Online Event


RECORDING DATE:
Thursday, September 17, 2020 at 1:00 p.m. EDT

FEATURING:
Congressman Will Hurd,
Member, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence

CSIS EXPERTS:
Jude Blanchette,
Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS

Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
www.superiortranscriptions.com
Well, hello and welcome. My name is Jude Blanchette. I am the Freeman Chair in China Studies here at CSIS.

I'm really excited about today's conversation, where we'll be talking about U.S. competition with China. But instead of focusing on some of the more traditional domains of the growing rivalry, we're going to focus today on information, disinformation, and the role that these are playing increasingly in the bilateral rivalry.

And I can really think of no one better to help us unpack this issue than our guest, Congressman Will Hurd, who since 2015 has been serving as the U.S. representative for Texas' 23rd Congressional District. Representative Hurd really brings a unique lens and background to this challenge, having served as a(n) operations officer in the CIA for the better part of a decade with tours in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, but also brings a keen interest and background training in all issues technology-related, especially computer science, which was an early focus of his. In Congress, among other things he serves on – as a ranking member for the Subcommittee on Intelligence, Modernization, and Readiness, which falls under the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. And I think very apposite for our discussion today, he's been a keen and outspoken voice on the challenge that China presents to the United States.

Just in preparing for this, looking through some of his recent writings you see a focus on not looking at the competition in the rearview mirror, but really trying to think through the next iterations of this challenge and what the United States has to be doing in terms of short- and long-term investments to better position us to be competing and ultimately winning in this challenge, in this competition with China. I saw just recently that the congressman called China the greatest political threat the U.S. faces. And looking at his work with Representative Robin Kelly in attempting to develop a national strategy on artificial intelligence, I think both demonstrates a very deep commitment to finding bipartisan solutions to these challenges, but I think a really laser-like focus on what the United States needs to be doing to think through the full 21st century of competition.

And so it's a great honor and pleasure to be joined by Representative Hurd to unpack this crucial topic of information competition between the U.S. and China. Congressman Hurd, thank you very much for joining us today.

It's a pleasure to be on. It's an important topic, and it's crazy. When I was – you know, if I go back to 2008, late 2008 when I made the decision to run for Congress, I was in the Hindu Kush Mountains in Afghanistan, and I never would have thought that I'd be sitting talking about technology and disinformation in China. You know, most of my career was counterterrorism and chasing nuclear-weapons proliferators. I did – you know, China was a – was a target for everyone in trying to better understand, but I would think even in my time in the CIA we viewed China as kind of a regional superpower rather than a global superpower. And so, my understanding of what I call this new Cold War has evolved from my time in the agency, and they are obviously a global power. So it's great to be with you to chat about these topics.
Jude Blanchette: Well, you've already hit upon a theme that will, I think, run throughout our discussion today, which is the last time the United States was engaged in a truly great-power competition was with the Soviet Union. And so it happens that you mention this as a new Cold War, and of course it's the new where all the interesting, challenging stuff is. Rather than this just being a repeat of the old Cold War, we're vexed with some issues of economic-technological-human capital integration, which make this such a thorny issue.

Rep. Will Hurd: Well, it's even – it's even more complicated because the U.S. and Russian cultures/economies were never anywhere as intertwined as the U.S. and China is. I think China is probably more of a frenemy, right? It's a – it's a potential customer, right, to a lot of great U.S. businesses, but it's absolutely an adversary as well. And so that's a unique challenge that we didn't have in dealing with the USSR or Russia.

Jude Blanchette: Yeah. Yeah, it's a crucial point.

To sort of start at the 35,000-foot elevation here, as hopefully we descend down, the first thing I wanted to ask you about is, as a framework, a lot of the focus now – not exclusively, but a lot of the focus – especially in think tanks, but even in the U.S. government is focusing on some of the more traditional domains of great-power competition. So, obviously, over at the Pentagon they're doing a lot of work on military competition. You see an increasing focus on economic competition. You yourself have talked a lot about how do we make North America much more competitive economically with China out in – out in global markets. We see a lot of focus on diplomatic competition with China. There seems to be a relative deemphasis or lack of emphasis on this information and ideological space. And so just as a framing question, I wanted to ask your topline thoughts on in those siloes or buckets of these various elements of the competition, what role do you see information, and as an adjunct ideology, playing today and looking forward into the future between the two countries?

Rep. Will Hurd: Well, it's going to continue to be an increasing area that we have to deal with because it moves faster than all those other – all those elements and in any other domain. And so we have to be prepared for that, and I don't think we are.

I think COVID is a good example of how early on, you know, the Chinese government tried to claim that this was the United States, that it started at a military base in Italy. They also are going to our Western allies and say you can't trust the U.S. to help you with this, we're the ones. You know, even in some points the Chinese had gotten support from European countries on the ventilators and PPE, and then they tried to sell that back to those – (laughs) – to those countries. And so this is the kind of game that we have to be ready for.

And it starts with what is their goal and this – their desire to be a world leader – THE world leader, not a world leader; THE world leader – in advanced technology in about 11 areas by 2049, right? This is not – this is
not my hypothesis. This is not something I collected when I was in the CIA. This is them saying this about themselves, and it starts with that.

And so why are they trying to do that? And ultimately, data plays a role in all these issues, right? High-powered compute plays a role in all this. Advanced engineering like algorithms plays a role in all this. And what is at the core of all this? Information. And so how do you collect it, how do you weaponize it?

Let’s go back to the OPM hack of 2015, 22.1 million Americans who have gone through a security clearance. Now, what the SF-86, Standard – literally stands for “Standard Form 86” – has information on family members that may be living overseas. So the Chinese now have access to any Chinese American that may have a family member living in China. How are they going to use and leverage that kind of information? So not only is it collecting information to move their operations, it’s weaponizing it in a way in order to move the narrative.

And information operations helps in all these other domains of general great-power competition. And so you can prepare the actual physical battlespace with information operations. This is what all of our military planners talk about. Why do we care about the fact that space is now a contested domain just like air, land, and sea? Because space decides and influences the way information flows terrestrially. And so all of these issues are connected.

Why should we care about TikTok? I don’t care about some fancy – you know, some dance moves somebody has, but it’s a lot of data that is tagged on shapes and styles of faces that the Chinese government can’t get in the mainland. So all these things are connected.

Jude Blanchette: I wanted to linger on something you mentioned at the top of your remarks, which was on China’s sort of narrative war coming out of COVID-19 – still to this day outright denying or at least obscuring or attempting to obscure where the origins of this were, speaking in the passive voice, leaving this kind of general, well, we don’t know where this originated, hopefully someday we’ll find out. And you’ve written a lot about this. But in thinking about the playbook that China has used on overt disinformation, whether that’s claiming through government officials over Twitter that maybe this came in through the U.S. Army, I wanted to get your thoughts on what does this tell us or what does this tell you about China’s shifting playbook on disinformation?

As a – as just a contextual remark, it was the case that up until very recently experts or analysts were saying, look, there’s a different playbook between Russia and China. Russia is much more – it’s like the Pistons in the late ’80s; it throws elbows, you know, it plays dirty. China sort of plays much more formal, much more elegant. It seems to me that that’s shifting a bit with seeing the more sort of Bill Laimbeer approach that China has been using with COVID-19. I wanted to get your thoughts on are we seeing an evolution in China’s aggressiveness in the disinformation space, and what does that mean to you?
Rep. Will Hurd: So the short answer is yes, but it's not new tactics for them. It is new tactics used on a world stage. They use all of these tactics internally, right? They use this in order to force obedience in the homeland. We’re seeing how they’re evolving and using these tactics right now in Hong Kong. And so we should not be surprised that an authoritarian government is using these kind of tactics on the world stage.

And I think you can go back even – I think it was 2017 when the first Chinese military base outside of Asia, outside of East Asia, in Djibouti. I think that was a wakeup call for a lot of people because, again, I think the prevailing sentiment was that – I mean, that China is a major player in East Asia and they only care about East Asia. No, that’s – that was an old-world thinking. We all laughed at Made in China, right, that you know, that's going to be some knockoff. That's not the case anymore, especially when it comes, you know, the fear about microchips and things of that nature.

And so we’re going to see – they have a playbook that has been developed over a couple of decades, and we’re going to see that being used in a broader way. And I do believe that COVID was an opportunity for them to supercharge their efforts, and that’s why I think some of these information operations are becoming more aggressive. Oh, and by the way, is it being countered properly?

Jude Blanchette: Yeah.

Rep. Will Hurd: And negative – I learned a few things when I was in the CIA: be nice with nice guys, tough with tough guys, and if there’s no consequences to negative behavior that negative behavior will continue and escalate. And the only way that we’re going to deal with this – and we can't do this by ourselves. We have to be working with our allies. Let’s start with the EU, let’s start with NATO in making sure that we’re pushing back. We’ve got to make sure that we’re in lockstep with Australia and Japan and South Korea and Vietnam on some of these issues because we have to have a collective response to these – to this behavior.

Jude Blanchette: Yeah. And certainly, you know, your last comment there reminds me that it seems that the United States has forgotten the fact that I think we hold all the – all the big major cards here, it’s just that we’re not deploying them. You know, China has a(n) unenviable number of allies – North Korea – whereas the United States is able to bring to – bring to the table and leverage a pretty robust and thick network of allies and partners, which creates a sort of – a size factor and a scale factor which certainly rivals China. But we’re in a moment where we've lost our mojo, and certainly I think it's clear in looking at a lot of our responses or how we’re sizing up the China challenge that we’ve forgotten all the substantial elements of national strength that we have, of which our allies are just one.

Rep. Will Hurd: And I would say on that, too, we oftentimes forget about soft power. When you talk about, you know, these issues, we always talk about the DIME, you know, frame of mind – diplomatic, intelligence, military, and economic. We oftentimes forget the economic piece. And with what the Chinese are doing
with the One Belt, One Road Initiative, our response to that, a new redesigned OPIC, you know, is that doing enough?

I was in El Salvador literally meeting with the president the day after they made the announcement of working with the Chinese on some port project which we know was a – was a debt trap. And so are we doing that– (inaudible)?

And I would say we’ve made some mistakes in Eastern Europe when it comes to – you know, I spent a lot of time in Eastern Europe in Congress, and a lot of them are like, why can’t we get more old episodes of “Oprah” or “Seinfeld” or some of these kinds of things to see that American culture that we all love? And they were having a hard time. And what the Russians were doing, they were providing the programming and including Russian news.

The Chinese are going to start doing something similar. And so if we don’t start focusing on some of our – that soft power, then we’re going to – we’re going to have a hard time.

Jude Blanchette: I’ve always said “Seinfeld” reruns are our most potent offensive soft-power weapon, so.

So I just want to follow up, just one last question on the election piece here. We’re moving towards our presidential election in November. We’ve had some pronounced warnings from senior law enforcement and intelligence officials about – specifically about the concern of the threat from China. I want to get your assessment of how big of a concern this is. And crucially, what steps do you think we can be taking now to protect against November? But I think also forward looking, what should we be doing about modernizing our election system to be able to withstand some of these threats?

Rep. Will Hurd: So I actually held the first hearings on election interference back in 2016 before the 2016 election was over, and one of the things that we have seen when it comes to hardening the vote-counting machines and the tabulation machines, states have done a pretty good job since 2016 making sure that you have the ability to have a(n) audit trail so that when a recount happens. And as somebody who has won an election by 900 votes, every vote definitely matters. And so we’ve seen that happen.

The question becomes if you’re trying to influence something – somebody, how does that impact your – ultimately, your vote? And one of the things that I would like to see, the social-media companies have gotten pretty good at trying to take down folks that are misusing and abusing those systems for a nation-state, you know, that is doing an information operation, right? We can monitor, and we – they’ve understood the tactics, techniques, and procedures that these troll farms are using, and trying to figure out how to – how to stop this. But the piece that’s missing is if a user liked or shared something that – some payload from a Russian troll farm, are they notified? And the answer is no. And so I would like to see a more sophisticated notification system that if we’re going to change people’s behavior and not propagating the payload of a(n) information attack, you got to be told, hey,
you did this and you shared something from a Chinese troll farm or a Russian troll farm, and so maybe that changes individual people’s behavior.

So that is – that is, obviously, separate from the vote tabulation and vote counting. But DHS is working with the secretaries of state, secretaries of state understand that, so I feel confident in this. But it’s these nation-state actors that are trying to get people or to influence the outcome of potential future legislation. That’s something that’s a little bit harder to do.

Jude Blanchette: Just a follow-up on that. I was in Taiwan for the election, the presidential election, in January and was – you know, Taiwan has been dealing with this onslaught from China, a real aggressive sort of technological threat to hack the election system, but also a morale threat of trying to – I think trying to diminish or deteriorate confidence in Taiwan’s democracy.

What struck me during that period, in looking at what Taiwan is doing to push back against this, is there feels like there’s a tension between raising awareness about the threat to your election system and – but as a corollary to that, delegitimizing the electoral system, right. The more I warn about the threats, the attacks, China, Russia, I can imagine the average voter going, well, how much do I really trust the system now?

So I wanted to just get your thoughts on do you see that tension existing as we start to raise the alarm bells or ring the alarm bells about China and Russia? And what do we do to make sure that we’re making sure voters are aware of the risks but still confident that when you go in and you punch the ballot, that your vote is still counted?

Rep. Will Hurd: And I think the outcome matters, right. I think the increase in – of people voting in 2018 over 2016, I think, is a good example. And even in this COVID environment, I think you’re going to see unprecedented turnout. So I think as long as people are turning out, that’s how you – that’s an indication that people feel comfortable.

But we also have to remember the goal of the Russians and the Chinese is the same. It’s to erode trust in our democratic institutions. And the way you erode trust may not be in changing a vote from A to B. The erosion of trust becomes making everybody do what exactly you just explained. Oh, you can’t trust this, so should I even go out and do this, right? And I think the great thing about the American spirit is that people are going to say, you know, you’re not going to prevent me from going out and do something.

And so that tension, while we should be aware of it, I don’t see it on the ground. I’m involved in a number of elections across the country. And ultimately it’s the individual candidates whose job it is to make sure they’re getting people and making sure people are going out to the polls. So the fact that you have thousands of people doing that and we have such a distributed system, I’m not as concerned as what we have seen in a place like some Eastern European countries or even our friends in Taiwan.

Jude Blanchette: We’ve got about 14 or so minutes left, and I want to pivot to the sort of offensive, what can the United States be doing to invest in the future? Just
one final question, I think, in this same cluster of issues, which is our U.S. educational system is still the world leader here. It is not only contributing to U.S. soft power but U.S. hard power through innovation, the talent that we are attracting from all over the world.

At the same time, you know, we know that we do have a problem of a very small percentage of individuals coming from abroad who are abusing the system and/or engaged in espionage to pilfer and steal IP, which is then turned against the United States. We’ve seen raising awareness about some of the talent programs that China utilizes here, and again, highlighting that this is a very, very small proportion of individuals who are engaged in nefarious activity.

As the United States has stepped up its defensive posture against some of these threats, there are concerns that we are overreaching, that we’re turning away talent. And instead of the old Cold War where it was the United States or that was it, students can now go to Canada. They can go to New Zealand. They can go to Australia. They can go to the U.K.

Again, thinking about these tensions, do you see one existing between protecting national security and maintaining an open, pluralistic, competitive education system? Or do you think this is a challenge that we can face and address in a pretty straightforward manner?

Rep. Will Hurd:

The challenge absolutely exists, and we must address it. The United States of America has benefited from the brain drain of every other country for the last couple of decades. We need to continue that. The reason our economy has been the most important economy in the world is because we have been a leader in advanced technology. And one of the reasons we have been able to do that is we attract the best and the brightest, and they want to come. They want to become Americans. They want to live in America and they want to contribute to our society, our economy, our way of life. We have to make sure that continues.

If the Chinese government wants to steal our technology, let’s steal their engineers, right. Let’s steal – you know, let’s take – let’s go after their top 200 AI researchers and be like, we’re going to make you a deal that you won’t be able to say no and then you’re going to contribute here; same with quantum. And I think that’s the kind of perspective that we need to take.

We can manage the risk of people coming. You know, having a young person come in through an undergraduate program, the kind of plan that takes years, and they’re going to be able to be exposed to the freedoms and our way of life rather than have to go back to China and deal with some of the realities on the ground there.

So, we should be prepared and I think we should be way more opening than what we are in order to deal with this. This is a generation-defining struggle between the United States of America and the Chinese government on who’s going to be the leader in advanced technology. Whoever comes in second place is going to lose. And this means we have to attract talent.
A scary stat. When it comes to venture capital, venture capital is kind of the pointy end of the spear when it comes to capital. In 2006, 80 percent of venture capital was invested in the U.S. companies; in 2018, 49 percent. And the increase in – the gross increase in the amount of money was like a 10-fold increase. In 2006, the top 10 venture-capital deals, eight of them were American companies. Two were Chinese. In 2018 – in 2019 – in 2018, excuse me – three were American companies, top 10 of venture-capital deals. Five were Chinese. One was Singaporean. The other was an Indonesian. That is a problem.

And so, we have to make sure people are still wanting to come to the United States, because we have the best schools. We have to make sure that we’re attracting that talent, because there are more honor students in China than there are all students in the United States of America – four times the size of our population, and that means we’ve got to make sure we’re attracting the best and the brightest.

And when you look at – Eric Schmidt is running the National Security Commission for Artificial Intelligence, right, and looking at artificial intelligence as a national-security issue. And some of the recommendations they’re coming out with have nothing to do with pure national security. It’s saying we’ve got to have an educated workforce, right. And we do that by educating our own, but also by attracting the best and the brightest from around the world.

And we have to pursue those two tracks and making sure that our education system is still the best in the world. Really, we’ve got to be focused on that, because there are some other places where you can be going and getting as good an education, if not better, outside the United States. And that should scare all of us.

Jude Blanchette: Great points. And I wonder if I can pivot off that, now that you’re talking about some of the investments the United States needs to be making, in a more offensive frame of mind. I wonder if I can pivot now to just use the remaining few minutes we have here to be thinking about returning to this information space and the Cold War.

If you look back at the history of the Cold War; information warfare, information competition, investments in soft power, investments in open-source translation, the United States really felt all in on this and recognizing the importance of the information space in competing with the Soviet Union.

It seems like that muscle has atrophied a bit with the United States. That makes sense. The nature of our competition and our rivalries changed; certainly a focus on an area you have deep experience in, the Middle East, where this maybe didn’t play as much of a role. You know, the United States was invested in things like Radio Free Europe, the U.S. Information Agency.

At a broad level, thinking back on how the United States was prosecuting the Cold War against the Soviet Union and that information approach, do you see any lessons that we can be learning today or what we can be borrowing from
the toolkit we used for the Cold War that might be apposite or helpful as we think about competition with China?

Rep. Will Hurd: I think all those elements you talked about are the – we should be using those strategies, but make sure we’re putting it into a 2020 or a 21st century context, right. And one of the areas that we’re going to have to learn is how do we translate our concepts and ideas, you know, to make sure that it resonates in a very different culture.

Look, I love movies. I watch so many movies. I watch bad movies. And I was watching a recent movie about Ip Man. He was the –

Jude Blanchette: Donnie Yen.

Rep. Will Hurd: Yeah, yeah. And it was a movie – I think it was Chinese-made. And some of the concepts – you know, the fight scenes were amazing and all that, but the concepts didn't resonate with me. It was like what point are they trying to make, right? And so, we have to be mindful that how are we going to articulate our message. So part of information operations is delivery of the message, right, but making sure that message is correct and hits its point.

And so, yes, we should have this. We should – you know, do we really understand, why does Hong Kong matter, right? Why – and Hong Kong matters because what the Chinese do in Hong Kong is what the Chinese are going to do in Taiwan. Why does Taiwan matter? Because Taiwan produces more silicon wafers and certain kind of chips that powers literally everything that we use. And if we don't have that, right, how is this going to impact this generation-defining struggle?

And so, we have to be paying attention to what they’re already doing and listening to them. And so how can we make sure that we counter? When you have protesters in Hong Kong waving the American flag, singing the National Anthem, right, usually – you know, the experiences I had in the Middle East is they were burning the flag and saying death to America. And so that is something that we have to be able to take advantage of.

You need the resources to do that. You need the entities within government to do that. You also need public-private partnerships in order to make that happen, and so – and that we have a framework that we should look at. And then the question is, how do we adapt those principles and techniques to where we are today?

Jude Blanchette: You know, building on that, I mean, you talked about sort of understanding what’s happening in China and understanding their messaging. The proximate reason that we’re having this conversation today and the reason that my CSIS colleague Seth Jones and I are spending so much time on this information space is we originally came to this because we noticed that most of the interesting stuff that the Chinese government or the Communist Party is saying about military strategy, about its political strategy, is encrypted in Chinese language, right. It’s not being translated; and this, in contradistinction to the Cold War, where we had, you know, the Foreign
Broadcast Information Service, or FBIS, which then transformed into the open-source enterprise but which dwindled and atrophied.

Seth and I really are trying to emphasize the role in open source in translation. And you mentioned China's a frenemy. We should be having every Xi Jinping speech translated into English within 24 hours. You notice that a few key documents, like the Made in China 2025 plan, which, you know, inshallah, was translated into English by the Chinese government, has done more to shift the awareness from foreign businesses and us here. The 19th Party Congress speech which Xi Jinping gave, where he articulated this big grand vision for rejuvenation by 2049 and a world-class military and comprehensive national power – you know, thank the Lord that was all translated to English.

So I wanted to ask you, do you see a gap as well in our investments in open source here? And what should we be doing to close this gap in terms of investments in and outside of government?

Rep. Will Hurd:

Look, you're absolutely right. And we shouldn't have this gap, especially where machine language and language programming is getting to be able to have some of the – some of these translations happen quickly and somebody go through and edit it. This is – you're absolutely right. And I think there was a shift. When you read them saying things themselves, that is what has changed the perspective of folks up here in Washington.

I actually think there's only a handful of truly bipartisan – or nonpartisan may be the right word – and the threat of China, right, in cybersecurity, I think, are those two. And part of that is from learning and understanding what they're actually saying.

So you're right. When we look at – when we think about research dollars, not just research dollars in these advanced technologies that we're going to need to master in order to keep our economy the strongest economy in the world, but it's like what are those – what are those technologies that are going to help us better understand our threat, right, and how are we going to better understand our adversary? And that starts with natural-language processing, and that's something that we should be doing more on and making sure that we are getting things translated.

I tried to get a document – thank God we have the Congressional Research Service – that was – it took me forever to say, OK, what does this actually say? Like, I want a better translation than what I had. But to your point, when we hear what they say, right, it makes it – it's more impactful. But, yes, there are so many areas. But that means we've got to make tough decisions. And we need to be making sure that when federal dollars are being used for research that that research is being made available to other folks, right? And so even if it's a private institution that ultimately is getting those federal dollars for that research, that information should be made available to others so that we can capitalize on those federal dollars.

Jude Blanchette:

We said we'd only keep you for 30 minutes, and I notice we're at 30 minutes and 20 seconds. But I wonder if I can sneak in a final question here.

Jude Blanchette:  You’re granted, you know, one wish and this will help position the United States to compete and ultimately be victorious in this long-term competition with China. What’s the thing you look at that you say, when we write the history of how we were successful, what will be the element that will explain it? And what would you like to see happen?

Rep. Will Hurd:   Every fourth grader is – coding is introduced to every fourth grader. I think that is something that would change – that would change our trajectory.

Jude Blanchette:  Well, as befits your reputation and personality, that is both an eminently practical yet blue-sky desire for the United States.

Rep. Will Hurd:  (Laughs)

Jude Blanchette:  But, you know, Congressman Hurd, I really want to thank you for taking time out today. I know you’re moving on to different ways of serving the country in the future. But your bipartisanship, your pragmatism, your principled stance on these issues, will sorely be missed. But I’m sure you will be a prominent and important voice in these discussions, in these debates, moving forward.

So again, I want to thank you for your service. Thank you for your time today.

Rep. Will Hurd:  I appreciate you. These kinds of back-and-forth conversations – you gave me a lot of things to think about as well. And my goal is, you know, I’m finishing up Congress and trying to do this national strategy on artificial intelligence so this is one area the United States stays a leader in. But I plan on staying involved in that intersection of technology, national security, and foreign policy. So I really do appreciate the opportunity. And best of luck with the rest of the conversations.

Jude Blanchette:  Great. Thank you very much.

(End)