

Fireside Chat with Nicholas Burns

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwc9Nk5QezU&list=PL7fuyfNu8jfP8TWSJzPCsyScNGwbW6xbQ&index=6>

Speakers

- Nicholas Burns, Co-Chair, Aspen Strategy Group; Former Ambassador of the United States to China; Roy and Barbara Goodman Family Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Relations, Harvard Kennedy School
 - **Moderator:** Zanny Minton Beddoes, Editor-in-Chief of The Economist
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Minton Beddoes

It's good to see you. Nick, thank you. Thank you. Anja, I'm delighted to be here again. I have to confess, I've had the pleasure of two Aspen trips within one month this year. I came to the Ideas Festival, and now here, I'm thrilled to be here. I'm thrilled to have this conversation with you. Nick, the it seems, I think opposite that we start this gathering with a conversation about US China relations, because it is really the single most important geopolitical question of our time, how those relations evolve, how the US deals with an increasingly formidable, authoritarian, occasionally aggressive competitor, rival, potential adversary, will shape the world of the 21st Century. It will shape the world the rest of us live in, and I think it's increasingly shaping the US. It's important, I think, to remember the impact that concerns about China, changing policies towards China have had on the US in the last 10 years, there's actually a remarkable, I think, bipartisan consensus in a country that is incredibly polarized, but one thing you can find pretty much everyone agreeing on in Washington is that you need to be tough on China. Now, there's differences between the two sides on tactics, but I would submit that there is a pretty general view that this is the most important thing for the US to get right and from the outside and take this as the observations of someone from the rest of the world, whose life and world is going to be shaped by this. I think it is possible that the US doesn't even, given all of that, realize is the scale of the importance of getting this relationship right. We are as, we will, have already heard from any and we're here again. We're in the foothills of the AI revolution. So we have this geopolitical rivalry at a moment of tremendous technological change. So how this rivalry pans out, will shape the economy of the 21st Century. It may determine who has an unassailable lead. It will, heaven forbid, we can avoid this, but it could lead to the most catastrophic conflict if we get this wrong. And finally, I think there is a risk that in its approach to China, the US risks potentially losing sight of what it is that makes the US great. There is, and I'm going to hopefully, if I can, rile you a little bit. This is why I'm saying this. There is a risk that in its concerns about China, the US loses sight of the openness, the competitive market, the attraction to immigrants, the kinds of policies that make the US great. And I think it would be catastrophic for the world if in a focused rivalry with China, the US loses what is great about the US. So there you go. There you've got my views to start with. I will. I want to start.. we couldn't have a better person to hit, to talk about this with, than Nick Burns. You all know him. S I'm not going to give you the reason, the many reasons, why you're the ideal person, but simply to say, I, every year I go to China, as

you know, every year, around March, I spend about a week there with my colleagues. And almost always the most interesting, or at least one of the most interesting, conversations, is with Nick. We sat at a table in the embassy. You've made clear at the beginning, this was off the record, and then you held forth. I hope you will get at least some of that candor this time. And I want to start by asking you...

Burns

I'm out of government.

Minton Beddoes

Exactly. You're out of government. You're now, you're now at the Kennedy School, my old alma mater, and therefore you have to grade papers. I assume you're teaching classes.

Burns

There's the AI world, so we don't always do papers anymore.

Minton Beddoes

Okay, well, you grade. So I want to start by you assigning a grade to US policy towards China over the last, let's say decade, to make it bipartisan. How well has the US done? Where has it done? Well, where has it not done well?

Burns

Okay, in two minutes or less, because we've got a lot of issues to go through. Welcome Zani. Nice to see you. We usually meet in Beijing. I say this, I think there is a rough consensus between the two political parties that we have to be very competitive with China. And I thought when I left China just before the inauguration, I thought I probably spent with my team about 80% of our collective time on the competitive edge. Is trying to prevent the PLA from becoming a superior military force to the US Navy and Air Force is trying to deal with the technology race, both the commercial aspects of it, AI quantum biotech, and the military applications that are going to that are being spun out that will have consequences for the global balance of power. It's trying to deal, as Janet Yellen and I both did six days with Vice Premier, He Lifeng, about 15 months ago, with this extraordinary Chinese push of low priced below the cost of production, exports dumping to the rest of the world, and Joe Biden put 100% tariffs, remember, on Chinese EVs and trying to engage in the battle of ideas. I think there's a self confidence in China, in the leadership, that their big idea, an authoritarian state controlled by one person at the top, with this resolute Communist Party, is a subpoena that delivers services and high speed trains is a better, they say, a better system than ours, and we contested that. So that was the battle front on the competitive edge, but just two quick points. We also tried to work with China and the Biden administration, because we believe that China and the US have to help lead with the EU and Japan on that issue. In the Paris Accords, we tried to work on fentanyl, President Trump has followed to do that. So it's not just a competitive relationship, it's largely, but there is a competitive, cooperative edge to it. I hesitate to give a grade,

Minton Beddoes

It's your new job.

Burns

I think the American consensus, the rough consensus, is correct. That China is seeking to become the strongest country in the Indo-Pacific. If you think about the map, we should have brought the map, the PLA is pushing out in the Spratlys and Paracels in the South China Sea, in the Senkakus in the East China Sea, certainly in the Taiwan Strait. And the Yellow Sea, opposite South Korea, and on a 2500 kilometer front with India and Himalayas. That is really substantial. And we'll get to this at Aspen this week. If you look at Chris Ray's public statements, our recent FBI director, about the degree to which China has penetrated our own grid here and our networks in the United States, this is a true rival, and so we tried to cooperate, but I think the consensus is, live in peace with China, but compete with China.

Minton Beddoes

So you're too much of a diplomat for me to be able to get a grade out of you. But let me put it a slightly different way. Is China a greater threat now than when you arrived in Beijing?

Burns

Well, we talked today, and one of the things I told Zanny, and I've said this a couple of times since I left, is I went out, like most American officials in both parties with with hawkish views, but in the Biden administration, we also wanted to connect with the leadership, if we could do that and get some things done. So that was our goal, and to live in peace. I came back more hawkish, and your magazine asked me to write an article in February, which I did for the great David Rennie and he said, "Please write an article on what you learned, what were your takeaways?" And that was my prominent takeaway, that I think the problem set is more difficult and complicated. I think the will and ambition and increasing strength of China, technologically, economically, through their intelligence apparatus, and certainly through the PLA it's not just a wake up call. I think we had the wake up call 10 years ago, but it certainly reaffirms where most of us are. We've got to be ready. We've got to up our own game.

Minton Beddos

I think I could summarize that by saying that, yes, it is more of a threat than it was when you went out.

Burns

Well I think it is in the cyber dimension, in space, and certainly, as the PLA continues to test the limits, we've been pushing back. A year ago this month, the US government pushed back as the Chinese challenged Filipino sovereignty in three different atolls in the South China Sea, and China stopped because we reminded the Chinese article four of our treaty with the Philippines is defense, and we were prepared to do that.

Minton Beddoes

So we'll come to defense in a second. But I wanted to try and structure our conversation around three elements of this rivalry. One is the economic arena. The second, broadly the diplomatic

arena, and then the third, and most alarming, the security and defense one. But just let's start with the economic one. And you're obviously not a member of this administration, but you are observing it from the outside. Can you tell me what US policy is trying to achieve with China on trade?

Burns

You know, I think it's actually... I think as I can understand President Trump, Vice President Vance and Secretary Besant, I think they're trying to do, in some ways, maybe with a different order of priorities, what we were trying to do in the Biden administration; here's what we're trying to do. I think both administrations have said, we do not want to see a decoupling of the two largest economies in the world. \$642 billion last year in two-way trade, goods and services, number one. But that we had to reach, had to restrict certain national security dual use technologies that we don't want to end up helping the PLA to overtake the US military. I think there's an agreement on that. Third, we also believe that trade was important. Joe Biden put 100% tariff on EVs, 50% on semiconductor chains and 25% on lithium batteries. I wouldn't have counseled 145% in April, but I got to tell you, I think President Trump is right to be tough minded, to push a tough deal. I think Secretary Besset has been impressive in his discussions with her He Lifeng, the Vice Premier, who's a very close associate of President Xi and is really the overall coordinator of economic policy, and we've got to drive a hard bargain, because, as Secretary Yellen said publicly, China is exporting two to... producing two-to-three times domestic demand in steel, robotics, EVs, lithium batteries, solar panels, dumping them on the rest of the world. Whose raised tariffs against China last 10, last 12 months? India, Turkey, South Africa, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, the US, Canada, and Europe. So I actually think there are a lot of parallels and connections between President Biden's approach, President Trump's approach, and I wish President Trump success in it.

Minton Beddoes

Well, I think that's true. There is a lot of commonality. But let me, let me give perhaps the opposite view, which is that one could look at the last three months and argue that actually the threatening tariff strategy has been somewhat of a failure, who climbed down on tariffs with China? In the end, the US. China is the country that has been playing hardball with its rare earth export controls, and I think there's a plausible argument that actually, the last three months have shown that China has the upper hand in this economic relationship, and that you can threaten as much as you like. In the end, the US backs down, and China is standing tough.

Burns

I'm glad you asked about this, because I respectfully disagree on two points. It's a symbiotic relationship. It really has been building since Deng Xiaoping... since Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the late 70s, early 80s. We have more than 10,000 American companies in China. We've got multiples of that trading with China from the United States. It's really important to us. It's also important to the Chinese. We're their largest export market. I think one of the reasons why I would predict there's going to be a trade deal, logic and self interest will lead both of them towards the deal, and there can't be a summit meeting, I think, Chinese wouldn't have it, without a trade deal. But why is that going to happen? Chinese was very clear. I was in China during our

election day, and I knew the moment that President Trump won, I began hearing from Chinese officials. They were preparing for a showdown, but we were too, and President Trump and Scott Besant were prepared. Yes, the Chinese withheld rare earths, we withheld ethane. We withheld critical components in the semiconductor industry. I think it was kind of a standoff right now. Unfortunately, I see a lot of articles saying there's been an agreement. There's no agreement. There's a truce. But the truce, I think, will lead both sides to climb down, eventually, not at 0% tariffs. I can't imagine taking President Biden's 100% tariffs on EVs off, EV's off, given BYD. So I guess I see a little different.

Minton Beddoes

But what is this just, and you would expect this from me as the someone who runs a magazine that fights for free trade, but I'm still trying to understand what the strategic purpose of this deal would be, what would be the definition of success in a deal with the Chinese?

Burns

Well, our principal problem in trade with the Chinese has been for the American companies, particularly the manufacturing companies that are in China, and many of them have been there for several decades, is that the playing field is not level. One of the things I did, I met nearly every CEO who came through China, and I felt that was a good use of my time. Story after story about forced technology transfer, about not applying the international rules concerning intellectual property thefts. And that goes on in spades in that country. And I think President Trump has been talking about that and trying to make sure that at the end of any deal, there might be a better way for American companies to be competitive. And what I don't know, and I think what none of us know, is, will the reciprocal tariffs that President Trump has put in down in almost every country in the world? Will they be the new baseline in US-China trade? We don't know that yet, but you know, since President Trump has put a lot of effort into this, and he's also talked more positively about his personal relationship with President Xi, and you'll notice that Senator Secretary Rubio had a, what he said was a positive and constructive meeting with Foreign Minister Wang Yi last week in Malaysia, I think we're seeing a creeping path towards some kind of a deal. Don't know the outlines, but that would be the prediction.

Minton Beddoes

That may well be the case, that you, you have a deal. But if you, if you zoom out a bit, and you look at China, and I'm we've had these conversations every time I came to Beijing, you know, to simplify somewhat, two years ago or three years ago, when the two sides were not talking to each other, it really did feel as though we were on the drum beat towards some kind of conflict. This time, when I was there in March, after the inauguration, before liberation day, my sense was from Chinese interlocutors... Firstly, I was stunned by the number of Chinese officials who said to me, what is happening in Washington reminds them of the Cultural Revolution. And there were so many of them, and I felt there had to be some kind of a sort of official sanction that they were allowed to say this, but secondly, that they felt the approach that and the tariff based approach was going to, quote, make China great again, because it was going to accelerate China's push towards domestic consumption, and China's push into high-end manufacturing. If you look at the industries of the 21st Century, whether it's clean energy, whether it's high-end

manufacturing, China is in many ways streets ahead of the US. I mean, you've been you've been there, you've seen it. How much does that worry you? And how much is this tariff policy the appropriate way to, for the US to retain its economic lead?

Burns

Well, let me just talk about tariff policy towards China. I think that's your question. I think President Trump is right to be tough minded. I see him heading for a deal with China now on the rest of it is global, reciprocal tariffs. I actually supported what President Obama, and his US Trade Rep Mike Froman, proposed in 2015-16, and that is a big free trade deal in the Indo-Pacific. And you see the consequences of that, China is the leading trade partner of 120 countries in the world, all of Southeast Asia, all of Central Asia, parts of South Asia, nearly all of Sub-Saharan Africa, and as we were flying into Lima Peru for president, Biden's last summit meeting on November 15, 2024, The New York Times had this extraordinary color coded map. In 2002, United States was the lead trade partner of every country in South America. In 202, China was a leading trade partner. Clearly, there's gotta be a reflection. I know it's not fashionable in an era of industrial strategy and also a protectionism to say we've got to look again at free trade. But China is outpacing us, and with that trade, and with a trillion dollars spent, and that's the rough estimate of the Belt Road initiative, from 2012 to 2024, China has an enormous cloud in the global Global South. One of the questions, Zanny asked me earlier today, is, what do you regret? And I think what we should regret, the United States, is the loss of influence and even competitiveness in in the vast Global South. I'll just give you one example, the Chinese locked up 1 million Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, between 2017 and 2019, and the party secretary of Xinjiang told two of my European ambassadors, this past autumn, that they had done that. They're now trying to cover it up. We, the Europeans, the Japanese, the Australians, the New Zealanders and Americans, Canadians, tried to take China to the UN Human Rights Council and shine a bright light. And guess what? We didn't have the boats. Why didn't we have the boats? Because Belt Road, because of trade, whether it's the indebtedness or the gratitude, frankly, in some cases, of some of these countries, and I worked with all the Arab ambassadors, not a single one of them stood up for the Uyghur population. So you see the clout that China has. Do I regret that? Absolutely, because I believe our system is better. I know our values are stronger. I don't want to see the Communist Party of China have this kind of influence in our hemisphere.

Minton Beddoes

That gets to the second area. So we've, I think, respectfully disagreed a little bit on economics. Let's turn to diplomacy, where, as you say, China has gained influence, I think, in the Global South, just as the US has lost. How important is that arena? And do you think China wants to create a different kind of global system, of which it is the hegemon, or does it have a different approach?

Burns

So there's one story or fact to illustrate this. Every year I was in China until the middle of January, and poor Mr. Wang Yi went to Africa the week I left. It was the 35th consecutive year that the Chinese foreign minister, whoever that person is, went symbolically to Africa first as the

year began. That's powerful. I was in Beijing last October when President Xi invited 54 heads of government from Sub-Saharan Africa. 53 came. He had 33 bilateral meetings in four days. You have to put the effort in and the time in. We need to do that. But let me just say something else about the Chinese. I think they were threatened, and I felt it in my bones as I talked to them over the last couple of years, by the fact that President Biden strengthened our alliance with Japan, with South Korea, with Thailand, our security partnership with India, our alliance, treaty alliance with Australia and there are a lot of European officials here tonight, the incredible relationship that we had, that President Biden had with Ursula von der Leyen. And we have our great Julie Smith, our great ambassadors in NATO here who worked that end of it, as I was working the China end of it, we had a consensus on many of these issues about how to push back against China, as well as work with it from the EU and NATO as well as the Indo Pacific allies, the Chinese felt threatened. What did they try to do? They tried to build the BRICS up. The only problem is the BRICS operate by consensus, and India is in it, and they've now got Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, they don't always think, sometimes they're with China, sometimes they're not. The BRICS isn't a competitor to this incredible alliance system that every President has built up since the Second World War. And my... I said some supportive things to President Trump, and I meant them. Here's my criticism. You can't question the sovereignty of Denmark about Greenland, you can't contest the whole national history of Canada, our great friend and neighbor, I would say, beloved. I'm from New England. We're neighbors. And you can't our allies feel subservient to the United States. And I think right now, you know, I'm just reading the way you are, I'm trying to talk to a lot of people. US-Japan, tensions on trade. US-South Korean tensions were somehow reviewing the AUKUS agreement. Michael Foley is here. I hope he speaks this week. He's really smart. From the Lowy Institute in Sydney, on this and we talked about it today. You know, one of the takeaways I wrote about in your magazine was, be nice to your allies. Respect them, because they are the difference maker between the United States and China. China has no allies. They just got some trade partners. That's important. But when the going gets tough, it's the Allies you have to count on.

Minton Beddoes

It's a really important point, and it's not just the allies that you laid out, but it's also the other big shift of this administration has been the closure of USAID and the differential approach in Africa and other areas of the Global South. Is that an opportunity for China, and is China going to grab it?

Burns

Well, the other own-goal that I think the Trump administration has scored is, frankly, the abysmal DOGE effort to destroy a great, a great but flawed, US government agency and fire 8500 people in two weeks. What CEO here would do that you got to reform. Sometimes you got to downsize. Sometimes people lose their jobs, but you do it thoughtfully. We didn't do it thoughtfully. What happened? China is out replacing us, where USAID was doing tremendous work on vaccines. PEPFAR started by George W Bush, and you can't replace that. The other thing that I regret was concomitant with it. We shut down the Voice of America, and we shut down Radio Free Asia. We thought we had several 100 million listeners in the Chinese speaking world, in mainland China, in Thailand, in Malaysia, in Singapore, and they were telling the truth to the

Chinese people. They were getting through the firewall. We shut them down. What happened? And I think the New York Times did a really good story on this the other day, and that is CGTN and China Radio just replaced the VOA hours in India, Indonesia, and Ethiopia, you know, their national TV program would give VOA an hour now it's been given to the Chinese. So you can't compete in this public diplomacy realm, in the aid realm, in the trade realm, unless you're offering something to people,

Minton Beddoes

Absolutely I think, I think probably everybody in this audience would second that. I want to make sure there's time for some questions. But so I want to, just before doing that, they touch on the third and perhaps most alarming aspect of the relationship, which is defense and security. And ask you straight up, how dangerous is the situation in Taiwan?

Burns

I think Taiwan is ultimately the most dangerous point on the map between the United States and China. And I was in Beijing on August 2 three years ago, 2022 and Speaker Pelosi visited Taipei. And by the way, we supported her visit publicly, and I supported it privately with the Chinese, and left them in no doubt about that. But the consequence was, since 1954 there's been a median line in the Taiwan Strait. The Chinese forces, the mainland forces, had not really gone beyond that median line permanently. But now you look at the status of forces, both on the sea, this is PLA Navy, in the air - there's sorties - they're well beyond. They created a new status quo, well beyond the levels of activity. And I think what, what most people think about, and I was asked about this in an Aspen program yesterday, "Well, are they going to invade over 100 kilometers," 100 miles, excuse me, "of open water?" I think the first thing to worry about is a creeping strategy of blockade and of almost strangulation, and that that is something that the Chinese have the capacity to do. They may have the will to do. And here again, it is so important for the US. And I went in with my European colleagues, my Japanese colleagues, together, for the Chinese to say, if you do something in the Taiwan Strait, there's going to be massive sanctions by three: the EU, the United States and Japan. That's 60% of global GDP. I think the Chinese recognize that, and we're just trying to deter them. And so the Biden strategy was to build up the defenses of Taiwan. I'm very glad to see the Trump administration continuing that, and I hope there's been a realization that part of the battle here in, Zannie, is that we need to support Ukraine, because if the Chinese see that Putin gets away with murder in Ukraine and with a huge historical crime, I think that will change for the worse, Chinese thinking on what could be possible in Taiwan. I think they'll conclude in China, if the US and Europe didn't save Ukraine or protect Ukraine from Russia, why would they stand up to us on behalf of little Taiwan? And I tried to disabuse the Chinese of this notion. You know, we've had this policy for 52 years of strategic ambiguity, but look at the facts. President Biden was a big supporter of arming Taiwan, and it's good to see the Taiwanese do two things in the last year, acquire and begin to produce drones at a massive scale and to achieve attack weapons as well that can be counterproductive for the Chinese navy.

Minton Beddoes

So strategic ambiguity became a little less ambiguous under President Biden. Do you think, for good or ill, he was pretty clear on several occasions. Do you think President Trump would defend Taiwan if there was an attack, or indeed, a blockade?

Burns

I don't know the answer to that question. I mean, it's a really serious question. I can't speculate. I've seen, you know, statements from the campaign which were not encouraging. But then again.. I mean, I was appalled when my wife Libby and I watched what happened to President Zelensky in the Oval Office in February. I was appalled when President Trump confused who the victim was and who the aggressor was in that conflict. But then look what happened Monday, and for everyone, has been a critic of President Trump, and I've been a critic, I came out yesterday here in Aspen and said, "Good for President Trump and Secretary General Mark Rutte of NATO Europe, NATO and the United States." And we have a NATO foreign minister here from Latvia. We're going to supply weapons together to the Ukrainians. So, and President Trump seems exasperated by Putin, good. Let's see if it's permanent. We've got to keep the pressure on. But this is a promising, we hope, turnabout by President Trump.

Minton Beddoes

Let's open for a couple of questions at the time we've got left. Yes, Lady there three rows back. If you could wait for microphone and keep it very short so we get a couple in.

Anniken Huitfeldt

So my name is Annika, and I'm the Norse ambassador. I wanted you to say something on the relationship between China and Russia.

Minton Beddoes

Excellent question. China and Russia?

Burns

Okay, I think it's a serious strategic alliance. It is grounded in two aging, and I can say that because I'm aging too, but a little bit younger than both of them, two aging autocrats, and they have met 52 times. They've called each other their best friends. I think that they have cemented for the time being, I don't think it's forever more a very important strategic alliance between the two countries. I was exasperated by the Chinese in February, March, April of 2022 when they told me, we're neutral in the war. They're not neutral in the war. They've protected Russia at the Security Council. They have given, they've supplied about 90% of the microelectronics to the Russian defense industrial base. They want Russia to win. And so the Europeans who are here, and we have the Foreign Minister of Iceland, Foreign Minister of Latvia, we have a lot of ambassadors here. I hope they can all speak up this week. They've been exasperated, for our European friends and allies, this is an existential issue. Europe's been divided by Putin in autocratic Russia and a Democratic West, and the Europeans have really put a chill into the US, into the EU-China relationship. Because of this, Chinese are normally, I think, quite good diplomatically, quite sophisticated. They missed this. They were shocked that Europe ended the investment treaty back in 2022 and Europe joined us in sanctions against Chinese companies

who were helping Russia. And I know there's an EU-China Summit coming up, it doesn't look like it's going to amount to much, as long as the Chinese are in the Russian camp, and they are one more point. There were a series of unequal treaties between the Qing Empire and the Romanovs. And it's interesting. You know, everything's controlled in China. In my last few months in China, obscure academics in regional Chinese universities wrote articles that were published about these unfair treaties the Chinese, remember, and so I don't think this is an alliance. Our alliance with Europe is forever. I don't think this China-Russia alliance is going to take them into the 2040s or 50s, but these two early 70s guys who want to cut the United States and Europe down to size, and Japan, I think it's real for the next as long as they're both in power, which may be, who knows, another 10 years. Thank you.

Minton Beddoes

Fourth gentleman, there's a microphone coming, if you could just wait for that, so everyone can hear your question.

Broder

Nicholas, Jonathan Broder from SpyTalk. Several years ago, the Chinese Ministry of State Security rolled up a lot of our intelligence assets in China, and under former CIA Director, William Burns, no relation to you, I suppose.

Burns

A very close friend.

Broder

Yeah, he began rebuilding our intelligence apparatus in China. My question is, how successful have we been? What is the state of Us Intelligence?

Burns

Jonathan, we are long time friends.

Broder

I had to ask you.

Burns

I was a former spokesperson, and I'm a trained diplomat, there's one issue we never talk about, and that's intelligence. So I'm not going to, respectfully, answer your question. Thank you. That gives... let's have a beer later. But I won't talk about intelligence.

Minton Beddoes

Well attempted and well deflected. I guess that's time for another question. Yes, gentleman here at the front, but make sure it's a question that can be answered. Front Row, front row. Gentleman, in the corner.

Marc Nathanson

Nick, what's China doing in the Arctic?

Burns

So here we have a great American Ambassador to Norway, Ambassador Nathanson, and we were colleagues separated by several 1000 miles. It's interesting. Norway, of course, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, the United States, Canada, certainly, and Russia, I probably left out some charter members of the Arctic Circle, but China considers itself a near-Arctic power, so they were always coming to me, because we're a member of the Arctic Council to see if they can get into the meetings. And we were always trying to deflect Chinese entry into the meetings, because we assumed the Chinese would join forces with the Russians, which they often do. But thank you for what you did with our great ally. I mean that in the case of NATO, you know, pound for pound, the Norwegian military has been beside us in every war. And I want to say one more thing about Canada, because it's such an acute issue for us. On 9/11, I was the ambassador to NATO, and the very first person who came to me in Brussels was the Canadian ambassador, David Wright, and I'll never forget what he said. He said, "We're with you. We think we should invoke Article Five, the entire alliance will be with you. Go for it." And I've always remembered the Canadians for that, and the Norwegians, and they all stood up. And Julie was a great American Ambassador to NATO. And I'll just say this because Condi Rice is coming in a couple of days,

Minton Beddos

And you're standing right there.

Speaker 2

She'll pull us off the stage in a minute. Condi was National Security Advisor on September 12. We were just about to invoke Article Five. I figured I needed adult presidential supervision, because we knew it was a war, a declaration of war against Osama bin Laden. I called Condi. I said, I need the President's authority. She said, go for it. I said, Condi, thank you. I need the President's authority. She said, go for it. Tried a third time. She said, Nick, you've got the President's authority. I said, I will go for it. I'll vote for it. And she said, one more thing before we get off the phone. I said, What's that? And she said, and I've never forgotten this, it's good to have friends in the world, and it's good to have allies in the world. And as I've seen, some of the attacks on our allies, particularly Denmark and Canada, been reminded of that scene when we were down, when we were hit hard, the Europeans and the Canadians came to our defense, and they all went into Afghanistan and Iraq with us. So good for them.

Speaker 1

So good for the Canadian. Anja, indulge me just for 30 seconds, because that is a wonderful stirring note on which to end this panel. But I would not be a good journalist if I didn't finally ask you one tougher question. And you're clearly not going to give grades, but maybe you'll give probabilities, which is over the next 10 years, what odds, you can give ranges you can give adjectives do you attach to the risk of conflict between outright conflict between the US and China?

Burns

So let's end on this, and I'm going to try to give it some hope. At the end, I think that there's a major problem, and that is the PLA has been closed to any kind of communication or conversations with the Asian allies, Australians, Japanese or with us during the balloon crisis, I was in Beijing. I was talking to the Vice Foreign Minister of China, and I kept saying to him, what we want is a conversation between Mark Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or Lloyd Austin, the Secretary of Defense, because that looks like a military balloon that drifted slowly across the Rocky Mountains all the way to South Carolina, and they refused to talk to Chairman Milley and Secretary Austin. And that was repeated time and again. One of the hopeful things that happened in the last summit between President Biden and President Xi was that they agreed that Admiral Sam Paparo, who was to be with us this Thursday in Aspen, the Indo-Pacific commander would have discussions with the southern and eastern theater commanders of the PLA they've had a couple of meetings. They've all been made public, but I don't think that has translated in the last couple of months into any improvements. So what I worried about nightmare scenario when I was out in Beijing was two ships collide by accident, or two planes collide, and that's happened before, 2001 and we can't even get them on the phone. And so your questions the most serious question. I think there is a problem. There is a possibility, certainly it's a serious one, that an accident might lead to something that we don't want to have happen. So that gives us two things we've got to do. And I really wish President Trump and my successor, David Perdue, and he's a very good man, and I've supported him publicly. President Trump's ambassador to China. He's a good ambassador. We've got to convince the Chinese leadership that's Xi Jinping to open up relations between the Defense Department and our mission in China, our embassy and the PLA because if you can do that, and if you have people, you can call at three in the morning, we can then separate the forces and lower the temperature and avoid a mistake leading to a conflagration. I think it's that serious and I would end on this point President Biden's instruction to me and to Secretary Blinken and to Jake Sullivan, all of us, was we've got to live in peace with China too. And I've been encouraged to see President Trump say that for all the competition, all the complicated complications and all the mistrust between us we are too big and too powerful in the nuclear weapons AI cyberrage to to have a probability of going to war together. And so the United States and China have to commit that we're going to compete as structural rivals, but we're going to live side by side, and we're going to live in peace together. And that word peace is too infrequently used in our national discussion. I think it's possible to do this. It's a very complicated situation, but we've got a good, we've got a good ambassador in Beijing right now, and some good people in the Trump administration, who I think are onto this, I wish them well.

Minton Beddoes

That's a very good place to answer. Thank you very much.