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TRANSCRIPT

Event

The CommonHealth Live!

CommonHealth Live! with Rep. Ami Bera

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FEATURING

Representative Ami Bera (D-CA)

*Ranking Member, Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific,
U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs*

CSIS EXPERTS

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INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

J. Stephen
Morrison:

Steve Morrison, CSIS. Welcome. I'm here today with Congressman Ami Bera, Democrat of California, to talk about the America First Global Health Strategy, the Ebola outbreak in DRC, and the interdependence of U.S. and China in the bio economy.

(Music plays.)

This is the CommonHealth Podcast, a product of the CSIS Bipartisan Alliance for Global Health Security. We engage with diverse leaders on the question of how best to navigate this period of exceptional turmoil, reform, and uncertainty in U.S. leadership.

(Music ends.)

I'm joined today by Congressman Ami Bera, a Democrat from California, the 6th District, Sacramento County, stretching all the way up now to Lake Tahoe. He's represented that district since 2013, serves on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, is ranking minority of the Subcommittee on East Africa and the Pacific. Serves on the Intelligence Committee, served on the AI Task Force in recent years. A member of the CSIS Bipartisan Alliance for Global Health Security. Very active. We worked and cooperated in a number of different endeavors. We'll talk a bit about that. He has a bachelor's of science and an M.D., a medical degree, from U. Cal Irvine. And, interestingly, a 20-year medical career before you even landed in Washington as a clinician and a provider, as a health management business official, as a chief medical officer for the Sacramento County, and as a professor of practice at U. Cal Davis. Kind of an extraordinarily broad background before you even came here.

Representative
Ami Bera (D-CA):

Yeah, my wife would say, can't you keep a job? (Laughter.) I'm just naturally curious.

Mr. Morrison:

Your wife's a medical professional too.

Rep. Bera:

She's a doctor as well.

Mr. Morrison:

Yeah. So, welcome. Thank you so much for taking the time.

I thought we'd touch on those three topics that we had discussed. One is the status and the future of the America First Global Health Strategy. I'll say a few words about that, and we can delve into that. Then I thought we'd talk about the Ebola outbreak in DRC and the administration's response there, and the broader challenges that are coming out of that. A third topic is the interdependence of U.S. and China in the bio economy, particularly in the commercial sector – in biotech, and biopharma, and the generation of new discoveries, and the like. And I think we'll add in a little discussion around

the war in Iraq (sic; Iran), since it's so timely and you've been so active on this.

So on the America First Global Health Strategy, it's almost a year since the administration unveiled this and moved very rapidly to put out a strategy, which they did in September, and then to begin on a very rapid basis the negotiations around the compacts, the memo of understanding. They've concluded something like 32 of these. There are still some countries that are outstanding, where there's continued dispute – Zambia, Zimbabwe, Ghana. They're moving into an implementation phase. They've shared – reportedly shared these MOUs with Congress. We'll talk a bit about that. But generally, it's not been – there hasn't been full transparency and disclosure, but the hope is that there will be. The premise is that the governments themselves, the partner governments, will make a higher commitment. There's about 20 billion in dollars involved in this, about 13 (billion dollars) coming from the U.S. the balance coming from the partner governments.

There's a lot of concern that's come in about transparency, about how fast the timeline is. Are these conditioned to critical minerals? There are allegations of that with Zambia. Is it realistic? Will these countries be able to come up with these commitments? And what if they don't, what happens? There's controversy around control of data. Will the governments be able to preserve quality data and put that forward? How do you – how do you think about this today, just around where the current status is, as a prominent member of Congress and someone very knowledgeable about past approaches – and this is the new model – how are you thinking about this, Ami?

Rep. Bera:

Yeah, so there's a lot – a lot of questions in there. And, Steve, you and I have been talking about this, certainly, for the last year and a half, since the second Trump administration was sworn in and we saw some early indications that they were going to take a very different approach. And then obviously with DOGE, and the dismantling of USAID, real concerns about what PEPFAR funding would look like, and real anxiety in international organizations, a withdrawal from the WHO. So a lot there that happened in the first months of the Trump administration. So where we are today is not totally unexpected, because there was a lot of signaling.

I know you used the word transparency, and sharing information with Congress. I'm really concerned because I don't think we've been getting the full information. We get bits and pieces. And, again, I've not taken an adversarial approach with the Trump administration and the State Department, because, you know, we are where we are, and this is the administration that we have to work with. I do think they're making a mistake by not engaging Congress more, though, because you're talking

about 180-degree shift in how we've done aid development, global health security, pandemic preparedness.

I think that shift is not one that's going to go away with the next administration, but can you do foundational things that don't change every two or four years based on who's in control of Congress or who's in control of the White House? Because we're talking about long-term investments here. You and I have talked about this compact model, where, you know, instead of just providing the aid indefinitely, you can go into recipient countries and sit there and say, OK, we're going to provide aid but we also want to create the context and an environment where over three, five, seven years you're transitioning from being a recipient to, you know, being more self-sustaining. And what does that look like? That's my hope, if we were to get the details of the MOUs, that you would see some of that in there.

I'm really worried – again, let's go back to PEPFAR. I think there's an abruptness in the termination of some of this aid where countries – you mentioned Zambia. I was there last summer. And I think they get it, when we talk to their president, when we talk to African leaders. It's like, OK, we are willing to start to pick this up, but we can't do it overnight. What's a transition look like? And I also worry a little bit about the transactional nature. You talked about – again, let's stick with Zambia. Is it, OK, we're going to give you HIV medications, but we want access to your critical minerals? I don't think that's the value set that – clearly, historically, that's not the value set of the American people and how we've engaged with the rest of the world. That transactional nature does worry me a little bit, where in exchange for your natural resources we're going to help you save the lives of your people. That just – as a doctor, that doesn't feel right to me.

Mr. Morrison:

I think there's been some progress in clarifying of late that the Zambia agreement does not include this conditionality. But it's taken an unusually long time. And I think the communication and the transparency would put to rest many of the – frankly, many of these allegations. And that's been a mistake in terms of just basic communications. I don't think there's things in there to hide. I think they want to respect the confidentiality of the negotiations with the partner governments. Partner governments have to also be comfortable with the disclosure, right? But this idea of an upfront ramp towards greater ownership, much more localization, lowering the dependence on these big implementers, putting more direct cash into governments, all those ideas have been under discussion for reforms for many years. And it's going to be interesting to see how things go.

There is one big issue for Congress, which is Congress came back into action early this year with a big foreign aid bill put through, which was only just a little less than what the prior foreign aid bill had been. And there was a big delta in that between the money Congress wanted to put towards these

programs versus what the Trump administration prefers to put into the new America First Global Health Strategy. And that delta – it's still not clear to me what does Congress do to say, wait a second, we appropriated these monies for these purposes and we want to see them that way, versus, you know, perhaps OMB reaching a point and saying, well, they didn't get spent and so we'll make them subject to rescissions and return to the Treasury. How do you think about that?

Rep. Bera:

Yeah. That's not how our government's supposed to work, right? We authorize and appropriate programs and then the administration is supposed to administer those programs. Because, again, we represent the will of the American people. The president and the executive branch then executes and implements that. And if we've got a disagreement, that's where Congress kind of does its oversight. That's not what's happening at this particular moment in time. But you do point out that Congress has plussed up a lot of this funding. And to me, that's an indication that Congress really hasn't changed in how we see our obligations of foreign aid development, global health security. Sure, there's been some changes that have occurred, but I still think most members of Congress understand that we have a role in the world.

And when you talk about this America first foreign aid strategy, that's not America only. Because what happens in the other parts of the world, what happens in Africa or Asia, absolutely matter to what happens in the United States. The pandemic is not that far in our rearview mirror. And we saw the global disruption of that pandemic. So obviously it would be better for us to build systems abroad, build epidemiologic systems, health systems in Africa or places where some of these pandemics may originate, so we have early warning systems, we've got systems in place. My definition of America first would be America also being part of these systems, because it protects our homeland.

Mr. Morrison:

Yeah. Now, one thing that jumps out when you look at what's happened in the last year is that the State Department is now front and center. It is the dominant player here. USAID no longer exists. Many of those funding mechanisms were incorporated into the State Department. And we'll talk about the Ebola response, where both on the emergency humanitarian and global health the administration moved over \$700 million through seven contractors in the matter of a few days. Well, those capabilities are there. They're in this Department of State. It's not career AID officials doing that. They're there, housed within that bureau.

CDC is being – is now incorporated into this as a fee for service model. That's controversial. We haven't seen that implemented yet. And the outstanding question is, are we going to preserve expert capacity in the major embassies? And are we going to have a surge capacity in Atlanta that's going to help us in

these moments? But they're being told, look, State Department dominates right now. They're taking back control of the Gavi account, which the secretary of HHS has attempted to dominate. That seems to be transitioning. Is this a good thing in your mind? I mean, the White House used to play a much bigger role in the National Security Council. It doesn't have a bureau of biosecurity and defense anymore.

Rep. Bera: You asked me if it's a good thing. I don't think it's a good thing, but it is what we're dealing with right now.

Mr. Morrison: Reality.

Rep. Bera: Look, I've known Secretary Rubio for a while, and obviously watched him as a U.S. senator. I think he understands the importance of these programs in a way that Secretary Kennedy does not. I mean, he's taken a very different approach to global health engagement through HHS. I am glad that things are moving over to the State, because I still think we do have a lot of capable expertise, career employees, and others that are, you know, patriotic Americans serving the goals of the United States, but also understand the importance of being present in the world. I think there's – you know, many have left, but many are still there. And we do everything we can to support them.

But we're in a real different place, right? I mean, I know we'll talk about Ebola shortly. We did a lot of things post that 2014 Ebola outbreak, right? We both work a lot with Beth Cameron. You know, we stood up an Office of Pandemic Preparedness, we created something within the NSC, an individual in office, that was looking around the world at what was happening, because we understood the risks and the vulnerability. Some of that was dismantled in the first Trump administration. We put it back in the Biden administration post-pandemic. And, again, a lot of that's being dismantled right now. And I think that does make us very vulnerable here in the United States.

So even if you want to think about America first, you ought to be engaged with the rest of the world. And I think our absence within the WHO is particularly worrisome when you look at this Ebola outbreak and how late we were to the game. I mean, in prior outbreaks we would be the first in, last out. And again, I go back to – I was in Congress in 2014-2015 when we had that Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

Mr. Morrison: Where we had lots of delays.

Rep. Bera: We had lots of delays, but –

Mr. Morrison: Like, nine months of delays.

Rep. Bera: But ultimately, we got there. We deployed resources. And that's not – we are deploying some resources, we are doing things, we are building clinics. But we're not doing what we – what I think people in the past have expected us to do.

Mr. Morrison: I mean, we're publishing a piece – Beth and I are publishing a piece in the next day or two that tries to sort of take account of, OK, what's happening? Because what we're seeing is the early signs of a renewal of U.S. leadership, and going back to the playbook and the muscle memory that's within our government. And that's a good thing, right? We're pulling on that 725 million that were programmed. It's a combination of U.N. agencies – WFP, UNICEF, International Organization for Migration, International Medical Corps, Samaritan's Purse, and Mercy Corps, FHI 360. These are large entities with a proven track record of operating in emergency situations with dangerous pathogenic outbreaks. And we're moving sizable resources.

The gap is that we withdrew from WHO and we're paying a price right now, because we – the deliberations over – you know, the Situation Room is that incident management mechanism that the Africa CDC and WHO co-chair, either in Bunia or in Geneva, to talk about where are we, and what are we learning, and where it goes next. The U.S. CDC Special Pathogens Unit would be in that room, right?

Rep. Bera: They would be.

Mr. Morrison: And they would be using their BSL-4 lab back in Atlanta to get the state-of-the-art science on what are we learning. That's not there.

Rep. Bera: Yeah. Look, this is a different variant of Ebola, right? You know, for other variants we did develop pretty effective vaccines. This one, I'm not quite so sure. And we should have our best scientists, and those historically have been folks coming in from the CDC and doing the work back in Atlanta, but also folks in the hot zone. You know, again, this, to me, feels a little bit disjointed. And, you know, it does worry me. I'm less worried about Ebola coming to the United States, but I do, as a doctor, feel that obligation that we've got to save lives in Africa and not let this, you know, get out of control.

Mr. Morrison: Right. Now, one of the things we've been commenting on with respect to the outbreak in eastern Congo, which is centered in Ituri this time, in that province of far north. Ituri Province is where the gold mining sector is dominant. It's where there is active armed entities, like the Allied Democratic Forces, which are Islamist affiliated and have a really dark record of massacres and the like. That gold goes cross border in through Ugandan channels to UAE, all sorts of other critical minerals, timber and other things, go the direction of Rwanda. The administration has begun to put some sanctions on illicit gold movement by those states. Very interesting. But we

have to have a security strategy and a diplomatic strategy if we're going to get to – protect providers and get access to those in need. And I don't see the evidence of that yet.

Rep. Bera: Yeah, so that worries me as well, because we've hollowed out our top diplomats in so many of our embassies around the world, particularly in Africa. You've hollowed out the State Department funding, that expertise that you normally would find within embassies. And, you know, that does worry me. You know, a lot of our embassies are without ambassadors right now as well. So those lead diplomats that would be on the front line communicating what's happening on the ground back to Washington, D.C., back to Atlanta. This CDC expertise that you would often have in the major embassies in Africa, again, a lot of that is hollowed out. It is hard for us, as Congress, when we do our oversight work we're asking for how the embassies are staffed, what that looks like. And we just are not getting the cooperation that we would have expected from the executive branch.

Mr. Morrison: You know, this week the administration put forward to Congress, OMB put forward, a request for \$88 billion, most of it tied to the Iran war. But within that was a request for 1.4 billion for the Ebola response in DRC. Now that's a very important signal. That's a very important signal of the seriousness in which they're looking at this, and the need to try and get ahead on this. And my guess is, with the – also the introduction of some gold sanctions, that they're thinking – beginning to think geostrategically about this.

Rep. Bera: I hope you're correct. It could also be – you know, for a guy like me, who has very publicly opposed this war in Iran – it's going to be very hard for me to support that supplemental. Now, there's \$1.8 billion for Ebola response, which I think I'd like to carve out and vote on separately because I am very supportive of that funding. So it could also be by political design to say, OK, well, how do we put some things in that Democratic members really want, and folks like me, to get what Pete Hegseth wants in terms of military funding. That is going to be a very tough vote, I think, for folks.

Mr. Morrison: Yes. Yes. Back to the global health – the America First Global Health Strategy, and where we're heading. And, you know, we're heading into our elections November 3rd. There's a high probability we'll have Democrats in control of the House, possibly Senate, as we get into 2027. This means you really need to start thinking ahead about, OK, if in that power, how do you advance this strategy? One of my concerns is that the America First Global Health Strategy, to be successful, has to continue to receive bipartisan support.

If it loses that, it's then – its viability is going to be weakened dramatically. And I also worry that we're in a cycle of retribution, and that that is going to dominate, versus let's stay the course but do the things that need to happen to strengthen this approach. And if Democrats are in power in January,

they're going to have the responsibility then to really sort of stay the course and lay down what their agenda is in a constructive way. Well, how are you thinking now ahead about using that power to best purpose in our global health strategy?

Rep. Bera:

Yeah, so I think it'd be too simplistic if we just thought about it as Democrats versus Republicans, because I think you're seeing a generational tension play out as well, right? When I think about America first, yes, you certainly can think about kind of the J.D. Vance wing of MAGA, because I do think he represents this – isolationist maybe is too strong a word – but, you know, a withdrawal from why are we providing all these resources abroad, and why don't we focus at home? I see it very much on the far-left as well, right? And you see it most acutely in how the United States is talking about Israel in a way that we didn't previously on the far-right and the far-left – the Tucker Carlsons and the Hasan Pikers, let's say.

That's more generational, in my mind. And then you see some of the elder statesmen, the folks that have been around who, yeah, our perspective of the world was shaped during the Cold War, the 75 years post-World War II, where America created this architecture of relative peace, stability, prosperity. And we think the world is a better place with America engaged in the world, not America only. How does that play out? Because, again, when I'm back home in Sacramento folks are not talking about Ebola, or they're talking about can I put food on the table, can I pay my rent, can I ever buy a house, will I ever be able to retire? And those are very real daily things that our electorate, the folks that we represent, are talking about.

I think we can do both. I think we can try to relieve the affordability crisis and the struggles of our American citizens, but at the same time I think the value set that we have as Americans, the generosity that we have as Americans, continue to lead the world. I think the sweet spot in how I'm thinking about it, getting back to the original question, is – and, again, I know CSIS is doing this, Rockefeller is convening groups, you know, CFR is convening groups on the, what next? It would be a mistake for us to say, OK, let's go back and reconstitute everything that USAID was doing. We're in a different world. You know, we have AI, we have technology, we're much more interrelated.

We should think about what comes next. And it won't be just America by itself, because you're seeing these conversations take place in Europe, you're seeing European countries cut their foreign aid budgets. You're seeing things happening in Asia. And I don't know exactly what that looks like, but I do think it'll be more of partnerships with like-valued allies, where we have shared commitments. And then the big elephant in the room is, you know, the United States and China are going to be the two large competitors in the

world for influence. But how do we not always compete? Because there are areas where we ought to be cooperating, global health being one of them.

Mr. Morrison: Let's shift to that. We're hoping to host some additional satellite meetings between U.S. and China officials. We hope you will be part of that. Perhaps we can do that on the margins of the Xi-Trump summit in September here in Washington. We're hoping, again, to take a congressional delegation out in early in 2027. We'll be in Beijing and Shanghai in August talking to the Chinese about this. And we're talking to the administration. We're in this – we're in this really interesting moment where biopharma and biotech in China are booming. And the Chinese have demonstrated that in the space of five to seven years it's transformed its sector. The quality of the regulatory regime, the quality of the investments strategically in the labs and in the academic and corporate systems have brought China into near parity.

And they're into discovery. They're not just replicating and at the lower end of production. They are dominating and at near parity. And the interdependence of the two, American and Chinese, is deep. And, you know, massive amounts of capital, U.S. capital, flowing into biotechs, over 90 billion (dollars) this year. And the discovery rates are up. But people are worried. They're worried about, wait a second, are we going to set ourselves up for an acute vulnerability and dependence where this could be turned on or off at a delicate moment? Are we paying sufficient attention to the security concerns around data and control of data? Are the supply chains going to be resilient enough?

All of this brings forward this push in Congress and elsewhere to treat the bio sector, the bio economy, as if it were critical minerals or if it were microchips. Congress stepped into the lead in pushing for industrial policy. But I'm worried. I don't think that there's a – there's a clear equivalence. In other words, that with a bio economy it's a globalized discovery and research. You can't have clinical trials without access to China, for many of these diseases. The oncology gains are going to be broadly beneficial. And I don't think Americans are prepared to invest huge amounts of money in the biopharma sector to get it to onshore or near shore. That would be a very unpopular proposal in Democratic ranks.

Rep. Bera: Yeah. So there's a lot in that question. So it's not either/or, right? So I do think we're very acutely aware of some of the supply chain vulnerabilities, dependent on APIs coming out of China. We will continue. as Congress and industry, look to diversify supply chains. So we talk to India a lot. They've got a mature pharmaceutical sector. So we have redundant supplies. If we get into a conflict with China, or China, you know, does some economic retaliation and chokes down on APIs for our pharmaceuticals, we want to have other places that we can go.

On the drug discovery side, this is the golden age of, you know, biopharmaceuticals, gene therapies, you know, cancers, diseases that were not curable when I was going to medical school. Today you're coming up with disease modifying, often disease curing, therapies. And, you know, if you come up with a cure for cancer in China, that's going to benefit Americans that have that same type of cancer. Now, I would like those discoveries to happen in America. I do think the cuts to NIH funding, to research funding, shoot us in the foot. We've had a model of our academic research centers, universities, that's been an envy for the entire world. And it benefits our economy to make those discoveries here.

This is something that I have talked to the Chinese about, talked to the Chinese ambassador about, is it is an area where we could be working together to solve some of these –

Mr. Morrison: So you would fall more into the camp of, let's focus on making sure that U.S. is competitive, scientifically and corporately, because we've weakened ourselves?

Rep. Bera: I mean, I think we're shooting ourselves in the foot. And that didn't just start with the Trump administration. You know, go back a decade or two, you have some of our most promising research scientists not getting the NIH funding that they would for their labs, and China saying, hey, I'll build you a state-of-the-art lab. Come out here. Do your research here. We'll give you what you need. So we lost a lot of talent.

Our immigration policy also loses a lot of talent. A lot of those students will come to U.S. universities to gain the expertise, the knowledge, the training. Yet, we don't let them stay here. And, you know, then they return back to China, or places where they just want to do the research. I do think that is a failed policy, on our part. And I do hope, you know, if we get the majority as we move forward into a new administration, we do restart some of the research funding, the NIH funding, that has been really successful for us. Maybe not exactly the same way as it was previously, but I think most Americans, most of industry, recognize the benefit of having those robust investments.

Are there places where we could partner together? Absolutely. And I think there are also guardrails where we should say, yeah, here's how we want to use gene therapy for good to help alleviate some of the challenges that we see in global society, but here's some guardrails and types of research that we probably shouldn't be doing because again, as we saw in the pandemic, there's a real downside of – you know, of things happening. You see that in the AI space as well. And that's a conversation that we're having with the Chinese as well, that we see all the promise of AI. We're conscious of some of the negative sides of AI if it gets out of control. The Chinese are actually

pretty – they understand that as well. And how do we compete on the promise of AI and say we’ve got to protect against the dark side of AI as well?

Mr. Morrison: Hmm. Thank you. President Xi and Trump met in May. They’re going to meet in September in Washington. They’re going to meet back in China during the APEC summit in November. And then they’re going to meet in Florida at the G-20 summit – four times in the year. That’s unprecedented. And it offers a real window of opportunity. Last week, the U.S.-China Business Council had its annual gala. The Chinese ambassador gave a very detailed and powerful speech. Our ambassador, Perdue, had a prerecorded, very powerful speech broadcast from Beijing.

The Chinese ambassador made a point of saying, our relationship is stabilizing. It’s going to get even more stable. There’s areas of key cooperation – global health being one of them, public health being one of them. I was encouraged to hear that. So we may – we may see, as with all of this contact, a window open up. And maybe that – you’re in a position to help change the – change the dialogue and the discourse up on the Hill, which has moved very much towards decouple, treat the Chinese as the enemy, not as a – not as a competitor.

Rep. Bera: Yeah. So I think you’re assessing how President Trump is seeing this. I think you’re also accurately giving a reflection that Congress – let’s separate to how Congress looked at China pre-pandemic, where they did see some of the threats and the competition. Certainly a low point during the pandemic and post-pandemic. And I still see a lot of my colleagues in Congress, and to some extent I see this as well, looking at China as a competitor and, you know, perhaps strategic opponent. I do think if you look at the American people, and there’s polling that bears this out, they don’t see China as an adversary. They see China as a competitor.

And that might be the better way to see China, because China’s not going away. We’re not going away. And we are the two leading nations on the Earth. And, you know, I don’t want us to have a kinetic conflict or a war. I don’t think they do either. We will compete for influence. And that’s not necessarily a bad thing. That can make both of us better. But can we find areas to cooperate? If Henry Kissinger were still alive today, he’d absolutely say, you know, we’ve got to have these track two dialogues on AI, on public health, global health, pandemic preparedness, on climate change. Like, there’s any number of areas where the United States and China have to actually work together if we want to address things that impact our entire world.

Mr. Morrison: The quagmire, the unresolved rancor over COVID origin, still sits in the middle of the road, right? I mean, it’s still an obstacle. It strikes me, it’s six years after COVID began. And when you go up to the Hill, that’s the first thing that gets rolled out.

Rep. Bera: Not by me. So as someone who had to sit through a frustrating two years on the Select Subcommittee on COVID, I think we totally missed the ball. Like, I'm agnostic. I can make the argument that it was a lab leak. I can make the argument that it was a naturally occurring pathogen. We have to take efforts to mitigate against both. So, you know, for us to just relitigate this is just wasting time. I'd love to go back and, you know, in an objective way understand what happened, understand our response – we got a lot of things wrong in how we addressed this pandemic – because, 100 percent, we are going to have another global pandemic. You know, hopefully that's in the far-off distant future and we have systems in place to help mitigate that, but, heaven forbid, if we were to have another pandemic similar to COVID-19 today, we are probably less prepared today to deal with it than we were in 2019-2020.

Mr. Morrison: We certainly don't have the mechanism – we don't have the mechanisms in place for high-level dialogue between ourselves and the Chinese.

Rep. Bera: We don't. And that's – that is a shame. And we, the United States, have dismantled a lot of our own capabilities – internationally, we talked about that earlier, but here domestically at home.

Mr. Morrison: We've got a few minutes left. I don't want to end without talking a bit about Iraq. I mean, about Iran, the war in Iran. We're at a delicate moment right now. There's all sorts of issues out there in the air in terms of holding the ceasefire, reopening the Straits of Hormuz, listening to the Gulf partners and their fears. What's China's role? How does this relate to Israel and Hezbollah? All of these things. Congress is going to be very, very important in this next phase. Hasn't been, obviously, part of these negotiations, but is going to play – tell us a bit about how you're looking at things?

Rep. Bera: Yeah. I think it's a huge mistake that the administration is not involving Congress. Because what you're talking about is putting together an architecture, hopefully, of peace and stability and a different Middle East moving forward. You know, as someone who was involved in the JCPOA negotiations, it looks pretty good today. Congress was very involved. We had multiple hearings on that. The Obama administration brought us in. You had partners in China and Russia helping negotiate this deal. I think this go-it-alone approach of the Trump administration that doesn't involve Congress, but doesn't involve our European allies, Asian allies, is a huge mistake. Now, I could go back and relitigate the war, but that doesn't do any good. We are where we are.

Mr. Morrison: What can you do as an individual member of Congress? What can you do to try and stir the water a little bit, and get some dialogue going, and inform yourselves but also be engaging with some of our partners?

Rep. Bera: Yeah. So how we're approaching this is if the Trump administration is not asking Congress's advice and support, I have the ability to sit down with the ambassadors from the various Middle Eastern countries, our Arab allies, have the ability to sit down with the Israelis and, you know, again, give my perspective, or give our perspective as a separate branch of government. You know, we're going to be with the ambassador from Qatar, who's going to host a group of members, Democrats and Republicans, to talk about their perspective. Because at the end of the day, you know, there's two and a half years left of the Trump administration. There'll be a new administration coming in. You know, Congress may change hands in November in the House and Senate. And we're talking about a long-term strategy.

It is going to be different, because the Middle East is different today than it was when I first came to Congress in 2013. Certainly, October 7th was a turning point in the Middle East, and now the closure of the strait, and where Iran and the Arab states are. The Arab states, you know, see a particular vulnerability at this juncture, right? They've had relative peace and stability and prosperity. They just saw, you know –

Mr. Morrison: Shattered.

Rep. Bera: Yeah. That is all gone. So what does the "what next" look like? You know, if Trump really does provide \$300 billion of rebuilding, if there is lifting of sanctions that have – some that have been in place for 40 years – does Iran become a more responsible country? You know, I don't expect the regime to change, but there are real problems inside Iran – significant drought, significant energy shortages, a shattered economy. I've talked to the Chinese about this. They should be a responsible player in helping what comes next because it's a win for them. I don't see U.S. oil companies going into Iran to rebuild their industry, but I do see Chinese companies going in there. I do see China investing in Iran. Again, you know, the Chinese were with us in the JCPOA. Will they be with us in a responsible way on what comes next? I would hope they would be.

Mr. Morrison: I was struck by President Trump's remarks praising the Chinese for their support in getting to this point. I'm not sure what exactly he was referencing.

Rep. Bera: Yeah. I mean, there's pretty clear evidence that Chinese also are providing data and targeting data for, you know, places in the Middle East and the Arab nations, our assets. But we are where we are. Can we create something better going forward, and create a different Middle East? I don't know. It's going to be really complicated.

Mr. Morrison: You know, Gaza has sort of vanished in the midst of the war in Iran. And the agreement from last October is stalled. The Board of Peace, the creation of the technocratic governance, Palestinian technocratic governance, the disarming of Hamas, the withdrawal of the Israeli forces. All of that has stalled out. We don't have as much of – as high a risk of famine as we've had at different points. There's been some improvements in the flow, but the conditions inside Gaza are still absolutely shocking and deplorable. And Iran sort of sucked all the attention away from that. So I think Congress could play a very important role there.

Rep. Bera: Yeah, we could. And we're trying. And the American public, their opinions of Israel have changed dramatically in the last three years. And we didn't touch on Lebanon and what's happening there. Israel is going to be really interesting and bears watching, because it is now a largely isolated country in the world. You've seen the Europeans turn on Israel. I mean, the United States is probably their last remaining friend. And Prime Minister Netanyahu is doing everything he can to push the United States away. The politics of Israel and support for Israel on the far-left and the far-right – this is not a partisan thing – have changed dramatically.

Mr. Morrison: Are you worried by that?

Rep. Bera: I would worry if I was in Israel right now, as an Israeli. You know, as someone who supports a Jewish state of Israel, it – again, the politics have changed dramatically. And I do worry about – you know, you've got Prime Minister Netanyahu on the ballot in October. He's got a far-right that doesn't support the ceasefire in Iran, wants to continue this war in Lebanon. I'm not bored, Steve. There's a lot going on in the world. But I got to stay optimistic. And hopefully we come out in a better place.

Mr. Morrison: Yeah. Yeah. So let's close on that note. As you're looking ahead, the elections in November, a new Congress coming into power in January.

Rep. Bera: I like the optimism.

Mr. Morrison: What is giving you the greatest hope here?

Rep. Bera: We're at an inflection point. And I never want to say we've hit rock bottom, but I think the opportunity – there's been – I think President Trump would take it as a compliment that he's been incredibly disruptive. It does give us an opportunity to rebuild something that's more reflective of the 21st century, rebuild an America that is focused at home domestically on providing opportunity, creating that American dream for the next generation,

but also understands our role and responsibility in the world. You will see the Europeans stepping up to take greater responsibility.

Certainly, in the security front, you know, you heard the president of Finland talking about the things that they need to do in Europe. You just had the NATO general secretary here. I think the Japanese – you know, you see a prime minister in Japan. You know, Japan's taking more responsibility. You know, Korea is now a leading nation in the world. The Indians are rising. You know, I push the Indians to take a greater responsibility in global affairs. And I think they should. They're very capable of doing that.

So what gives me optimism is let's not rebuild the architecture of the 75 years post-World War II. Let's rebuild an architecture that reflects the next 75 years in the 21st century. It's not going to be easy. You know, organizations like the U.N., WHO were largely created post-World War II through the Cold War. That's what we have. Can we modernize these organizations to be reflective of the 21st century that we see? And that's going to be a huge challenge, but it is – it gives me hope and optimism that, at the end of the day, we always seem to choose the right thing for humankind.

Mr. Morrison: Thank you. Congressman Bera, thank you so much for all you do, in so many domains, and including the commitments and contributions you've made here to the CSIS Bipartisan Alliance. We're very grateful to you for that. We're also very grateful to both your staff and our staff in putting things like this together. Michaela Simoneau, Caitlin Noe, Emma Bruce, from your staff, who's been a great friend and ally, and the remarkable production staff, Dwayne and his staff, who made this all possible. I hope we can do this again soon.

Rep. Bera: Great. Glad to be here. And thank you for everything you do at CSIS.

Mr. Morrison: Thank you.

END.