Christopher Johnstone: OK. Well, good afternoon, everyone. I might ask folks to take the seats. Well, welcome, everyone. You can certainly feel free to continue eating as we begin the keynote session here. I’m Chris Johnstone. I’m the senior advisor and Japan chair here at CSIS. Again, welcome to CSIS this afternoon. It’s my great pleasure today to introduce the keynote speaker for this conference, Daniel J. Kritenbrink, who is the assistant secretary in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and a career diplomat since 1994.

Daniel Kritenbrink: I’m old.

Mr. Johnstone: (Laughs.) Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink represents truly the finest of the U.S. Foreign Service. He previously served as U.S. ambassador to Vietnam from 2017 to ’21. He was senior director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council in the Obama administration, 2015 to 2017. Also my boss for a year at that time. (Laughter.) And before that, was the deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Beijing. He also completed multiple other overseas tours in Beijing, Tokyo, Sapporo, and Kuwait City. Truly, a remarkable career path, with experience really across the Indo-Pacific region.

And earlier this month, as everyone here knows, Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink joined the Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in traveling to Beijing, where the secretary had meetings with President Xi Jinping, the Director of the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Office Wang Yi, and Foreign Minister Qin Gang. As the State Department’s readout of those meetings said, they had “candid, substantive, and constructive discussions” on key priorities in the bilateral relationship and on a range of global and regional issues. I suspect our audience, Dan, will be interested in your thoughts on the trajectory of U.S.-China relations in addition to the specific issues related to the South China Sea.

But there’s no better person to join us here today. So let me invite Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink to the podium. And after that, we’ll have a fireside chat, not in front of a fire, but a fireside chat. Welcome. (Applause.)

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Excellent. OK, thank you, Chris. Appreciate it. Thank you. Hey, good afternoon, everyone. All right. Good afternoon, everyone. What an honor to be here. Chris, thank you for the overly generous introduction. Chris Johnstone is a great American, a great public servant. Delighted to see the contribution you’re now making to U.S. foreign policy here at CSIS, Chris. And thanks for everything you’ve done for our country. Thanks for everything you’ve done for me personally, including the time we worked together at the White House.
And I do want to recognize this great institution. Really profoundly grateful for the scholarship and the policy leadership that CSIS provides. Thank you as well for giving me a platform and an opportunity to occasionally come here and address the great scholars you have here in the audience as you assemble. I was reflecting this morning that I last spoke at CSIS’ South China Sea Conference back in 2016. Things have changed a little bit since then.

But, look, this is a really important conference, and it’s an important conference for the State Department as well. I reflected on my prior remarks here at this conference in 2016. In July 2020 as well, some of you may recall, we used this very forum to announce an updated U.S. policy regarding Beijing’s unlawful maritime claims in the South China Sea, including for the first time publicly clarifying that the PRC has no lawful claim over maritime areas determined by the 2016 arbitral tribunal to be in the Philippines exclusive economic zone.

Today I’d like to give you a set of remarks focused exclusively on the South China Sea. We’ll try to put it in a regional context, but I would like to give you an update on our latest thinking about the challenges present in the South China Sea, why these issues matter, how we’re trying to grapple with them, what some of the current challenges are. And then when I sit down with Chris, when we do our Q&A, we can go any direction you want. If you want to talk about the South China Sea, that’s great. If you want to talk about anything else going on in the region, I’m open to that as well.

I do want to put the discussions on the South China Sea into a larger context, however. As you know, last year we unveiled our U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, in which maritime security, including the South China Sea, featured prominently. And that’s because for the United States, our vision for the Indo-Pacific is one in which the region remains open and accessible, and where the region’s seas and skies are governed and used according to international law. And we plan to continue doing so by building support, including through our partners and allies, for a free and open rules-based order, again, including in the South China Sea maritime domain.

And that’s because peace and stability in the South China Sea is vital to the entire world, including to the global economy. We have a strategic interest in upholding the rights of all countries to exercise freedom of navigation and overflight. The South China Sea has become one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, through which approximately one-third of the global economy runs. More than half of the globe’s oil tankers and other raw materials pass through the South China Sea, with total annual trade flowing through the South China Sea estimated to be
more than $3 trillion U.S. The South China Sea also accounts for 12 percent of global fish catch, which is estimated to generate $100 billion annually, and which supports the livelihoods of 3.7 million people. So the South China Sea matters. That’s probably not a newsflash to this crew.

In terms of U.S. policy regarding this vitally important waterway, I do want to reiterate that the United States takes no position on territorial claims to high-tide features in the South China Sea, but we do maintain that all South China Sea claimants should comport their maritime claims with international law as reflected in the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention. We also believe that South China Sea claimant states should be able to exercise without interference, threats, or coercion their sovereign rights and jurisdiction over natural resources in the exclusive economic zones and on their continental shelves.

So what are we doing to protect this critical maritime commons? I always like to highlight three key lines of effort that I think describes well American policy in the South China Sea. First, our diplomacy. Together with likeminded partners, we are promoting respect for international law and the rules-based order, freedom and navigation and overflight, unimpeded commerce, and the need for peaceful settlement of disputes.

Secondly, our maritime capacity-building programs. We have a number of maritime capacity-building programs for the region’s maritime law enforcement agencies and militaries. And these programs give countries maritime domain awareness and the ability to patrol their claims, which we believe – which we believe further promotes peace and stability.

And, third and finally, I want to highlight our own operations. Our own operations of the U.S. military, which include freedom of navigations operations and routine presence operations, which demonstrate that all countries have the right to fly, sell, and operate anywhere that international law allows. And we’ve been doing just that.

Over the past five years, the U.S. government has provided more than $1.6 billion in military and law enforcement assistance to Southeast Asian partners, with a focus on building maritime capabilities and enhancing maritime domain awareness. For example, at the U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit last year, the U.S. announced $60 million in new regional maritime security initiatives, including the placement of a U.S. Coast Guard regional training team in Southeast Asia. This was followed by the Department of Defense announcing plans last November to
invest approximately $10 million each year to launch and support a new network of Southeast Asian emerging defense leaders.

Through the Quad-supported Indo-Pacific Maritime – through the Quad-supported Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, or IPMDA, we’re helping increase transparency in the region by enabling Southeast Asian nations to monitor their maritime areas and international sea lanes via low earth orbit satellites that identify ships by their radio traffic and automated tracking systems. Through IPMDA, we’re providing near real-time integrated and cost-effective maritime domain data to the region, particularly to the claimant states. And we’re supporting maritime agencies’ efforts to combat a wide range of illicit maritime activities, including illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, and responding to climate-related and humanitarian events.

In addition, earlier this year the Philippines and the United States announced plans to accelerate the full implementation of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, or EDCA, by designating four new locations in strategic areas of the country. We also announced the substantial completion of projects in the five existing EDCA locations. And we’ve allocated more than $100 million in infrastructure investments in the new and existing EDCA sites by the end of this fiscal year.

I think as many here probably already know, EDCA also authorizes U.S. forces to access agreed locations in the Philippines on a rotational basis for security cooperation exercises, joint and combined military training activities, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities. And this announcement was followed by the largest iteration of the Balikatan bilateral military exercise with the Philippines to date, which involved some 100 – which also involved some 100 Australian Defense Force personnel, and observers from 11 other countries.

So in achieving our regional security priorities, I want to emphasize that we’ve consistently prioritized multilateral diplomatic engagement through ASEAN. We’re very much looking forward to the ASEAN-related ministerials in just a few weeks. We’ve called on our ASEAN partners, who are negotiating an ASEAN code of conduct in the South China Sea, to ensure that any agreement that is negotiated is consistent with international law and protects the rights and interests of all parties, including third parties. We also urge all ASEAN claimants to make progress in resolving their overlapping maritime engagements to strengthen their collective voice during negotiations with Beijing.
We’re particularly encouraged by recently announced maritime boundary delimitation agreements between India and Vietnam, as well as between Indonesia and Malaysia. We believe that U.S. policy has bolstered regional confidence in U.S. resolve and it’s empowered South China Sea claimants to speak up publicly to protect their own rights and interests. Moving forward, we want to support Southeast Asian claimants with both our words and our actions. The lights have gone out, Chris. (Laughter.) Setting the mood, but I’m still under the spotlight. I’m going to keep going. (Laughter.)

The United States is also committed to supporting implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific's maritime pillar. The AOIP’s maritime pillar includes deploying personnel and presence to the regime, promoting capacity building through maritime coordination and fusion centers, countering IUU fishing, expanding training for regional partners, maritime law enforcement agencies, and also promoting readiness, sustainable equipment, and workforce professionalization. As I alluded to earlier, the United States also maintains a longstanding program to uphold freedom of the seas for all nations under our International Freedom of Navigation Operations Program.

The FONOP program that we conduct challenges unlawful maritime claims around the world. And they are conducted in response to excessive maritime claims by countries worldwide. In the South China Sea, the U.S. conducts regular FONOPS in the Spratlys and Paracels to demonstrate firm opposition to those who make excessive and unlawful maritime claims, including the PRC. We will always defend U.S. interests and ideals and stand up for compliance with international law, including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. We will speak out against those countries that act against these principles.

And here, I think it would be appropriate for me to say just a few words about the People’s Republic of China. As you know, Secretary of State Antony Blinken just visited Beijing, and I had the honor of accompanying him. In the course of that visit, the secretary made clear that we intend to maintain open lines of communication with PRC leadership as part of our efforts to responsibly manage the U.S.-PRC relationship, and particularly to reduce the risk of miscalculation that could veer into conflict. We think this is what mature, responsible powers do, and should do.

During his visit to Beijing, the secretary also reiterated that in keeping with our longstanding position, the United States continues to reject the PRC’s sweeping and unlawful maritime claims in the South China Sea. And we urge Beijing, and all South China Sea claimants, to comport their
maritime claims with international law, again, as reflected in the 1982
Law of the Sea Convention. We’re advocating and upholding
longstanding international law and a set of shared global standards for
maritime security that benefit everyone across the Indo-Pacific.

This, we believe, is a timely and important discussion because we’ve
seen a clear and upward trend of PRC coercion in the South China Sea,
including efforts to exercise its expansive and unlawful maritime
claims, infringing on the rights and freedoms of all states under
international law, again, as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention.
Against South China Sea claimants, the PRC routinely harasses vessels
lawfully operating in their respective EEZs.

And in February, for example, the Chinese Coast Guard used a laser
device against the crew of a Philippines Coast Guard vessel. And two
months later, a China Coast Guard ship then blocked a Philippine patrol
vessel with a group of journalists onboard, in the vicinity of Second
Thomas Shoal. The United States again calls on the PRC to comply –
(coughs) – excuse me – with the July 12th, 2016, decision of the arbitral
tribunal in the South China Sea arbitration, and to cease its unlawful
and provocative activities in the South China Sea.

The PRC also continues to interfere with South China Sea states’
exercise of their legal rights to natural resources in their EEZ and on
their continental shelves. Just last month, a PRC survey vessel and several
PRC Coast Guard and Maritime Militia vessels engaged in provocative
and unsafe maneuvers for weeks inside Vietnam’s EEZ, particularly in
the waters around Vietnam’s oil and gas installations.

Under international law, coastal states have sovereign rights and
jurisdiction over natural resources in their EEZs and on their
continental shelves. And the PRC is yet to articulate a coherent lawful
claim to this area. The PRC thus cannot lawfully interfere with
Vietnam’s exploration and recovery of natural resources in its own EEZ.
The PRC’s provocative behavior exacerbates risk for businesses,
effectively pushing out competition and paving the way for the PRC to
push a joint development deal with its state-owned firms. The U.S.
supports nations in standing up for their interests and resisting
pressure to accept any deal whereby they would be compelled to yield
those rights to any other country.

I think as everyone here has seen as well, the PRC also interferes with
freedoms of overflight and other lawful uses of the sea. For example,
PRC aircraft have increasingly engaged in unsafe intercepts of U.S. and
other military aircraft in international air space over the South China
Sea. Just one months ago, a PRC jet fighter pilot performed an
unprofessional and unsafe maneuver during an intercept of a U.S. Air Force aircraft that was conducting safe and routine operations over the South China Sea in international air space. Another similar incident happened within days thereafter. A PRC vessel maneuvered in an unsafe manner, twice crossing within 150 yards of the bow of the USS Chung-Hoon. We’ve called on Beijing to cease these unsafe maneuvers, which increase the risk of miscalculation.

So in general, our policy is to support each and every country in exercising its own sovereignty and in pursuing its own national interests. We believe that all countries, large and small, should play by the same rules. Large countries should not bully smaller ones. Again, we think the alternative to this is a world in which the strong take advantage of the weak. And such a situation would put all of us at greater risk.

So in conclusion, maintaining peace and stability and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is part of our larger vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific. And therefore, we will continue to work with our allies and partners across the region and across the world to ensure that our skies and seas are governed and used in accordance with international law and grounded in respect for the rules-based maritime domain. Thank you very much for having me today. I’ll look forward to your questions. (Applause.)

All right, Chris. Here we go.

Mr. Johnstone: Right. Thanks, Dan, as always. Really terrific and comprehensive remarks.

Maybe I’ll start with just a couple of questions related to the South China Sea itself, and then perhaps we can get a little broader than that. So, as you said in your remarks, it’s been a number of years, really close to a decade, which China began reclaiming features in the South China Sea. As you noted, the tribunal ruling in 2016. And you’ve laid out a comprehensive set of lines of effort that U.S. government is undertaking to respond to all that. Can you say a bit about what we have learned over the last several years about what’s most effective in pushing back on this behavior? And do you see – I mean, you described the particular developments with the Philippines. But do you see more broadly more willingness on the part of other claimants as well to stand up to the coercion that we continue to see?

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Thank you, Chris. Well, a simple answer is yes, I do. And I think – I think what we’ve learned is that the key to successfully advancing our interests, and I believe the collective interests of all like-minded
partners in the maintenance of peace and stability and freedom of navigation across the region is that we have to focus, first and foremost, on building the capacity of our allies, partners, and friends. You go back to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy that the president announced last year, you can see that the central animating feature of American foreign policy is revitalizing our allied and partner relationships and investing in their capacity, and then working together with those likeminded partners to promote our shared interests and principles.

I think that’s the key really to peace and stability across the region. Certainly is key, I think, to the maintenance of peace and stability and the freedom of navigation across the South China Sea. I talked about our three lines of effort, but you’ll notice through all of that really is imbued this sense that we are in this together, both with claimant states, with countries around the world who share that vision and a recognition of how important the South China Sea is to the global economy.

And I guess I would further underscore that even as we approach a very consequential but complex relationship with China, we try to put that relationship in a larger frame. I always say, we have a regional strategy of which China is a part, and not the other way around. In other words, our primary focus is on building those allied and partner relationships and then, from that perspective, we approach all challenges and other issues.

I think that’s the key. As I travel across Southeast Asia, friends are always saying to me: Kritenbrink, you’re not going to make us choose, are you? You don’t want us – we don’t want to choose. And what we always say is: We’re not in the business of forcing countries to choose. What we are in the business of doing is ensure that countries have choice, and the ability of making their own decisions free from coercion. And I think that’s a vision that almost all of our partners across the region embrace and share. And so I’ve seen an increasing realization that if we stay in this together, that I think we can, again, preserve peace and stability, including in the South China Sea.

Mr. Johnstone: That’s great. On this issue of partnering with others, certainly Japan and Australia have been close partners and also seeking to uphold the rules-based order in the South China Sea. Also, in building capacity among partners. You noted the Quad. India, interestingly, in the joint statement that the president and Prime Minister Modi issued last week, condemned Chinese actions – destabilizing actions in the South China Sea. India’s also announced that it’s gifted Vietnam a warship following bilateral talks with the Vietnamese. Do you see a growing role for India in this South China Sea? And will we see U.S.-India collaboration in this area –
Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Yes, I do. And, yes, I think we will. You know, I think the growth of our partnership with India, and certainly the revitalization – I think an expansion of the activities of the Quad – these are some of the most significant strategic developments I think I’ve seen in my lifetime. But again, Chris, I would just reiterate, I don’t think this is a U.S.-India – you know, this is not limited to a U.S.-India issue, per se. Again, I think our focus across the entire region, again, is building the capacity of allies, partners, and friends, and for all countries who share that vision, right, that we want to live in a world that’s peaceful and stable, where all countries large and small follow the same rules. We’ll welcome cooperation with any country that embraces that vision. That, of course, includes India. I think it includes most of our partners across Asia.

And then it’s been quite interesting in this job, one of the surprises that stood out to me in the year and a half, I guess almost two years, that I’ve been in this position, is the amount of time that I’ve spent with European partners on Asian security matters and with Asian partners on European security matters. I think there’s an increasing, I think, recognition of the indivisibility of Asian and European security matters. I think that’s why you’ve seen European friends as well who have focused on, for example, the maintenance of peace and stability and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and have carried out their own presence operations there as well. So again, I think any country that share that vision we look forward to cooperating with.

And that’s not a vision aimed against any particular country. That’s a vision that embraces these large principles and that is committed to supporting and buttressing them, because we think it benefits all countries.

Mr. Johnstone: Really extraordinary. The progress on EDCA, the conclusion of new defense guidelines, expanding exercises, deepening consultations on security cooperation. I also noted that Jakes Sullivan had a trilateral meeting with the Japanese national security advisor and the Philippines national security advisor. Can we expect that the Philippines incorporation to these, you know, expanding many-lateral dialogue that includes the Philippines, is this going to become an enduring feature?

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Well, I think so. And I hope so. And I notice some of my friends from the Philippines’ embassy are here, and we should probably ask them as well. But I guess what I would say is, first, again, we have such a longstanding and vitally important relationship with our Filipino allies. And I’ve had the pleasure of hosting now our bilateral strategic dialogue here at the beginning of my tenure. And then earlier this year, I believe
it was in January, I traveled to Manilla for the second iteration of that. It’s really striking, the breadth and depth of U.S.-Philippines cooperation. And I think we’ve been particularly gratified that under President Marcos we’ve taken our cooperation, I think, to a new level.

And again, it’s grounded in this shared vision of the kind of region we want to live in. And so it’s been – it’s been remarkable to see how rapidly our cooperation has expanded and deepened. But, you know, you picked up on something that I think’s really important as well. And this increasing element of trilateral and other sort of many-lateral cooperation across the region. Again, I’m grateful to CSIS. You gave me an opportunity to speak to your regional architecture conference. I don’t remember when that was, maybe a year ago or so. But gave us an opportunity to share our vision.

We talk about building a latticework of interlocking relationships, formal and informal, bilateral, multilateral, many-lateral, but all designed to buttress the rules-based international order that we think is so vital to peace and stability. And I think the Philippines plays a very important part in that, and I think its role is likely to grow.

Mr. Johnstone: Yeah, extraordinary. Let me maybe ask you now about China, and sort of would welcome your comments broadly on where you think the relationship is headed in the coming months, now that we’re past the secretary’s visit and we start to think about meetings possibly in November. But specifically, this question of dialogue and resumption of high-level dialogue. China has – continues to refuse to resume military-to-military defense dialogue that would be, I think, from a U.S. perspective, useful in addressing the risk of unintended escalation. What’s going on here? What do you see as the way ahead on that? Do we share sort of fundamentally different perspectives on the purpose of mil-to-mil dialogue? Or what’s behind the obstacles here?

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Yeah. Chris, another great question. Let me say one word or two about the U.S.-China relationship and what we were trying to achieve through Secretary Blinken’s important visit there. First, you know, obviously as the president – as the president has outlined, as Secretary Blinken outlined last year in his – in his speech on China, our relationship with China remains one of the most important, consequential, but at the same time complex, relationships in the world. The secretary outlined our vision of our invest, align, compete frame with the People’s Republic of China.

We do believe that we are in a significant competition with our Chinese counterparts. But we are absolutely committed to managing that competition responsibly and to keeping open channels of
communication so that at a minimum we can minimize the risk of miscalculation that could veer into unintended conflict. I think that’s our – that’s our bare minimum responsibility as a great power.

So when we thought about the secretary’s trip to Beijing, we laid out three primary goals. One, to reestablish those senior-level channels of communication between the U.S. and China. Again, to reduce the risk of miscalculation. Second, to have an opportunity to exchange views on some of the most difficult challenges that we face. And then, thirdly, to explore areas where we can compete. We do have areas where our interests overlap and where it’s incumbent upon us to cooperate. And we explored all that as well. And I think set against those three realistic objectives, we thought the trip was a success.

And, by the way, I would just say, I’m a diplomat so this should come as no surprise, I believe in diplomacy. I believe in talking to people. I believe in keeping those channels of communication open at all times. And so we were gratified that I think through the secretary’s visit I think we’ve reestablished and reopened those senior-level channels of communication. I think in the coming weeks you’re likely to see more senior-level exchanges. And, again, I think that’s all to the good.

But I also want to underscore, we didn’t go to Beijing with the idea that we were fundamentally going to alter or transform the U.S.-China relationship. And we didn’t go there with a vision of somehow changing our approach or our assessment to this intense competition that we have with the PRC. So I think you mentioned in your opening – excuse me – the adjectives we applies to the meetings. We talked about the meetings being candid, substantive, and constructive. And I think that’s accurate.

But I would probably put a particular emphasis on candid. I think we were exceptionally clear and honest with one another, including in the areas where we have such fundamental differences. And, you know, that list is a pretty long one. But we also explored some areas where we can cooperate with one another. And I’m cautiously optimistic that you’ll see some progress there as well. I do think currently one of the places where we are most disappointed is we haven’t reestablished or reopened those mil-mil channels of communication. I think we’ve done so at the civilian level. And I think you’ll see that continue.

I think the reasons why are complex. I think many in this audience know, I think our Chinese counterparts, especially in the mil-mil domain, take a slightly different view of communication channels. And I know sometimes Chinese friends state that they’re worried about providing too many assurances because they worry somehow that that
will embolden the United States to take additional actions that they
don’t want to see. But that’s a vision that we just simply don’t share.

We think at a minimum, especially two militaries of the size and
capability of the U.S. and China, we always need to be talking to one
another, no matter what, so that we can avoid some of these incidents
that we’ve seen recently that are so dangerous. And I think there are
some other concerns that our Chinese counterparts have outlined. I’ll
just reiterate what Secretary Blinken said in his press conference in
Beijing. He said that we were disappointed that we haven’t made more
progress yet on reopening mil-mil channels of communication, but
we’re going to stick with it. This is vitally important.

I think if you take a step back and you look at the history of our
interactions, I would like to think we will get those channels back open
at some point. But we’re not there yet. But it really is vitally important.
And, again, opening communication channels does not, in our mind,
involve compromise or paying a price just to have a conversation. We
think it’s a responsibility that both of us have to ensure, at a minimum,
we don’t have a miscalculation that veers into conflict.

Mr. Johnstone: Yeah, great. Diplomacy, certainly an essential feature of the U.S.-China
relationship. Well, let’s begin to open this up to questions from the
audience. Please – boy, we got line over here.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Look at that!

Mr. Johnstone: My goodness.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: All right.

Mr. Johnstone: I’ll probably – we also have some online questions coming, so I’ll
probably toggle back and forth. But why don’t we start at the
microphone. Go ahead. Could you introduce yourself, and then keep
your question concise, if you would? Thanks.

Q: Well, thank you, Chair. Thank you, His Excellency. This is Hoang from
the East Sea Institute Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Nice to see you. I see we have several Vietnamese friends here that I
recognize from my time. Nice to see you all.

Q: Yeah, my question is – I’m so glad that you mentioned FONOP in your
speech. And from what we have seen – what we have calculated, there
has been a significant drop in terms of FONOP in the South China Sea. I think there was about 10 operations in 2020, and then 2021 and ’22, it dropped to about four or five per yet. And now 2023, only two publicized FONOPs so far. Does that mean anything? Does that signify a change? Or does that mean that the U.S. – FONOP from the U.S. has lost its effect, so the U.S. is turning toward other kind of forward-leaning presence? While the transit in Taiwan – near Taiwan Strait is pretty much stable.

And then the second question is that in 2020, Mike Pompeo came out and the Trump administration came out with a position on the South China Sea at this very stage, I believe.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: That’s right. I referred to it in my remarks.

Q: Yes. And there has been many changes since then in terms of tactics on the ground, in terms of perceptions of threats. There’s been new threats, new challenges. There’s also changes in the U.S. policy with littoral countries and the presence in the South China Sea as well. I was wondering, because of those changes, will there be a possibility of the Biden administration putting out a standalone position or statement on the South China Sea, like the previous administration did? Thank you so much.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Hmm, great questions. Well, it sounds to me like you may have studied more closely the statistics regarding the precise number of FONOPs, presence ops, in the South China Sea. I haven’t brought those here with me. But what I can say with great confidence is I know for a fact on a daily basis the U.S. military is flying, sailing, and operating across the Indo-Pacific domain, including in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, and elsewhere. And some of those operations are designed to demonstrate a persistent, routine presence. Some are designed specifically as freedom of navigation operations to challenge unlawful or excessive claims.

But there’s no dramatic change in our presence that I’m tracking. We’re there all the time. And all you have to do is ask some of our friends in the region, some of whom welcome that presence and some complain about it, that they notice that we’re there on a regular basis. And there’s certainly been no change in our approach, or our policy, or our strategy as well. And I outlined – I always like to talk about those three pillars of diplomacy, capacity building, and our own operations. No change there. You noticed – or, you noted the 2020 statement on our policy in the South China Sea. We’ve reiterated that that remains American policy and strategy. I don’t anticipate that changing anytime soon.
I can’t predict whether or not there would be an additional U.S. statement on our policies and strategies in the South China Sea. But, as I hope my remarks make clear today, we think our approach is crystal clear. I hope it’s even slightly clearer after my remarks here today. But I think we have the policy and the framework that we need. I think we have a clear assessment of the challenges. I do agree with you that they’re growing, but I think that we need to use the framework, and the tools, and the resources that we have, and apply them to the problem set. And the most important aspect, just to reiterate, is doing it together with allies, partners, and friends – including our friends in Vietnam.

Mr. Johnstone: Great. Thank you.

We’ll do another one from the microphone.

Q: Yeah. I’m (inaudible).

I have one question. In South China Sea, China has its ultimate purpose and strategy and tactics to realize its purpose. The purpose, as you know, is controlling the whole of South China Sea. And the strategy is a gray zone strategy. That means they do not fight big war. They combine the military forces and nonmilitary forces to advance step by step the whole area. And they have a set of tactics to realize that strategy. For example, they have economic coercion tactics over the small countries surrounding South China Sea. They have tactics of sending survey ship into the EEZ of small country. And in summary, they have purpose, strategy, and tactics. But am I right or wrong if I say that the U.S. has no strategy at all? Up till now the only thing –

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Hmm! I think I can say with confidence you’re wrong. But let’s have a conversation. In my humble opinion.

Q: But up to now – up to now, the only thing the U.S. do in the South China Sea is practicing FONOPs, the freedom of navigation operation. Do you think the tactic work to counter China’s ambitions? And, the last question, if the U.S. have no specific strategy at all, but only have FONOPs tactics, so how small country like Vietnam and other countries surrounding the South China Sea can freeze China ambitions in that area?

Mr. Johnstone: I think, Dan, you laid out some other components of your strategy, but –

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Thank you. So, yeah, no, I feel like I have failed spectacularly after hearing your – (laughter) – because – but let me – you’ve given me
another chance, so I'll try to redeem myself. I have heard the criticism, because we spend so much time in the region talking with our friends, especially in Southeast Asia, who make the argument that you do. America's not going to FONOP its way to a free and open Indo-Pacific. And that's all your strategy is all about. Why can't you guys do better?

So what I tried to lay out in my remarks – I will not read them at you again, but I'll try to highlight them here – we believe we have a multifaceted, pretty nuanced, and we would argue effective, strategy that is lot more than just FONOPs. I started with diplomacy. And that's all flavors of diplomacy. That's diplomacy carried out by our diplomats, by our intelligence officials, by our lawyers like the great Bob Harris, who's here.

And what are we trying to do? Working especially with the claimant states, friends across ASEAN, the rest of the Indo-Pacific and even Europe, it's to continue to promote and defend a rules-based regional order, right? Defend the application of the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling, defend and promote and sustain the vision that countries ought to base their claims in international law, they ought to resolve their disputes in accordance with international law. And they ought to always do that peacefully. And I would say we spend the bulk of our time on the diplomatic side of the equation. So that's one. And that has nothing to do with FONOPs.

Number two, the second pillar that I talked about is our capacity building programs. I used a figure today that we've spent $1.6 billion in the last five years building the maritime and law enforcement capacity of our partners in Southeast Asia. I remember – and I knew it had to be – I asked my team for that figure today because I knew it had to be pretty significant, because when I was in Vietnam I always used the figure just in a five-year period from 2012 to 2017 we provided $450 million in maritime capacity development assistance just to Vietnam. So again, that has nothing to do with FONOPS. That's the second part.

And what that – when I talk about building and investing in the capacity of partners, we believe that the best way to preserve peace and stability in the South China Sea, raise the threshold to conflict, is to give countries in the region the ability to actually understand what's happening in their maritime domains, and then the ability to defend those interests and do something about it, right? That's what our capacity development programs are designed to do. That doesn't take
the place of the significant investment that claimant states and other partners are making, but we think it certainly helps. And we think that doing so doesn’t militarize the issue, doesn’t destabilize the issue. We think it stabilizes the region by giving countries that capacity.

And then, thirdly, we do talk about – I did talk about – the third pillar of our strategy, which is investing in our own capabilities and exercising those capabilities, both through routine presence ops and FONOPS. But I would argue that that’s just one small part of our strategy. And at least from where I – I mean, it’s an important part. But it’s just one part. So I humbly disagree with your presentation. We do a lot more than just FONOPs. I hope that’s clear, through our presentation here today. But I do appreciate your viewpoint and the candor with which you expressed it.

Mr. Johnstone: Dan, let me just pick up on one dimension of the maritime domain awareness discussion that you also addressed in your speech. You mentioned the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative that the Quad is participating – or, developing. One of the goals of that initiative is to create really what’s a common operating picture across regions, across the South Pacific, the South China Sea, Indian Ocean. How’s the progress going on that front?

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Well, I think we’re making progress. And maybe just one comment about the Quad, this is – really, I’ll just reiterate – I think it’s one of the most significant strategic developments I’ve seen in the course of my career. This informal grouping of four likeminded powers, four likeminded democracies, believe that we have a responsibility to promote stability across the region, provide public goods to the region. And we think one area where we can do so is through the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative.

We’re basically taking existing largely commercially available satellite data and helping countries access it so all of us have the same picture. What does that allow you to do? That allows you to know what’s happening in your maritime domain, who’s out there fishing illegally or otherwise in your waters? Who’s out there during surveys that you haven’t approved or are concerned with? Who’s out there maybe stealing your resources or conducting other activities that you’re concerned about?

And once you do that, once you understand that and achieve that awareness, then you can do something about it. I would say we’ve definitely made progress. There are countries using that data. I think we
get better at it every day. I think the claimant states are benefiting from it most. But we’re quite excited about it and we’re committed to it for the long term.

Mr. Johnstone: Great. I don’t want to totally ignore our online audience, so I’m going to take one question from – a virtual one on Taiwan: How do U.S. congressional engagements with Taiwan impact the U.S.-China relationship? Maybe reframe that a little bit, Dan, give you the chance to talk about where we are in the cross-strait dynamic, and in particular how you think about, you know, managing the U.S.-China-Taiwan dynamic as we enter a sensitive period, the Taiwan election season?

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: No, vitally important issue. I guess where I would start with Chris’, just a couple of maybe framing comments. From the very beginning, America’s enduring interest has been in the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and ensuring that cross-strait differences are resolved peacefully. That, in essence – those are our fundamental interests that we believe are at stake and always have been in the Taiwan Strait. And here too, I’ll just illustrate, why do we take such an interest in the Taiwan Strait? Why is it so important? There are a number of reasons why, but I’ll give you just a couple.

Fifty percent of the global container shipping traffic goes through the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan is central to the global economy. Just one stat, for example, 90 percent of the world’s high-end chips come out of Taiwan. Taiwan is an incredibly important and robust unofficial partner of the United States, a top-10 trading partner. Again, one of the world’s most important economies and, I would argue, a vibrant democracy and a force for good.

So there are lots of reasons why the U.S. has taken an interest in maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and why we’ve underscored the entire world ought to be invested in maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Just a crisis, let alone a conflict, across the Taiwan Strait I think would be devastating for the global economy.

I’ll also underscore that what we state both publicly and privately. We did this in Beijing in private, we did it in public as well. There’s been no change to our one China policy. We define our one China policy as being guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three joint communiques, and the six assurances. Again, we support the maintenance of the status quo and peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. We do not support Taiwan independence. We oppose unilateral changes to the status quo by either side. That is our approach.
What do we see happening across the Taiwan Strait? Unfortunately, I think we see increasing steps by the PRC that are putting pressure and that are – and the use of coercion directed at Taiwan. We’re concerned about that. We’re concerned about the risks that poses to upending the cross-strait status quo that is so important. I hope I’ve outlined here why that is.

I would say that – and I’ve talked about this a little bit in some of my briefings on the secretary’s trip – Taiwan was one of the key issues that was discussed in Beijing during Secretary Blinken’s trip. I think we had a very candid exchange between the two sides. And again, Secretary Blinken walked through the elements of our strategy that I’ve just done for you here.

And we talk about demonstrating both resolve and reassurance. Resolve about our interests that are at stake, our commitment to meeting our obligations under the Taiwan Relations Act, but also reassurance that there’s been no change to our one China policy, and that our policy remains solely focused on the maintenance of peace and stability and peaceful resolution of cross-strait disputes.

We are headed into a sensitive period, given the Taiwan presidential election. I think it’s incumbent upon all parties to act responsibly in this period. I think we can expect Taiwan’s vibrant democracy to hold another free and open, fair election. And then we’ll look forward to working with whatever candidate, whatever authorities are elected. But that would be, in a nutshell – I hope I’ve outlined why the issue is important, what our approach is. Again, our approach is the maintenance of peace and stability and the status quo.

Mr. Johnstone: Yeah, good.

Let’s go back to the mic. We probably have time for one, maybe two more. But, please.

Q: Good afternoon. My name is Laurel Schwartz. I’m a columnist for The China Project. And I also recently returned from Beijing, where I was principal of a Canadian Chinese School.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Hey, fantastic.

Q: Thank you for being here and thank you for going with the secretary to Beijing.
Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Thank you. Yeah, you know, I lived in Beijing for eight years. And I went back – I went twice I guess. Is it twice this month? Are we still in June? (Laughs.) I’ve gone to Beijing twice this month, first time in seven years. And nice to meet you.

Q: You as well. So in 2020, the Fulbright greater China program was cancelled by executive order. And we had less than 400 students from the United States travel to mainland China last year. We have a dearth of a generation of new China scholars coming up, having spent time in the PRC. And while State does have a variety of robust public diplomacy programs in the PRC, as well as in the region, this program, which is the marquee of the state’s public diplomacy outreach, is yet to be restored. Can you share whether or not restoring Fulbright greater China was discussed in the recent visit, and what the timeline might be for restoring it via executive order, and how that could come about? Thank you.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Quick question. Thank you. That specific issue was not discussed. But what was discussed, and I hope some of you saw in our public readout, this is one area where I think the U.S. and China fundamentally agree. And that is on the importance of people-to-people ties and people-to-people exchanges.

You know, I’m the beneficiary in the past life of being an exchange student in the great country of Japan. I’m the beneficiary of two years of full-time language study for Chinese and had the pleasure and privilege of working in Beijing for eight years and getting to know hundreds if not thousands of wonderful Chinese counterparts. So I’m a true believer of people-to-people exchange. I’m a true believer, you know, in the power of engaging at the personal level.

And I think it’s an important part of the U.S.-China relationship, has been for some time. And we always try to distinguish between the policies and concerns that we may take vis-à-vis the PRC versus our great respect for the Chinese people. I’m really worried about this asymmetry that’s developed right now. I think we still have close to 300,000 Chinese students here in the United States, which I think is a wonderful thing. I think we’ve got about 350 Americans on the ground right now in China studying. And I hope we can do better there.

So there was an agreement between the secretary and his Chinese counterparts that we are open to and committed to finding ways to increase these people-to-people exchanges. And one specific thing that we agreed to do was to look at increasing, in a phased manner, the number of commercial flights between the United States and China. I’ve discovered it’s pretty hard to get to China. And it’s pretty expensive
right now. We had something like 350 flights a week between the United States and China pre-COVID. Right now, we have 24. So I think we can do better.

I fundamentally believe in the importance of promoting people to people ties. I think you'll see that happen. You'll see that increase. Hopefully we'll see the flights start to increase as well. I don't know what might happen on specific programs like Fulbright, but I think you'll see us expand people-to-people exchange in a number of areas. Thanks very much.

Mr. Johnstone: We spend all our time in places like this talking about geostrategic issues, but the importance of people-to-people ties really can't be –

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: It's – oh, it's just extraordinary. And I – look, I think it's – I think it's true in every country, every relationship we have. And I know for me, every place I've served it's been that way, whether it was in Japan, or with my Vietnamese friends in Hanoi, or in China, or Kuwait as well. I just think it's vitally important. And making sure we understand one another, I think, at a personal level, is extraordinarily important. If you want to talk about a long-term investment in American national interest and a long-term investment in trying to promote peace and stability, we shouldn't lose sight of the importance of people-to-people ties.

Mr. Johnstone: We'll do one more question.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Do one more?

Mr. Johnstone: This is – no pressure. You're the last one.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: They always say this is when it gets the most dangerous. The last question.

Q: Thank you very much. Robert Delaney with South China Morning Post.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Hi, Robert.

Q: Thanks very much for doing this.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Thank you.

Q: If I could just get a bit of clarification on what you were saying about Secretary Blinken's trip and his meetings in Beijing. That one of the
goals, of course, was to reestablish high-level negotiations. And that we should look forward to, in the coming weeks perhaps, to see more of those.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: I think you should.

Q: At the same time, you mentioned that this has become more difficult on the military-to-military side.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Correct.

Q: So when you say that we should be looking forward to more establishing – reestablishing more of these contacts, are you saying that we should expect this just on the diplomacy side and that we’re still not there – we haven’t made any progress yet on the military-to-military side? And if that’s the case, if you could explain or elaborate a bit more on why that is.

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Yeah, no, thank you. Actually, my simple answer is, yes. I think you’ve captured it accurately. I do think – look, we thought the secretary’s trip to Beijing was quite important. We thought it was quite constructive. And, again, against the – against the objectives we set, we thought it was successful and we did the things that we set out to do. But, as the secretary himself said, this is just – this is just an initial step, right? Initial small step to try to stabilize the relationship, again, reduce the risk of miscalculation. And I think what you’ll see and what we hope you’ll see is that following that trip you’ll see a more regular and established set of interactions between some of our civilian officials. We haven’t achieved that same progress on the mil-mil side yet, but we’re going to keep at it.

Mr. Johnstone: Dan, thank you. This has been a terrific and wide-ranging conversation. Very much on display why you’re such a terrific representative for the U.S. in that region. Please join me –

Asst. Secretary Kritenbrink: Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)