

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
Event
ROK-U.S. Strategic Forum 2025
“Luncheon Conversation”

DATE
Wednesday, December 3, 2025 at 11:45 a.m. ET

FEATURING
Kurt Campbell
Former Deputy Secretary of State; Chairman and Co-Founder, The Asia Group

CSIS EXPERTS
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Transcript By
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Victor Cha: OK. Thank you, everyone. We're going to resume the program for the afternoon. And we're very happy to have with us the former Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell. I mean, I think it's often – it's often said with someone like Kurt, like, he doesn't need an introduction, because he's so famous. But I was looking at his bio this morning – and I've known you for a long time – but I've been looking at his bio this morning and it really is something that's truly impressive. So I'm actually going to formally introduce him to you all.

Kurt Campbell: Please, don't. (Laughter.)

Dr. Cha: No, it's just really impressive. So, as you all know, recently served as the 22nd deputy secretary of state. Now chairman at – back at the Asia Group, where he is chairman and co-founder. He held a position in the White House that didn't exist before, which is the coordinator for the Indo-Pacific. So he was the inaugural Indo-Pacific coordinator in the White House. And then prior to that, as you all know, served as assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs in the Obama administration, where he authored, both in policy and in academia, the so-called pivot to Asia, which is one of the ten books – I didn't know – I didn't know this until I read it – ten books that you have authored or edited. If you haven't read "The Pivot," it's really a fantastic book. I've assigned it in my classes many times at Georgetown.

Hon. Campbell: Those are the only people who've read it, by the way. (Laughter.) And so – my aunt has four copies, that's it.

Dr. Cha: (Laughs.) You're being modest. And I'm happy to say that he's also teaching at Georgetown, which is something that we're very excited about. He did his B.A. at UCSD, University, California, San Diego, his D.Phil. at Oxford. And he has also the been awarded the Secretary of State's Distinguished Service Award, which is the – which is the highest diplomatic honor that can be given by the United States to an official.

So we're going to do this as a conversation, if that's OK with you.

Hon. Campbell: Perfect.

Dr. Cha: And I think maybe we could start – well, first, thank you so much for coming. I know how terribly busy you are. We really do appreciate it. And I thought we'd maybe start by getting your impressions of the recent trip that President Trump just took to Asia. As you know, it was a big trip. He was in Southeast Asia, then over to Japan and Korea. It's difficult to do both subregions in one trip, but he did it. And, you know, a number of things happened during the trip. Just sort of your overall

impressions of it, as clearly a veteran on these sorts of trips and these sorts of issues.

Hon. Campbell: Great. Victor, first of all, it's a privilege to be here, back at CSIS. I saw my good friend Steve Biegun, who served with real distinction as the deputy before I came in here. And I want to thank him for all the commitment that he has given to public service in the State Department. I'm going to just give you one quick anecdote, and I do appreciate being here, about all those positions, what they're good for and what they amount to.

So, like all of you, I traveled during the period of disruption over the last couple of weeks. And so I was trying to make my way to Australia, our flights were canceled. And so I'd been on the road for about 24 hours. I was in Los Angeles. It was about two in the morning. And, you know, they take you off the flight. You know, it's not going to go. So you're standing in a long line waiting to get some sort of stub that will allow you to take a taxi to the horrible hotel before you get on – try to get on the flight the next day.

And so I'm standing in this line. And it's just forever. And so I struck up a conversation with my colleague next to me. And, by the way, this is a lesson to all of you, never do this. Never do this. So I was getting a little pissed off. I was little irritated and tired. And I normally am never like this. And so I turned to him and I said, you know, eight months ago I was the deputy secretary of state. (Laughter.) And he looks at me. And I'm not kidding. He looks at me and he goes, buddy, who gives a shit? (Laughter.) So just to – yeah, I hear clapping. I know that. So just keep that in mind, folks, when you're – so, again, Victor, it's great to be here.

So, look, the truth is, we all watched very closely. I don't know, of a trip of a leader that sort of garnered more attention and focus on every dimension of it. And the truth is that in many respects, it's like an opening act of a Shakespearean play. We're looking for some of the next manifestations. We're trying to understand what relationships were set in place, what they mean going forward. Subsequently, we've now got acknowledgement that President Trump will be visiting China as the guest of President Xi in early April.

We've also heard and understand that he's going to bring with him a commercial and trade delegation, very much like the kind that we had in the 1990s. We haven't seen that in a long time. There's been a call between the two leaders in the last couple of weeks. Lots of questions about who originated that call. Each side, I think, claiming the authorship of who initiated it. And then an immediate call thereafter to

the Japanese prime minister, making some requests about toning it down with respect to Taiwan.

So lots of things, Victor, we're only going to be able to interpret in time. But I would say there were a couple of things that I think we can be reassured by. One is, enormous amount of energy by the president on this trip. At every stop he was really going at full throttle. He engaged, I thought, very effectively with all of his interlocutors. And there was a clear schedule in each of the stops in – in KL, in Japan, and in Korea. I will say a few things just, you know, glancing in terms of interpretation.

Much more focused – the original purpose of this visit was for the multilateral engagements, the EAS and APEC. But in fact, the president focused mostly on the bilateral agenda in each of these countries. I think enormous care was taken to treat the president with great respect. Each one of the leaders thought carefully not only about what the appropriate gift would be, but also what were the things that the leaders could engage President Trump in, that the president would find compelling. So lots of focus, Victor, on supply chains, on critical minerals, and obviously, in a couple of stops, on shipbuilding, per se.

I do want to just underscore that even though the visit itself was important, the engagements on Asia begin a couple of days before that with the visit of Prime Minister Albanese to the United States. And that was a very significant bilateral engagement, after very little high-level engagement between Australia and the United States. The opinion polls in Australia are complicated, Victor, about President Trump.

I thought Prime Minister Albanese walked that careful line, deeply respectful but also engaged the United States in critical areas of mutual responsibility, with respect to both technology, AI, critical minerals. Also reaffirmed AUKUS, something that I thought was quite important, and grateful for. Lots of focus on Australia making the argument for continued American engagement, and why American engagement in Southeast Asia and the Pacific was consistent with America first.

So if you begin the arc of their engagement there, important opportunities in KL, Victor. The kind of ceremonial focus on what took place between Cambodia and Thailand, I thought, was of critical importance. And then obviously, the president's engagement with Prime Minister Takaichi in Japan reaffirmed the alliance. And I thought she very effectively basically underscored that, in some respects, she was the logical heir to Prime Minister Abe, who had such a close relationship with President Trump, and also kind of manifestation of an East Asian version of Margaret Thatcher.

She did an excellent job. And what we've already seen, and you've got to give Victor some credit here, his counsel behind the scenes with the Korean government, a substantial set of engagements there on shipbuilding, possibilities for nuclear submarines. More has to be sort of built out over this. And then obviously the visit between the two leaders.

One of the hard things, though, for us in terms of trying to understand what plays out is that the readouts after these meetings are often quite narrow. And then normally, in almost all venues, Victor and I would normally be in these kinds of meetings in earlier incarnations of our career. Very few working-level people. These are mostly Cabinet-level folks that sit in meetings. And so sometimes the readouts are incomplete. But overall, I thought it was a positive visit.

I think the issues that we're going to have to watch for going forward, Victor is, does the president still believe that our alliance structures are important and critical? I don't think I need to tell you, there is some anxiety in Japan about, you know, the president getting on a call with Takaichi right after talking with President Xi. I think we can interpret this in the best possible light, but deep down we probably all have some anxieties. But the real issues that we're going to need to focus on in the next little while, as Secretary Bessent engages with his counterpart, the vice premier in China, is, as they prepare for April, both sides want a profound, quite transformative set of interactions.

The president wants more agricultural engagement. He sees the softening in some parts of the United States with upcoming elections, worried, Victor, about traditional Republican agricultural places perhaps becoming a little disillusioned. He wants more sales of sorghum, of wheat, rice, corn, soybeans, but also exotic nuts, and the like, from the central San Joaquin Valley. So he'd like that as part of the deal. The Chinese, I think, are intent on figuring out what's possible on technology. That is being hotly contested. And obviously we're going to be watching carefully for what it means for Taiwan.

So the answer to your very good question is I thought it was a positive trip. But, frankly, we will only be able to fundamentally evaluate what it means when we have more data on the ground to be able to say, look, this is part of a framework here. What I'm really hopeful for, Victor, as we go forward, is we'd love to see the reconvening of the Quad. We'd like to see a reengagement – trilateral engagement between the United States, South Korea, and Japan. And frankly, more than anything else, I'd like to see a rebuilding of this critical relationship between the United States and India.

Dr. Cha: Yeah. Great. Terrific. There are a number of things that I want to come back to in what you said, but before I do that there's one other question I want to ask you broadly in terms of overall Asia policy. You have said it many times, and there have been many venues in which I have said it, others, like Mike Green, have said it. And that is that U.S. policy to the Indo-Pacific has generally been very bipartisan. And I guess the question is, to what extent you think that's still the case. I mean, what are the – you kind of referred to some of them.

What are the commonalities or throughlines you see from when you were working these issues in the previous administration to the current administration? And what do you feel is different? I mean, part of what you said just now makes me feel like, on the surface, there are some things that look like they're similar, but there is a deeper anxiety in Asian capitals about how much of these agreements are just purely transactional versus, like, this, deep – a belief in the deep resilience of these alliance relationships.

Hon. Campbell: Yeah. And, you know Victor, one of the things that's interesting, and I always kind of struggle with this, I do wonder, has our policy traditionally over the last 30 or 40 years been bipartisan, or nonpartisan? And there is a difference, actually. But I found, frankly, over the last several years, some of our biggest supporters as Democrats in a Democratic administration were found on the Republican side on technology, on military spending, on alliances. And I have always been reassured that, in contrast to other regions, there has been a broad degree of consensus on the way forward between Democrats and Republicans.

The honest truth is, I'm not completely sure how much of that transcends currently into Asia. You know, it is an interesting dynamic that, in almost every venue that President Trump speaks at, he finds time to disparage President Biden and the previous administration. And in that environment, it is hard to sustain bipartisanship. And so I have a lot of friends in this administration. It's not unusual, and probably not surprising, they're not inviting me over to their offices to sit down for lunch. When we meet, we meet secretly. And they don't want to be seen with me. And it makes you feel bad. You know, you feel, like, you know? (Laughter.) But that's the reality that we live with.

I think the truth is, when we look at some of the things that President Trump has rolled back on and said, look, we're not going to do it – like the inflation Reduction Act – if you look at that bill in its earlier and later forms, this was not authored by President Biden. These were important technology bills that really emerged out of the Senate, from largely

Republicans. And so in many respects, President Trump represents a third strand, if you would, of how to think about the world.

I'd like to think that there is a degree of bipartisanship. I root for the United States and President Trump in these circumstances. But at the same time, I think we have to realize the limitations and how ferocious politics has become. My biggest test will be the upcoming engagement between the United States and China. And I think what is hard – one of the things we did not discuss, Victor, throughout the trip the president was not only getting ready for this meeting with President Xi, and this is important. It's critical. And he's accepting the challenge. But he was constantly asking about whether his potential invitation to Kim Jong-un had been accepted, and whether he'd had the opportunity to meet with president – with Kim Jong-un, either along the DMZ or somewhere else.

And, you know, we try to be very polite about it, but the truth is a huge part of his worldview is about engagement between Russia, North Korea, and China. And he is drawn to these authoritarian leaders in an interesting way. And I listen to the people around the president put this in the best possible light and try to explain it in a way that that can be consistent with traditional approaches. But it is undeniably unusual that there's this much focus on countries that, at least from my perspective, appear to have declared and underscored quite directly that they are interested in undermining the American role globally.

Dr. Cha: Great. We should talk a little bit about Korea.

Hon. Campbell: Yeah.

Dr. Cha: The administration, based on the fact sheet and the SCM, seemed committed to the NCG, the Nuclear Consultative Group. They, I think, mentioned it by name, something that you helped to create. But I'd love to hear your thoughts on a couple of these other new elements. And particularly you referenced shipbuilding, your thoughts on that, and then also the nuclear submarine agreement. I think – I mean, I was on CNBC, or one of these shows, and you were apparently on the night before and you were talking about this. And your comments were kind of positive on the nuclear submarine agreement. You thought it was doable, workable. Love your thoughts on these things.

Hon. Campbell: Yeah. Well, look, the – and I commended you, and we've got other folks, excellent ambassadors in the audience who served with such distinction in Seoul. Look, very few leaders have been as effective with President Trump as President Lee. I wouldn't have anticipated that necessarily, but he has taken the counsel of many people in this room, and he's done an excellent job. And the way that he has attacked the problem of

shipbuilding is quite impressive. So if you just track what we think we know, first, he's underscored the commitment of Korean firms that have made investments in the United States. He's indicated that he wants to support the indigenous capacity of the United States. But he's been very honest with the president about how hard that will be and how long that will take.

And he indicated, look, if you need to do this quickly, then some of this is going to have to be done in South Korea. And that will mean that you're going to have to address domestic legislation in the United States. So he had a very clear game plan with the president. The president apparently was potentially interested in the way forward. South Korea has unique capacities in shipbuilding. And you would think that this would be an ideal place for us to work together. Frankly, we need help here. And it's undeniable, not just in the civilian capacity, but particularly in the military capacity as well.

Victor, in truth, South Korea is a highly sophisticated, technological country. For almost all the countries in the world, it is going to be easiest for them to attain the capacity of a nuclear-powered submarine. I believe that the technology is clear, that it is possible to do this in a way that does not violate or call into question any nonproliferation elements. And so as a trusted partner, and as a key country in the sort of general framework of the U.S. alliance system, I would support this 100 percent. You occasionally see reports about how the United States needs to upgrade and integrate our alliance structures. Sometimes those reports leave out South Korea. That's a terrible mistake.

Ultimately, I think we have to be ambitious about what's possible with South Korea, understanding some of the dynamics they're facing. I think what we've seen quite clearly in the last couple of days is President Lee underscoring that, for right now, he wants a strong nuclear umbrella over South Korea, that he believes that the path towards potential indigenous nuclear capacity is challenging, probably inappropriate right now. And so I'm very pleased by some of the steps that we're taking. I think we're going to have to figure out how these investment vehicles that have been announced in both Japan and South Korea are going to work, how this massive amount of money will be, you know, distributed.

I will say, the two largest investors in the United States over the last five years have been South Korea and Japan. So that progress is already there in high-quality batteries, in AI, in auto manufacturing, and a whole host of technology-related ventures. But I'm not sure it's going to be the way that some in the United States have described it, with money coming to the United States and then President Trump making decisions

about where that money will be spent, almost like a sovereign wealth fund. I think that's unlikely. But those details are being worked out now.

Dr. Cha: Yeah. I mean, speaking of, like you said, the last five years, greenfield investment, Korea's been one of the top, if not the top –

Hon. Campbell: Number one.

Dr. Cha: Yeah.

Hon. Campbell: And the truth is, what's interesting about that is normally you are proud of that, because it's such a powerful indicator of strategic vibrancy. But the truth is, there is some ambivalence in Korea about that, because they're saying, shouldn't some of that investment come to Korea as opposed to going to the United States? But from the American perspective, we should be very grateful and appreciative of that.

Dr. Cha: Yeah. I mean, speaking of the – I want to pick up on the ambivalence that you mentioned. One thing that we haven't had a chance to talk about was right after this 350 billion (dollar) investment was announced last August, we had this ICE raid on the Hyundai facility in Georgia. Seems like the administration has tried to recover from that as quickly as they could, sending basically your successor out to Korea to express regret and open a separate visa negotiation. Your thoughts on that would be –

Hon. Campbell: So we're always looking for things that have strategic resonance. The Hyundai story was a couple of days in the United States, and then we moved on to other challenges or difficulties. That's not the case in Asia, Victor. And it is not the case that it extends just to South Korea. You have many Asian manufacturers who have auto, other kinds of factories in the United States, that are deeply worried because their workers are on similar kinds of visas. And they don't want what happened. And, remember, like, these are, you know, highly educated, technological guys. And they're being handcuffed and put in busses, and with – some with shackles. That's inappropriate, and very hard to explain.

I'm grateful that there is a dialogue underway to try to make sure that that does not happen again, but I do believe that there is some lingering anxiety about that. And I think all companies are going to be thinking about that as they go forward. I think the point that you're getting at though, Victor, is although the president's visit was, I think, through Asia, quite successful, each of the leaders faced subsequent domestic criticism about giving away too much, about needing to preserve and protect national dignity. And questions about, you know, whether the United States is going to be reliable. And those criticisms sting in Japan, South Korea, and KL.

Dr. Cha: Hmm. OK. I know your time is limited, but let me just get to two more topics quickly. And one of them you mentioned already, which is the Japan-Korea relationship, U.S., Japan, Korea trilateralism. We had you on this stage just as you were – as the Biden administration was finishing, in a sort of a retrospective. And I asked you, like, what was one of the high points – what were the high points during your time as deputy secretary? And one of them you mentioned, without blinking an eye, was Camp David. And so I want to ask you, sort of, I know you guys worked really hard on that, gave it a really good foundation. How are you looking – I know what we would like to see – but how are you looking at that in terms of the continued resilience of that, the relationship with Lee and Takaichi, the trilateral? I know that your aspirations were to have this trilateral – formal trilateral meeting at least once a year.

Hon. Campbell: Once a year.

Dr. Cha: Yeah. Yeah. So.

Hon. Campbell: So, look, Victor. what's interesting about the last little while, to the extent that that momentum has been sustained, it has been sustained by leadership in Japan and South Korea, with, I think, both leaders. Each of whom you would wonder, given their previous statements and views, whether they would be as enthusiastic about that. But each of them has overcome some of their historical views and statements to embrace elements of both that bilateral relationship, and are open to the trilateral component to it.

I think when you ask the question about what will continue as we go forward, my hope is that in 2026 we will see the reconvening of the Quad, and that we will see some sort of trilateral engagement. I think Secretary Rubio has indicated that he believes that these are important, and that they are – again, they are either originated in the Trump administration, or, you know, should be continued. And, like, I was warned and told very clearly by a friend in government, like, some things we're going to say that we started, you broke during the Biden administration, and we've resurrected, and I'm fine with that. As long as –

Dr. Cha: Whatever works.

Hon. Campbell: Whatever works. Whatever works.

Dr. Cha: (Laughs.)

Hon. Campbell: So my hope is that happens, Victor.

I will say this, though, and I just think we need to underscore it: The president – there was a period in diplomacy in Asia where China preferred to conduct most of its diplomacy in a bilateral context, and they still do in some respects. But they are now more multilateral. And I think that was the case because they never wanted to be cornered, but they also wanted to be able to extract a quid pro quo in any setting.

It appears that President Trump is more comfortable in these bilateral settings than multilateral. When he was at the G-7 in – you know, in Canada, that was cut short. A lot of reasons why, but I think it's undeniable he's not as comfortable in some of those settings, and I'm not sure why that is. It could be that some of the klieg lights are not just on him and – you know. But at the same time, I think these are both vehicles that should be seen directly as in American strategic best interest – not as either Democratic or Republican, but in the national interest.

Dr. Cha: Yeah. Great.

Last but not least, North Korea.

Hon. Campbell: Yeah.

Dr. Cha: I know that during your administration you made a lot of efforts to try to engage with North Korea without much success. The Trump administration, in fairness, also up until this point has had no success engaging with North Korea. I guess the question is, like, where do you think we go from here? And if we were ever to reengage with North Korea, what would be the purpose or the goal? I mean, sure, denuclearization is a nice thing to say that we're after, but you know, this is a big program now and it's a very sophisticated program. I'm just curious to get your thoughts.

Hon. Campbell: Yeah.

Dr. Cha: Yeah.

Hon. Campbell: So, look, in truth during the transition one of the things that the key players on the Trump team wanted from us was our best suggestions about how to get in touch with Kim Jong-un. The president had communication with him early in his tenure, but that had been more challenging, I think, as he got closer to the election. I think we know

they've tried very hard to reach out to resurrect high-level engagement. I think the message that we have heard from North Korea is that there's no reason to engage unless the United States changes its position and accepts North Korea as a nuclear state, and so they are setting a precondition for engagement.

The interesting thing about President Trump is that, you know, we're constantly looking for what are the constants in his worldview. But nuclear weapons is an interesting feature of his psychology. He understands the importance of it. On the way over he talked about – I think he was briefed probably improperly and thought a nuclear – a nuclear-related system was actually a nuclear test, and announced that we were prepared to restart nuclear testing. I think that is unlikely, but he's also mentioned in certain, you know, venues flexibility about other countries thinking about nuclear weapons. So we just don't know. My expectation is that he would not say, yes, we accept North Korea as a nuclear state for fear that it would set off sort of a series of actions that would be difficult to predict.

But at the same time, I think one of the things that is just undeniable, Victor, is that the politics have changed. And it does not appear that North Korea is as interested in engaging either with the United States or South Korea or Japan, where in the past for a variety of commercial and other interests they wanted those lines of communication. I think they are relatively satisfied with this, you know, kind of set of arrangements with Russia and China and other countries. Economy's growing. And so I don't feel that they are under any sort of pressure to reengage with the United States or other countries.

I think the hard thing, though, Victor – and this is probably the subtext of your question – is that it is only a matter of time before there is a provocation of some sort that will force the United States. We may decide we're going to engage on our terms, but at some point we will probably have to engage on their terms, which will be at a moment of uncertainty in Asia.

Dr. Cha: Right. And they use those provocations to force us to engage on their terms.

Hon. Campbell: On their terms, and they're often very effective as we go forward. But at the same time, the president probably does not have the inhibitions about engagement with Kim Jong-un that other leaders might have, and so it's not impossible to imagine at some point on a future visit that indeed the two leaders would sit down. I do believe, now that the North Koreans have basically set a guideline that there has to be some sort of acknowledgement of their nuclear status, I think it'll be hard for them to

back off from that now.

And actually, Victor, maybe as a last, what do you think? I mean, you're the expert here. (Laughter.) I'm just – I mean, everything we tried failed, every single thing. (Laughter.) But what do you think is the likely outcome?

(Pause, laughter.)

Dr. Cha: On their terms, and they're often very effective as we go forward. But at the same time, the president probably does not have the inhibitions about engagement with Kim Jong-un that other leaders might have, and so it's not impossible to imagine at some point on a future visit that indeed the two leaders would sit down. I do believe, now that the North Koreans have basically set a guideline that there has to be some sort of acknowledgement of their nuclear status, I think it'll be hard for them to back off from that now.

And actually, Victor, maybe as a last, what do you think? I mean, you're the expert here. (Laughter.) I'm just – I mean, everything we tried failed, every single thing. (Laughter.) But what do you think is the likely outcome?

(Pause, laughter.)

Hon. Campbell: Yeah. (Laughter.)

I will say, though, guys, just as you think about this, like, we all are wondering about the lessons of Ukraine with modern warfare, how it's rendered certain capacities almost irrelevant like tanks, and the role of UAVs and the like. But it is also the case an undeniable sort of lesson is that when you give up your nuclear weapons you're more vulnerable. And you know, that has also been reaffirmed in other places as well, and so it's got to be something that North Korea is thinking about in the back of its mind.

Dr. Cha: Yeah. Yeah.

Well, Kurt, thanks so much –

Hon. Campbell: Thanks, Victor.

Dr. Cha: – for spending time with us. The work that you've done with the Quad, with Camp David, with the pivot – as you know, I'm a scholar of U.S. policy in Asia, and I can't think of anybody who's been more influential and creative in terms of our policy in Asia.

Hon. Campbell: Thank you. Thank you, Victor.

Dr. Cha: And I'm not just saying that because you're here today. I mean, I really mean it. (Laughter.)

Hon. Campbell: Thank you, Victor.

Dr. Cha: So, anyway, please –

Hon. Campbell: And remember – and the lesson, guys, when you're standing in line, don't say stupid shit. (Laughter.) OK? Just stand quietly and take it, all right? (Laughter.)

Dr. Cha: Please. Thanks. (Applause.)

(END.)