or would it not be helpful?

Antony J. Blinken

So thank you, and thank you for for your service. And thank you yes, again for making sure that that we're connected the the Op Center is really the lifeblood of the of the entire department. So thank you. We have a lot of concerns about Iran. We have the concern that after having put its nuclear program in a box with the JCPOA. With that agreement no longer in force. Iran has speeded ahead with the production of fissile material for nuclear weapon, everything the agreement effectively did to stop that has now been lost. And the efforts that we were making to make sure that the breakout time that they would have if they made a decision to produce a nuclear weapon in terms of having fissile material for such a weapon having pushed that past a year now down to a matter of weeks. So I real concerned about that and as well as provocative

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actions that they take with regard to the program. I have a lot of concerns about the actions they're taking throughout the region to support various groups that are engaged in profoundly destabilizing activities. And of course, we were talking about Ukraine a while ago. This is how unfortunately a global enterprise the drones that Iran has provided to Russia for use and Ukraine are having a real and terrible impact. And it's a two way street. We're now seeing Russia provide Iran with equipment and technology they of us they can in the region. So these are deep concerns and then finally at home of course, we've seen the extraordinary protests led by women led by by girls standing up for basic rights. And we've seen the means that the Iranian regime to repress them, we have done a lot of work to try to help people have their voices heard. Not only in the sanctions, not only in the spotlighting, but also in work that we've done to provide technology to people in Iran to make sure that they could to the best of their ability and our ability to stay connected with each other and stay connected with the world. So this is something that's an ongoing concern, but not only our concern, the concern of many other countries around the world. One of the benefits of working to see if we could get back into the nuclear agreement. the JCPOA is that we're in alignment with our European partners with the UK with Germany and France, where they've been a real division. And we're working very closely together to deal with some of the excesses committed by the regime. One final point on this. The other way they've unfortunately gone global is to try to take repressive actions against people halfway around the world for saying and doing things that they don't like, including in the United States. We are pushing back resolutely against all of that,

Andrea Mitchell

Steve we've got time for just a couple more and then change.

Antony J. Blinken

Wait the fix is in this is Steve Clemons. This is not as young as you are Steve, not a not a young leader.

Audience question

Well, great young leaders. Tony, thank you so much. Look, I'm interested in the high level US visits to China and whether China has done anything in response to these visits to justify those coming has Kissinger told you how his trip went? And dp you know where Qin Gong is and what's happened to him.

Audience question

Has Henry has Henry debriefed you?

Antony J. Blinken

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So first, Henry is truly extraordinary. One of the benefits of this job is that I get to speak to him every few months on a whole variety of things. Every single conversation, I learn something get some new insight. And of course, we spoke at length before he made his trip to China, and I'm looking forward to speaking to him probably next week to get a debrief. We've been in regular communication. Look from our perspective, it's very simple. It was important to us to put some stability back into this relationship, to put a floor to make sure that the competition that we're clearly in, doesn't veer into conflict, which would not be in our interest, not be in anyone's interest. And that starts with engagement. It starts because it starts with having a sustained conversation to make sure that at the very least, you're understanding each other. You're clear about intent, and that misunderstandings, misperceptions, don't escalate into something that no one wants. And we've been able to do that. There's also a demand signal that is clear and powerful around the world. And the demand signal on both China and the United States is that we will each work to responsibly manage the relationship because it has an impact not just on our two countries, but literally on the entire world. We've heard that loudly and clearly. And we're acting on it. I think China is now trying to demonstrate that it's doing the same thing. So we had detailed, intense conversations. When I was in China, I think 12 or 13 hours of conversations with Jin Yong Wang Yi with President Xi. Of course, Secretary Yellen, John Kerry. I anticipate other cabinet members will be going and Chinese counterparts will be coming to the United States. I think these contacts these communications are essential. And in fact, it would be irresponsible not to pursue them. If we're actually trying to make progress. Not only in preventing competition for oil and the conflict, but also seeking if in some areas where we have a mutual interest. We can find ways to cooperate and we don't try to do it. That's on us. I mentioned fentanyl before it would be important to see if China won't cooperate with us and other countries actually play a leadership role in dealing with fentanyl because the chemical precursors that right now are going into the illicit manufacturing of fentanyl in Mexico, wind up the United States. We want to work cooperatively with them. We'd like to actually have partnership with China and many other countries in dealing with this. If we're not engaged with them. That's not gonna happen. We have some detainees in China. How are we going to actually get them out? If we're not talking? There are areas of potential cooperation and collaboration, John Kerry, pursuing climate global health, I could go down the list so both in terms of making sure that we are responsibly managing the relationship and dealing directly and clearly with our differences. And also looking to see if there aren't areas where we can cooperate. If we weren't engaged, we would be we would be rightly I think tagged with being responsible. So we are I have no illusions about where that goes. This is, in many ways the challenge of our time. It's the most consequential and probably the most complicated relationship that we have as to the whereabouts of any senior officials. I leave that to my Chinese counterparts.

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Andrea Mitchell

I know we're out of time but Jane Harman very quick, quick question answer because I promised I would call on Jane and this will be 30 seconds Anja, I promise. Congressman,

Speaker 6

Comment on China. Which is that this whole audience loves Nick Burns and hope you'll send our greetings to him. Hope he's safe and and productive there. Question about whether we've approached Turkey to help with the Ukraine grain embargo problem. They border on the Black Sea, Erdogan was just in Vilnius trying to be a good citizen or maybe he was by letting Sweden into NATO. And if he wants to be in the EU, which is another part of his agenda. Shouldn't he be very helpful to us here?

Antony J. Blinken

Firstly, and I'm in violent agreement with you about Nick Burns one of the great great diplomats of our time and obviously, someone very well known to Aspen, having helped lead the strategy, group for so many years. Second, with regard to Turkey, Turkey was instrumental in getting the initiative off the ground in the first place, working closely with Secretary Lew Tarish. They did a terrific job and getting this off the ground. They've done a good job and keeping it going at various periods when the Russians were pulling back. And President Erdogan has said, I think just yesterday that he is engaged with President Putin to see if he can bring them back to the to the agreement so we look to Turkey to play the role that's already played a leadership role in getting this back on track, making sure that people around the world can get the food they need at reasonable prices.

Andrea Mitchell

We are out of time, but I can't think of time better spent than with Secretary Blinken, my greatest thanks to Aspen for letting me do this today and to Secretary Blinken for being with us.