Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

"Hand-Off: The Evolution of U.S. Policy in Asia"

Panel Discussion

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FEATURING

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Nicholas Szechenyi: Well, thanks, everybody. Welcome to part two. My name's Nick Szechenyi. I'm a senior fellow with the Japan chair and deputy director for Asia here at CSIS. And it's a real pleasure for me to moderate a panel with such distinguished experts to carry forward a very rich conversation on U.S. foreign policy at the end of the Bush administration, and the implications for U.S. strategy in Asia today. I'll briefly introduce our panelists, and then we'll get right into it.

On the far right, my far right, is Dennis Wilder, a senior fellow for the Initiative for U.S.-China Dialogue on Global Issues at Georgetown University. Next to him is Chris Johnstone, a senior advisor and Japan chair here at CSIS. We're delighted to be joined also by Bonny Lin, who's a senior fellow for Asian security and director of the China Power Project here at CSIS. And next to me, Victor Cha, senior vice president for Asia and Korea chair here at CSIS, also at Georgetown University.

So let's get right into it. Dennis, you wrote several of the memos that are in the book, so I thought best to start with you, and sort of allow you to share your key takeaways from that –from that period of time, just to get us started.

Dennis Wilder: Sure. Well, let me first say what a privilege it was to work for President Bush. I was in the White House for five years. What a privilege it was to work for Dr. Rice and then for Steve Hadley. It really was a dream team on foreign policy. And their interest in East Asia was strong.

One of the things I want to start by saying – and I'm going to tell a few little war stories here. But one thing that people didn't understand, people say the administration was preoccupied with the war on terror, Iraq, Afghanistan. And, you know, basically we couldn't walk and chew gum at the same time. This just wasn't true. President Bush's engagement with East Asian leaders was remarkable. And let me – let me tell you a few stories. Steve already referred to the first meeting the president had with Jiang Zemin.

The interesting thing about that meeting, it's only five weeks after 9/11. And the president made the decision to go to Asia, even though we were in – pretty well in turmoil at that moment. In fact, U.S. Air Force jets had to get permission to fly with Air Force One into Chinese airspace. And the Chinese said yes. But in that meeting with Jiang Zemin, the president was very clear. He wanted China to join us in the war on terror. But he also said to Jiang Zemin, but you will not use this to go after your Muslim populations. Because he understood that there was a danger with the Uighur situation and other situations in China that the Chinese might take this as an opportunity.

And he also said to Jiang Zemin, as Steve said, I'm going to always raise the issue of human rights with you. But he went even further. And this was one

of my duties that was really difficult. Every time we went to Beijing – and we went three times to Beijing – I would have to find a church for the president to go to. He and Laura Bush would say to me: We're going to church. And I would go to the Chinese Foreign Ministry and say: We're going to church. And of course, they really loved that idea. (Laughter.)

And they would search everybody at the church. They would give the churches trouble. But it was something that the president just felt deeply, Laura Bush felt deeply. And it was – it was symbolic, but very meaningful. By the way, he also forced me to do this in Hanoi. And we had the first ecumenical service ever in Hanoi. I had to get the Protestants and the Catholics to decide on a liturgy that they could both agree to. And that was a very interesting process. But this was President Bush.

The other thing, I would say, is the president knew how to use a meeting very successfully with Chinese leaders. And I'll give you the example of Hu Jintao at APEC in September 2007. And Steve seems to be remembering this. I had no idea this was coming up, by the way. But the president sat down with Hu Jintao and said: Mr. President, I'm going to tell you something you are not going to like. And Hu Jintao sort of raises out of his seat, very uncomfortable. And the president says: Nancy Pelosi has asked me to join her in giving the Dalai Lama the Congressional Gold Medal. And I'm going to do that next month.

And Hu Jintao starts moving and clearly about ready to launch. The president says, wait a minute. I have a second message for you. I will be at your summer Olympics next year. There are many Americans who aren't sure I should do this, but I'm going to be there. And, frankly, we got through the Dalai Lama ceremony with not a word from the Chinese. It was amazing. And this was a special ability, I think, that Bush had in dealing with them, where he stood his ground on human rights, but also showed the Chinese respect.

And I'd just add one more area. And that is it wasn't just with the Chinese. With the Japanese Koizumi. The Koizumi relationship was absolutely special. And it starts at Camp David in September of 2007. And what did Bush get the Japanese to do? Well, for one thing, the Japanese sent combat forces, for the first time ever, to Iraq. This was a huge change. It was difficult for Koizumi to get through the Diet. But it was a tremendous change that starts Japan down the road to what sometimes is referred to – and Chris can talk more about this – but a normal nation on the defense side.

Secondly, agreement to have nuclear-powered aircraft carriers in Japan. This was a hard thing to do because of the Japanese public attitude. But Koizumi saw that through. And – (coughs) – excuse me – then we have the really odd moment where I walk into the Oval Office one morning. I'm sure Steve was with me. And the president says: We're going to take a road trip. This was in

2007. And I said, what? Mr. President, what's a road trip? He said, we're going to Graceland. I barely knew where Graceland was on a map, let alone how much of a shrine it was to Elvis.

But Koizumi loves Elvis. Still does. Has actually recorded albums of Elvis' music. And it was just the most remarkable event because it was an American president showing great respect to a foreign leader. And so we took Air Force One. We played Elvis' songs on Air Force One going out there. Koizumi got to sing with the band at lunchtime at the famous barbeque restaurant. And so I just want to get across, and we'll get to more substantive things in a moment here, that Bush did have a remarkable ability. And it's one that I wish American presidents more often had, at this personal diplomacy. And it was something he learned from his father, who was also very good at this. I'll turn it over to you.

Mr. Szechenyi: Excellent. A good way to kick off the conversation with President Bush's emphasis on personal diplomacy, both with China, as Mr. Hadley noted, where the administration was trying to integrate China into the international system, but also hedge by strengthening alliances in the region.

Let me turn to Bonny for your comments on the extent to which the relationship with China has changed. Where we're now in an environment where the emphasis is overwhelmingly on strategic competition. And there's a real struggle to even have high-level engagement with China. And I would repeat the question we heard in the first panel, not to put you on the spot, but I'd be fascinated in your views. If Xi Jinping answers the phone, does he know what to say? Where are in terms of the prospects for high-level diplomacy today? So, Bonny, please.

Bonny Lin: Thank you. I think it's a hard act to follow Dennis, but I'll focus initially my comments on looking at the transition memo and highlighting where I think are some of the key differences and similarities on where the Biden administration is, and then go back to your question, Nick, on what happens if Xi answers the phone.

What really struck me in the transition memo that was in this excellent book – it's very heavy, but also – (laughter) – really makes it very useful for you writing on top of. (Laughter.) What I found really interesting is how it assessed China. And I'm just going to quote a couple lines, because I think those are not the lines that we see anymore. But I think perhaps there are some elements of how the Bush administration was very cautious on China that we might – we might want to think about as we look at the China challenge.

So I thought it was quite interesting how the memo talks about how China is suspicious about the United States, and worries that the United States would

treat China as its main adversary and strategic threat. Obviously, that shifted after 9/11, but that just shows, like, how deep the distrust China has had for the United States, spanning decades. But what is interesting in the memo is the quote, "The president's strategy also recognizes that China's strategic future remains uncertain, and that thus it is prudent to engage in contingency planning."

I would argue that right now in the United States there is much less uncertainty about the direction of China, right? So if you look at our current national security strategy, it's very clear that China is our main strategic and geopolitical challenge. And it's very clear what – and it's very clear that we are relatively certain about this challenge, right? Our NSS writes that, quote, "the PRC harbors the intention, increasingly the capacity, to reshape international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit."

So I do think it is useful as we look at China, particularly having had, you know, 20 years of history since the Bush administration, to recognize that, yes, that might be the trajectory that China is now, but there is also significant degrees of uncertainty. And to actually quote Steve from another session I had with him, I think whatever strategy that we have for China needs to be able to be robust enough such that it can deal with all these contingencies. But on the other hand, in the off chance that post-Xi Jinping we have a leader in China that we can work with, our strategy needs to be flexible enough to deal with it. I think there is a danger in the direction that we are trending in D.C. that we are not able to necessarily be able to communicate with China the way that we were able to during the Bush administration.

I would also note the key difference in the Bush memo and what we're seeing now with respect to how we think about shaping China's behavior. I was struck by how much the memo talked about building good relations with China through bilateral-multilateral engagement, the emphasis on both cooperation and engagement.

It's hard to really quantify where we are now sort of in terms of cooperation and engagement on one side and deterrence on the other side, but I would probably say that right now the center of gravity in D.C. is more on the deterrence side when it comes to China, and probably a bit less on the cooperation and engagement side; of course, not necessarily at the fault always on the U.S. side. We've talked about how we've tried to pick up the phone with the Chinese – we've tried to call the Chinese and the Chinese don't pick up.

But we do see now in D.C. much more of a sense that we need to shape the external environment which China operates in, which is clearly laid out in

our National Security Strategy. And there is still a desire for cooperation. There still is a desire for engagement. But we're no longer placing as much hope on those elements to shape China; so again, a different emphasis and a different balancing compared to what we saw in this memo.

And the other thing I wanted to highlight and reemphasize was what I found really interesting in the memo was the portion on personal bonds are key. And we talked about how Jiang Zemin's first impression of President Bush was very much shaped by the fact that right after 9/11 President Bush was willing to travel to China, right; make a foreign trip, which is a – one could argue was very difficult when you have so many problems to deal with at home. And, of course, Dennis, you also mentioned that President Bush had attended China's Summer Olympics in 2008 against pressure and against some of the criticism for him to not go.

I think it's interesting if you contrast that with what we've seen in the past year or two where we did not see President Biden attend China's Winter Olympics in February 2022. And it's my personal view that if President Biden had attended, I don't think we would have seen the China-Russia joint statement there, right, because if he did – sorry – if President Biden did, President Biden would have been, rightfully so, a center of attention for that and you wouldn't have seen Putin being elevated in that respect. Whether, you know, China-Russia would have continued to strengthen their relationship, I definitely agree that probably would have continued. But I do believe that his absence at that world stage did provide China more rationale to lean in the direction of Russia that we might not have seen before that.

I think we also hear again and again from the Chinese side that when – that they very much watch the words of President Biden. And President Biden's comments specifically about Xi Jinping have been very much noted by the Chinese. And that's where we've seen, since this March, President Biden's comments in the State of the Union specifically against Xi Jinping has caused China to take more of a different turn with respect to the United States.

But I would emphasize that what we're still continuing to see in recognition in this administration, the Biden administration, is the need for very high-level dialogue. And that's where we see continued emphasis on President Biden being able to speak directly with Xi Jinping, with the recognition that, given how much China has centralized power under Xi, very different under Hu Jintao, who was going in sort of the opposite direction, inviting more collective leadership, that it's even more important for the two leaders to maintain that personal bond.

So I'll wrap it up here, but happy to go back to any of these points.

Mr. Wilder: Can I just –

Mr. Szechenyi: Please. Go ahead.

Mr. Wilder: Intervention?

I think there are two points I want to make. One is we did try to figure out Xi Jinping in the administration. When we went to the 2008 Olympics, Xi Jinping was actually in charge of the Olympics. So we were able to get a meeting for the president with Xi Jinping. And we were all very excited to meet this guy, because nobody really understood him. And I thought I would dine for years in Washington on being one of the first people to actually sit down with Xi Jinping.

And I've got to tell you, it was one of the most boring meetings I'd ever been in. Xi Jinping gave nothing. He was cardboard. He wasn't going to tell us a thing about himself. He was not going to show his hand. And this is how he got to the top of the Chinese system. He did hide his cards. There is a reason why we were all surprised by Xi Jinping, because the nature of the man, the nature of the way he came to power, was to hide. And, in fact, everybody thought he would be a reformist because his father had been a reformist. And so if you look at the early assessments, everybody thought we're going to have another reformist Chinese leader.

The second point I would make is I mentioned President Bush's emphasis on human rights. I should have added that President Bush was able to get dissidents released from China in a way we haven't been able to since. Rebiya Kadeer, the head of the Uyghur World Congress in 2005, just before a visit by Secretary Rice to Beijing, they released her. And we put a lot of pressure on the Chinese. There were several Christian dissidents that we got released. So there was success in these areas that frankly I don't think we would find today.

Mr. Szechenyi: Appreciate both of your comments; the importance of high-level engagement, but also a recognition that personalities matter and that we have to adjust accordingly. But personality is a good way to transfer – transition, excuse me – to Chris for your comments on both the Bush-Koizumi relationship, developments in the alliance with Japan, and other allies during that period. So please.

Christopher Johnstone: Sure. Thanks, Nick.

Let me start with a couple of comments about, first of all, the book and the contents of this book. Dennis, I think your memo is just – you deserve a lot of credit for the prescience you had for the world we were going to face.

First point I would make is it really is extraordinary. These are transition memos for the next team. You can't lose sight of that, how significant that is. This was a commitment on the part of the Bush administration to help the Obama administration get off to a fast start with the critical foreign-policy issues of the day.

I was on the National Security Council staff under Obama and then again later under Biden. So I was sort of the inheritor, if you will, one of the inheritors of your work. And I remember in 2016 we were beginning to prepare for the transition. And Susan Rice stood up, in sort of an all hands with the NSC staff, to say the president has said to me that George Bush gave him a terrific transition, and we're going to do the same for the team that comes next.

So I think, you know, the message that you all sent with this was very important and was carried forward. And I can't speak to how much – (laughs) – what the Obama administration provided was used by the next group, but I think there was a heavy emphasis placed on it.

A quick point on China. I think, you know, as I think about the Obama administration's China policy, a lot of continuity, really, with the Bush approach. We were still focused, I think, largely on the idea that China could be integrated into the existing system, made to be a responsible stakeholder, and could become a partner, in a sense, on the critical issues of the day. And I think that was the dominant approach for most of the administration. It was starting to change at the end with the emergence of the South China Sea issue, the rise of things like the cybertheft issue that became a focus of Xi's visit to the White House in 2015.

And I was part of a drafting team that wrote a presidential policy directive in the 2015 timeframe, sort of codifying the Obama administration's Asia policy. And I think when that document is released – and hopefully it will be – it will indicate the China section, I think, really sort of tees up a more competitive approach to the relationship. I think that was beginning to happen by the 2015 timeframe. There were still divisions within the U.S. system. There were divisions between Treasury and the DOD, for example, on how to think about the relationship. You can imagine what the roots of those differences were. But it was starting to turn; still fundamentally grounded in the view that China was shapable and that engagement would shape it.

I do also remember, though, at that time we were beginning to see differences with our allies on that question. And I remember distinctly a bilateral discussion with some Japanese counterparts, led by the NSC, in which my counterpart said to me we no longer believe that China is shapable and we need to think differently about this relationship. So it was interesting

to think about – to look back and see how the region was beginning to change as well.

A few quick points on allies, Nick, which is what you asked me to address. Forgive me for taking so long to get it. First of all, I think, Dennis, the language you have in your memo about we are going to China with and through our allies, that's a fundamental insight that I think guides the Biden administration today, that we're doing – that our policy toward China starts with allies.

That is very much the philosophy of the Biden administration. If you think about how the Biden administration started, it began with heavy engagement of our allies, inviting Suga to Washington, inviting President Moon Jae-in to Washington; get those relationships in good shape and then engage the Chinese. I think that's very much guided by the philosophy that you – that's articulated in your memo.

Second, this question of counterparts – totally agree on the importance of personal diplomacy. And I think the Bush-Koizumi relationship is a great example of that. I am reminded of how much counterparts matter. (Laughs.) This was also the time of – a pretty difficult time in the relationship with Korea because of the leader there. And then I think about Obama, who started the relationship with Japan under Prime Minister Hatoyama, which I think was a particular dark period in that alliance that colored really their view of Japan for eight years in some sense. So counterparts also matter.

The other relationship that comes to mind for me in your period was the president's relationship with John Howard and the elevation of the relationship with Australia. I mean, we think about Australia as a Five Eyes partner now as if it's a given, but it was under you all that you really elevated the information sharing with Australia, particularly related to CT, but on other issues as well, that I think has served to cement that relationship for the long term.

The last point I would just make for my initial comments is I do think it's – I think you're exactly right, Dennis, about the walking and chewing gum at the same time, that we were able to do diplomacy in Asia at the same time we were prosecuting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. I do think it's fair to say that our engagement in Asia was colored by our focus in Iraq and Afghanistan, right, and the – you know, the – we spent a lot of time encouraging our allies to contribute to our policy outside of Asia, right.

And so I do agree that the Japanese contribution in Iraq was significant. It set the stage for what came later under Abe. It also consumed a huge amount of bandwidth in the relationship. I was a desk guy in the Pentagon at the time, and the amount of staff time we used helping the Japanese to find the part of

Iraq where they were going to send their forces sort of squeezed out our ability to do a lot of other stuff.

Mr. Wilder: I don't know if you remember. We actually had to surround them with Mongolian troops because the Japanese could not –

Mr. Johnstone: And Australians, I believe.

Mr. Wilder: – and because they couldn't fire on anybody. And so – and actually a Mongolian soldier saved the compound at one point by taking out a terrorist who was coming in a vehicle with a bomb.

Mr. Johnstone: So a big part of it is I think about the pivot to Asia under Obama. And there are reasons, of course, to be a little cynical about that. It was about bringing the focus of our policy back to Asia and the focus of our alliances in Asia back to Asia. So that's the start of the force-posture initiatives with Australia that have led to things like AUKUS and where we are today.

Last quick point; I'm consuming a lot of bandwidth. Two things in your memos talk about priorities in the near term for the alliance with Korea and the alliance with Japan. The first is OPCON transition, transition of wartime operational control. We must complete that by 2012, you say. And then the relocation of Marines from Okinawa to Guam; by 2014, you say. We haven't done either of those things yet. (Laughter.) So it turns out it's hard to make change in government, particularly in the Department of Defense.

Mr. Szechenyi: Excellent, Chris. Thanks.

We're going to transition to North Korea in a second. But Victor, first I want to give you a chance to react to what you've heard and any recollections you want to share –

Victor Cha: Sure.

Mr. Szechenyi: – on managing China and our allies.

Dr. Cha: So first I want to say that this really is an amazing project handoff. I've never seen anything like it. For those of you out there in the scholarly – it's a great teaching tool. I plan to use it in my classes as well, because it's really an upfront, up-close view, first-row-seat view of what a transition looks like. And Stephen/everybody deserve a lot of credit for it; really terrific.

The Asia memos in particular – you know, I had left the administration by then, but, Dennis, I can imagine this was a big job to put together these memos over the course of two – you know, two terms. I was with the administration during the second term.

So let me make a couple of points about alliances. The first is that I think that the external environment at the time had changed in such a way that it forced us to push our alliances beyond their bounds. So 9/11, the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan created a situation in which our alliances were asked to and were willing to move beyond what they've done before with us, particularly out of area.

So the South Koreans had the third-largest ground contingent in Iraq. They were in northern Iraq, but they were there. The Japanese were in Iraq. They also had the marine self-defense forces in the Indian Ocean in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. These were things we had never seen our – and the Australians, of course, were in combat. These are things that for decades we'd not seen, and in some cases had never seen our allies do before. And so it served to really consolidate and expand the domain, the scope and domain of our alliance – of our military-alliance relationships.

The second point I would make is that what we have not talked about yet with regard to alliances is the trade architecture. We saw a deepening of all of our alliances in Asia at the time because of the trade agenda of the administration, free-trade agreements with Australia, Trade and Investment Framework Agreement with Singapore, and the KORUS Free Trade Agreement with South Korea.

The last of these, the KORUS Free Trade Agreement, really became the prototype of the sort of high-standards, blue-ribbon free-trade agreement that was not just about reducing tariffs, but also about affecting labor regulations, environmental regulations, in the countries that we did these agreements with. And, of course, that became the prototype for other free-trade agreements that followed.

And, of course, the plan of the administration at the time was a building-block approach, to use these – you know, TIFA with Singapore, the Australia Free Trade Agreement, KORUS – to use these to eventually get to something called FTAAP, which you talk about in your memo, the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific. It may be hard to think about these things today, but they were a very important part of deepening and the resilience of these military-alliance relationships such that they were not just about military issues. And they were things that benefited the American people, right.

I mean, I remember there was one time we were putting together talking points for the president for his meeting with Howard, and there was a line where it was something like the U.S.-Australia Free Trade Agreement has led to an increase in U.S. exports to Australia in everything from dog food to airplanes, or something to that effect. And he didn't like dog food, so we had to find something – I think we ended up with peanut butter or something

else. (Laughter.) But it was – but, you know, there was clearly a message about how these things were not just good for our alliance relationships but also for the American people.

Third point is with regard to – and we talked about this backstage – all of the Biden administration's focus on coalitional diplomacy, right. We had a focus on coalitional diplomacy. We saw the first iteration of this during the Bush administration. My first week – my first week – Dennis will remember this well – at the NSC was when the tsunami hit in South and Southeast Asia. And that, of course, was the genesis of the Quad – U.S., Japan, India, and Australia. The Trilateral Strategic Dialogue – U.S., Japan, and Australia – was also something that started at this time in the Bush administration.

The six-party talks was an effort, the first effort, sort of a multilateral security organization in Northeast Asia, focused on a very specific problem, North Korean denuclearization, but it was something that had not been tried before; and then, of course, U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral. So there were, I think, a lot of efforts in that regard; and then finally, of course, the civil nuclear deal – Steve talked about it – the civil nuclear deal with India and an attempt to really transform that relationship.

So I think that there was a lot that was accomplished with regard to alliances with Asia that have a clear through-line to the current situation.

Mr. Szechenyi: Excellent. Thank you.

Well, we can't have this conversation without talking about North Korea, which, Victor, you've mentioned several times as the – what's the phrase you use? – the land of imperfect options. But the book does a really good job of explaining the philosophy of the Bush administration, which was to multilateralize the challenge – you mentioned the six-party talks – and also address it in the context of the U.N. Security Council; but also not just talk about denuclearization, but also human rights challenges in North Korea, and other issues. So welcome sort of your reflections on that period, and where you think we are on North Korea strategy today.

Dr. Cha: So let me just make two quick points. And, I mean, Dennis should chime in as well on this. The first is that – this is my personal view – I think that of all the efforts – Steve talked about five administrations have tried to deal with this perennial problem. I think of all the efforts, and there were many and they were consistent across administrations. Arguably, I think the six-party talks got the farthest in terms of denuclearizing North Korea.

Now, of course, that may mean nothing today because, as David said, we're now at, like, at 80 to a hundred North Korea nuclear weapons versus half a dozen at the time. But if we think about the stages of denuclearization,

freeze, disablement, dismantlement, I would argue that the six-party talks got the furthest along that spectrum. Of course, in the end we did not succeed. But it got the furthest along that spectrum towards dismantlement, where we actually saw the collapse of the cooling tower in Yongbyon. So for whatever that's worth, I think it's worth mentioning.

The second is that there was this popular perception out there that President Bush did not want to negotiate with North Korea, that the administration had basically a neoconservative agenda to collapse to North Korean regime. And that could not have been further from true. The U.S. position had always been peaceful diplomacy with regard to North Korea. Peaceful negotiation, peaceful diplomacy, to try to find a negotiated solution. And as I think the memo states, there were – we spent many hours, weeks, months negotiating with North Korea bilaterally and in the six-party talks to try to make that happen.

The third point I would make is when I look at the six-party talks in the context of the history of the negotiation with North Korea, it was sort of the middle piece that was – that was a testament to the U.S. willing to try all sorts of different efforts to get to denuclearization. The first effort was during the Clinton administration, which focused on very direct, bilateral talks with North Korea. The innovation during the Bush administration was to multilateralize the problem, to bring China in as an important stakeholder in this – a very important stakeholder in this. And then the third iteration was what we saw during the Trump administration, was to do the very direct leader-to-leader talks.

Now, in the end, all of these failed. But I think of the three different templates for dealing with North Korea, to me the one that still makes the most sense is one that is much more of a regional approach. The North Korean nuclear problem is not just a U.S. problem. It's a regional problem. And the United States has some influence and some levers, but we don't have all of them. China has very important levers, as do the South Koreans, as do the Japanese, as do, arguably, the Russians.

So this still seems to me like the best approach. We tried it. We got pretty far. In the end, you know, we really don't know, but part of the issue was the North Korean leader had a stroke, which we found out about later on. So we'll never know how that story ended up, but still, to me, that seems like the most logical and practical approach to dealing with this, so.

Mr. Szechenyi: Dennis or others want to chime in on North Korea?

Mr. Wilder: Yeah, I think terrific points by Victor. And you have to understand, Victor was really our point man on this subject, just did tremendous work working

with Chris Hill at the State Department. I would make a couple points. And they're really related to the Biden administration.

I am worried that we've had diplomacy fatigue with the North Koreans, and that we seem to now kind of mouth a mantra that we're ready to talk, but we have a part-time negotiator who is also our ambassador in Indonesia. We don't seem to be putting much into it at this point, for very good reasons. The North Koreans are incredibly difficult to deal with. And negotiations are slow and difficult, and very unrewarding.

But I think that the fallout of this, the dangerous fallout – and Victor may disagree with me – is we now have a North Korea that's on the verge of tactical nuclear weapons, and the South Koreans are now talking about – there are questions about extended American deterrence, and whether they should be thinking about their own nuclear weapons. Well, that's a wake-up call to Washington. And I think it says to me that we've got to get back in the game of somehow engaging North Korea.

Second point I would make is we did engage China. China was helpful in the six-party talks. I think we've given up on China at this point, for some good reasons, but, again, I think we've got to try and put this back on the agenda with the Chinese. And put some onus on the Chinese that this problem in Northeast Asia is their problem. It's not our problem exclusively. They have a national security problem now, because if you look down the road Japanese nuclear weapons, South Korean nuclear weapons, where is this all going to go? And so I think we have to have a very serious attempt with the Chinese to say: You're on the wrong course. Supporting North Korea is not going to work, and it's just going to make a nuclear disaster zone of Northeast Asia.

Mr. Szechenyi: Bonny and Chris, do you want to chime in on that? We could go on forever, but time is short. We're near the end of our time here on stage. Go ahead, Victor.

Dr. Cha: Could I just say: I mean, the – Dennis talked about, and Chris talked about, sort of the personal diplomacy and personal relationship that President Bush had with leaders around the world, but particularly in Asia. I think that's – I think that's very true. I actually last week saw John Howard in Asia. And he still talks very fondly of President Bush, and the private lunches and dinners they spent together.

Mr. Wilder: State dinner.

Dr. Cha: State dinner. But I would also say that even with – I think somebody mentioned difficult relationship with South Korea at the time. Even with the South Korean president, President Roh Moo-hyun at the time, who was, you know, ideologically on the other end of the spectrum from the president, was

very focused on engagement with North Korea, almost at any cost. Even there, even though they didn't share the same sort of Bush-Koizumi relationship, they had a – they had a good relationship, and they got a lot done. Again, ground troops in Iraq, visa waiver, NATO+3 status, KORUS free trade agreement.

There were a host of things, arguably more that was accomplished in that four-year period – four-to-five-year period between those two leaders, than we had seen in the history of the U.S.-Korea relationship. So even though he had great relationships and that was his leadership style, even with people he didn't necessarily see eye-to-eye with on things like North Korean human rights or other issues, they still managed to do business and get a lot done.

Mr. Szechenyi: Great. Well, in conclusion, let's just do a quick lightning round. If you want to offer one quick takeaway from this discussion on where we go from here.

Bonny, let's start with you.

Dr. Lin: I guess on China, I would go back to a point that I mentioned earlier, which is I think what we need to think a little bit more in D.C. is how do we make sure that we aren't on a trajectory in which the Chinese perceive that we are at a collision course, right? Sort of, how do we get out of this fatalism mood that we're increasingly hearing from the Chinese side, that we will – that if the United States keeps on the course that they see us doing, and if China keeps on continuing their very aggressive course of action, how do we prevent the collision?

And here, I think some of what the transition memo offers us is that perhaps one thing that we should do is think more of personal diplomacy, high-level diplomacy. See what President Biden can do, particularly in another meeting with Xi Jinping, whether that's in the United States, at APEC, or elsewhere. But really see what we can do at that very high level, where reading through what happened then I see that we haven't done nearly as much in the last couple of – last couple of years.

But also, we also need to think about, even if we are relatively certain right now of China's aggressive and coercive tendencies, and it's likely that as China becomes more and more powerful, that China will continue on that approach. How do we build in room in our strategy that we could have space that if future leaders in China do shift off of that course that we can still engage and work with China?

Mr. Szechenyi: Excellent. Thank you. Chris.

Mr. Johnstone: Yeah, I'd just quickly pick up on Victor's point about sort of the seeds of multilateralism in East Asia that you all sort of planted and nurtured. I really

see this as the great opportunity of the day, right? When you look around and you see the elevation of the Quad to the leader level. The meeting itself in Australia didn't happen, but they had a short meeting in Hiroshima. And if you look at the joint statement that was released afterwards, this is a very substantive agenda that the Quad is now driving. And that's emerged since the work that you all got started on.

The U.S.-Japan-Australia relationship is remarkable. And in particular, the growing security ties between Japan and Australia themselves. It won't be long before you see Self-Defense Force personnel training in Australia, something that would have been pretty unthinkable just a few years ago. And then the progress in the U.S.-Japan-ROK relationship. You know, the agreement to begin real-time missile data threat – missile threat data sharing is a significant step toward a more integrated alliance posture. And most recently, the progress with the Philippines.

So what's interesting is that you really do see sort of a web forming, a mesh forming of – among U.S. like-minded allies and partners. And it started, I think, in a lot of the work that you all did. And it's clearly matured because of the common threat picture that these – that our friends increasingly see with us.

Mr. Szechenyi: Excellent. Well, that's a great note to end on. And an element of continuity. An instinct to still explore personal diplomacy and dialogue at high levels with China, while also continuing to make our alliances and partnerships in the region more dynamic. The book is "Hand-Off." It's a fascinating look at the challenges the Bush administration faced in Asia and around the world, with profound implications for U.S. strategy today. So please join me in thanking our distinguished panel for their time. (Applause.)

(END)