

## **Aspen Security Forum - December 04, 2024**

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### **Andrea Mitchell**

At Aspen Strategy, and, of course, the Deputy Secretary, Kurt Campbell. Thank you very much. It's not as though there aren't things, few things going on in the world right now to take your time. So let's start with, of course, South Korea, and the fact that the President is now facing potential impeachment from the opposition party which controls the National Assembly, following his surprise declaration of martial law, he's reversed it. Do you think that he will be impeached? Do you think he will survive in office? What is the stability of such a critical ally when we have 30, nearly 30,000 American troops to support that?

### **Campbell**

First of all, Andrea, thank you very much to the Strategy Group and to Anja for inviting us, and I think Andrea is right. What transpired over the last 24 hours in South Korea, in the ROK, was completely, deeply unpredictable and unlikely, and I think President Yoon badly misjudged. And I think the memory of previous experiences of martial law have a deep and negative resonance in South Korea. And so what was notable, late last night, or the night before, after President Yoon had issued his martial law decree in the Constitution, a majority can vote to rescind that martial law, and members of both parties, both the opposition and the ruling party together, voted all the members that were in the General Assembly to rescind martial law according to the Constitution, and President Yoon abided by that statute in the Constitution. And so you point out, politics in the ROK are deeply polarized and divided. The fact that both parties can agree that this step was deeply problematic, I think in many ways, is deeply reassuring about the strength and depth of democracy in the ROK. And frankly, we've watched this over the last couple of days. We've had many interactions with our ROK interlocutors, and they take some pride in the resilience of their democracy, the fact that they've managed to stand clearly and firmly against these actions. I think our expectation now, Andrea, is that there will be a lot of back and forth, but not in all likelihood, involving the military, but in the realm of politics, in the corridors of power. And that is what we hope and what we expect. I think it is likely that the next few months, the ROK will be in a challenging place. Our goal is to make clear that our alliance is absolutely rock solid. We stand with them, but ultimately to have the confidence that they will be able to work through these issues, through their own means and their own mechanisms. And we have confidence in that.

### **Mitchell**

It is truly remarkable that so many people turned out in protest for democracy that the military did not fire on them. It was the non-counter-Tianamen, just to mix a lot of geographies and metaphors.

### **Campbell**

It is a bit, Andrea, but when we asked the question like, what is the role of the United States? What is the purpose of our engagements, how do we think about what we've accomplished and where we are in the world? The nature of the robustness of the democracy in many of the countries in Asia and South Korea, the ROK first and foremost, is something that we should very much reflect on. This a powerful symbol in the fact that people were prepared to come out and make clear that this was a deeply illegitimate process and that would be met by the will of the people and frankly, the will of the legislative bodies. I think we have to take some comfort and confidence in that.

### **Mitchell**

One question that does occur is the surprise that the US was completely unprepared for this happening. Secretary Blinken said it was a surprise. He said that today. Don't we have better intelligence on the inner workings of a close ally, and do you have no heads up at all that he was going to declare martial law?

### **Campbell**

I mean, the only thing I can tell you to that Andrea is that almost all of our interlocutors inside the ROK government, the foreign minister, the finance minister, many of the key players that we work with in the president's office, or we call the Blue House, were themselves deeply surprised by this. And so, you know, we have good insights into a variety of things, but in global politics, there are always are going to be situations where there are developments that are unforeseen. I will also say that, like the toughness of politics in the ROK, you know, it probably has taken a toll. I mean, this has been very tough over the course of last year, lots of challenges, lots of moves on impeachment, lots of questions about, you know, activities of the President and his wife. That is not in any way meant to be an excuse, but it gives you a sense of what some of the pressures that were, that are being faced are. Our commitment, though, is to the country and to the alliance, which is one of the most important alliances on the global stage.

### **Mitchell**

Let me ask you about Pyongyang then, and the closer and strategic relationship now between North Korea and Russia, with the deployment of North Korean troops in Europe, really causing a red line. I mean, there was the exchange of missile technology, munitions to Russia, technology to enhance the targeting and accuracy of North Korean missiles from Russia, but to actually deploy those troops, and it could be an unlimited number of ground troops.

## **Campbell**

Yeah, what we have seen is something that we view as deeply provocative. It is not only been the provision of really frontline combats, Special Forces from North Korea, onto the battlefield in Russia against Ukrainian forces. But it's also the provision of huge amounts of military over months, artillery, missiles, and the like. This is a... Russia and North Korea have always had a closer relationship, that, as you point out. Andrea, this is a step change that is significant. In return, we're concerned by some of the capabilities that Russia is providing for North Korea. Also energy, hard currency. It puts North Korea in a situation where it can be even more dangerous than it has been. And so you're... I think what we've seen is that the two most important enabling forces on the battlefield in Ukraine have been first, the Chinese support for the defensive industrial base in Russia, which has been sustained and significant over years, and now the provision of troops and armaments to Russia from North Korea. So you could make an argument that the most decisive actors currently on the battlefield are Indo-Pacific actors, North Korea and China, affecting what's taking place on the ground in Ukraine and that's something that we have to be very concerned by. One of things that I think I appreciate this forum that has been achieved over the last several years is a much closer dialogue between Europe, the United States, and the Indo-Pacific. And I think that dialogue is significant. It's important. It has security manifestations, economic dimensions. I think we very much want that to continue. There are countries that are... have anxieties about that, France in particular, but I think at the same time, the logic of this continuing integration of these two theaters, work with with our key partners and allies, I think that should continue, and I think will continue. I would just point out, if you think we've been talking about South Korea, when the then Prime Minister of Japan, Fumio Kishida, he came to the United States for his state visit, he made an address to the both houses of Congress. If you ask most of the congressmen that ended up voting for the supplemental for Ukraine, what tipped the balance after months and months of hesitation, it was the appeal made by Prime Minister Kishida. None of them expected that an Asian leader would make an argument to them that the security of how the Ukraine circumstances played out had a direct, manifest implications for security in the Indo Pacific. And I think that logic continues to apply, and we have to apply ourselves to building those interactions going forward. We have friends here from Great Britain. We're very proud of the very strong dialogue that we've developed between London and Washington, thinking about the Indo Pacific, not just in AUKUS, but how we coordinate and across the board. Andrea, my hope will be that as we work through this transition, that this is one of those areas of enhanced cooperation that will continue.

## **Mitchell**

Well to that point, the new NATO Secretary General, Mark Rutte, has warned Donald Trump that the pressure on Ukraine to make concessions to Vladimir Putin at the negotiating table endangers our security here, as well as the security of all our allies.

## **Campbell**

What I've been so impressed by in the last several weeks is how clear European colleagues and friends have been to the newly elected president and people around about what the stakes are and about why this has to be considered so carefully. I can tell you that these are topics that are being discussed among the fledgling efforts of the transition. And I think people recognize around President Trump the nature of the stakes involved. I don't think easy decisions lie ahead, but at the same time, Europe has been so clear about the need to ensure that if there is a move to a more diplomatic or political set of interactions, that we the united effort in Europe and the United States have to stand firmly behind Ukraine in any outcome.

### **Mitchell**

Do you think that the new administration here will support a united effort, a NATO effort, to give Ukraine the kind of pre-NATO security guarantees that might make a negotiation more balanced and more successful?

### **Campbell**

So, look Andrea, it's hard to get in the business of predicting what a new group of people would say.

### **Mitchell**

Just say how important it is for the United States to stand with our allies, put it that way.

### **Campbell**

I think it is extremely important, but one of the disciplines associated with doing party documents and convention, where you ration part and fighting about what the platform is, is that some of the most important debates are dealt with in advance, and so you have kind of a sense of what the key priorities and game plans are. I think, in fact, that we're going to find that some of the most important, difficult debates are yet to be waged and that you're going to have substantial debates on basically core issues. How to think about countries that are antithetical to our interests on certain issues? How do you think about China? How do you think about Russia? How do you view the importance of allies? My hope will be, I think what President Biden and frankly, building on a history of bipartisanship has shown, is that working with other countries and their partners on the global stage is in the best interest of all involved. Almost all opinion polls in the United States reflect that recognition of how important it is to work with other countries. I would say, I think, that the partnerships that we built in Europe, some of the new frameworks, like like AUKUS, like the quad, like the trilateral, between United States and Japan and South Korea, these are important elements that lead the United States into the fabric of global politics in ways that I think actually secure and enhance our interests. And my hope is that that logic will be obvious and will continue. That is one of the reasons why European voices are so important. What we saw last time during the transition, I'll just say this, there were a couple of countries that weighed in very hard with President Trump in advance, like Prime

Minister Abe, a couple of others. Some European countries stood back a bit and waited. We have not seen that. We've seen European partners weighing in quickly on their interests, their perspectives, what they view is important in the role of the United States. That's healthy, that's important, it suggests a degree of learning and understanding about how important it is to engage early, and that's happening.

**Mitchell**

There was recently a notable prisoner swap with China to get three Americans out and is that a path that can still be pursued? There were some 200 people, Americans and others, being held in China right now.

**Campbell**

Some of those are on what we call exit BC issues. So it's, you know Andrea, and it's a complex mixture of people. Some of them are...

**Mitchell**

But are there others we can...?

**Campbell**

Yeah, so look, I will say this, President Biden has made clear that there are a number of places where Americans and others are being held. He has empowered the people at the White House and the State Department. Roger Carstens is our person that works on this to basically leave no stone unturned, and that's what's ongoing. And I expect that we're going to see some efforts right down to the wire. I will say to countries who take prisoners, like Russia, it's an incredibly challenging set of circumstances, because the more you demonstrate your urgency and your need to get people out, the more the quote unquote price tends to go up, the reluctance to actually do what's right in these circumstances. That has not stopped us and we've been able to really go after a number of major prisoners involved in other countries as well and I think we'll do that.

**Mitchell**

You've been a consumer of intelligence throughout your career, and know the value of good intelligence and reliable intelligence. How important is it to have people running the intelligence agencies who have experience, who have no prior biases or preconceived notions, who have clear abilities to take raw data and analysis and understand assessments, especially someone who's going to be editing the final edit of the PDB every day and appointing the briefer?

**Campbell**

So I have to say it's been my great good fortune over the course of at least this administration, to be in almost daily or very regular briefings with Avril Haynes and Director Burns. And, Andrea, I don't think I'm charting a new course here, they're like two of the most impressive, admirable people that you can imagine. When I see Director Burns, Bill, out representing the United States, I think he's one of the most impressive, effective actors, but also his counsel on how to think about complex intelligence matters. I always note when he talks, there's that extra silence in the room because people are listening extra hard, and so I'm very proud to have worked with him, and I hope that the next administration will choose and confirm people that have equal respect and trust. It's hard to match Bill Burns and Avril Haynes, though.

**Mitchell**

I've been told by senior diplomats among our Five Eye partners that while a lot of it is hardwired, there will be some compartmentalization if some of the people mentioned, like Tulsi Gabbard, are confirmed.

**Campbell**

I can't speak to that. Andrea.

**Mitchell**

Do you worry that we'll lose some of the sharing that we have relied on from our closest intelligence allies?

**Campbell**

I have heard this reported; I don't know further. All I can tell you is one of the things that is clear to me, as I worked at this level, is that beneath the scenes is an incredibly intricate trust-based set of relationships between our intelligence and law enforcement agencies, particularly in Europe and increasingly in the Indo-Pacific. And every element of what we are able to do internationally benefits from that partnership. It is unbelievably close. It's rarely in the headlines. And I think the United States has an interest in doing everything possible to see that it continues.

**Mitchell**

Finally, you've authored a number of books. One of them is called *Difficult Transitions: Foreign Policy Troubles at the Outset of Presidential Power*.

**Campbell**

Yeah, that's sold about seven copies.

**Mitchell**

But obviously well titled.

## **Campbell**

It is only ever brought up right now, like during these transition periods. There four days after the election and then four days during the transition. Yeah, I did write that book with Jim Steinberg.

## **Mitchell**

What if you were doing a book report on that book, what would you think would be the crises that you would kindly advise the incoming team to be alert to? So, Andrea, it's a great question and an important one. Look, I think it is no secret that the challenges that you've raised in Ukraine will be top of mind. We haven't talked as much, but also, obviously, we have a strong team that's worked on the Middle East, but these are incredibly difficult issues. Just in the last three days, we've had a couple of issues that have arisen that will be demanding of attention to the senior team that's coming in. One is, again, somewhat unexpected, onslaught against government positions in Syria that changes the balance of power inside the country. That's going to require attention and all the various actors that play there: Hezbollah, Iran, they're reevaluating their stance in the Middle East. What happened in South Korea, despite your question, completely unanticipated, and we need to respond to that, less in the headlines. What's going on in Haiti, a country where we're working on peacekeeping efforts and stabilization, but very challenging. And then on top of that, so many hard international multilateral meetings and engagements. We had important meetings in Baku as part of climate discussions, whether those will continue the work that was done unsuccessfully, but progress was made on plastics. Those larger initiatives that require global cooperation. Lots of issues that are going to, you know, basically hit the administration almost immediately. The heart, you know, government, in the best of circumstances, is hard, and I think one of the things that's going to be challenging is that, what are the abiding philosophies? What is the mindset? How is, how do you approach global politics? For me, over the last several years, it has been very much about building stronger partnerships. I believe that the United States will be more effective if we can operate with like-minded states. The idea of "America First" is an interesting kind of conceptual... and certainly works well in the heartland. How that is translated into complex issues have really been yet to be kind of worked out in all its details, and that's what's going to happen in the next little while. I will say one of the things that President Biden and his team, senior team, have instructed us is to do everything possible to make sure that the transition is as smooth... And any new government wants to depart on new initiatives, that is inevitable. You have to accept that. But at the same time, there's some basic mechanisms. There's some ground truth realities, like very much your focus on the importance of intelligence, that you want a new team to understand quite clearly. And the hope will be that some of those essential truths will indeed be handed down.

## **Mitchell**

I just want to thank you, Kurt Campbell, for your service, and just say a word about the Foreign Service officers, the lifeblood of the State Department. You now can appreciate them as much as I do, and...

### **Campbell**

Yeah, can I just say something on that if I can? I'm one of those people who benefited, and I've worked in a variety of agencies. I've worked in Treasury, I've worked at the White House and in the military, OSD, the intelligence community. By an order of magnitude, the people I've worked with at the State Department are largely unheralded. They take a lot of, I think the technical word to "shit," and, and I've rarely worked with a more patriotic, committed group of people that are always working in the best interest of the United States and it has actually been an honor to try to serve them and represent them. My deepest hope is that, huge confidence in Secretary Rubio is that this institution that has served administrations of every stripe for hundreds of years will continue to sustain and to play a critical role on the global stage. I will do everything possible to support that. Just appreciate very much the opportunity for a short period of my career to have to do this. Thanks.

### **Mitchell**

Thank you.