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“Fireside Chat with Kurt Campbell”

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FEATURING

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Transcript By

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Ted Osius: Good morning – morning again. It's a real pleasure to have a chance to have a conversation with Dr. Kurt Campbell.

Dr. Campbell has had many titles. He was my boss when he was assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific. He was deputy assistant secretary at DOD. He has headed esteemed think tanks, including CNAS, as was a VP here. He's headed the Asia Group. He has taught at Harvard. He has written terrific books, including one about the pivot, of which he was the architect – President Obama's pivot to Asia. But I don't think there's any role that he's played more consequential than the one he's playing right now. Dr. Campbell is deputy assistant secretary to the president and coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs at the National Security Council, a position he was appointed to on day one of the Biden administration.

So it gives me great pleasure to have this chance to talk with you, Kurt.

Kurt Campbell: Great, Ted. Ted, thank you very much. I don't know if this microphone is on. Is it? Can you hear? I apologize. Is it good? Good. Thank you very much and it's a pleasure to be with you.

I also just want to return the compliment. Great that you've taken up this new role at the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council after decades of consequential diplomatic engagement, and it's great to be back at CSIS as well. Thank you.

Amb. Osius: Thank you, Kurt.

So let's – we're going to jump right in with Russia-Ukraine. You are occupied day in and day out at the White House dealing with the aftermath of the Russian invasion. And can you tell us some of the – what your efforts have been with regard to Indo-Pacific friends and allies in seeing how to make sure that they are part of the solution and not part of the problem?

Dr. Campbell: Great. Thank you, Ted.

And I think as – everyone understands that what we're witnessing – this tragedy, this terrible conflict in Ukraine – for many of us just brings back sort of historic memories of the 1930s, sort of a combination feel of both 1939 and 1989, both deep peril and anxiety and also some prospects for what comes next.

I will say that the issue that has received most of the focus has been the unprecedented solidarity between the United States and European allies and partners, the ability to work together, and it has been inspirational and deeply impactful both on the battlefield and with respect to the surrounding diplomacy and the sanctions policies.

But I think what sometimes, Ted, gets a little lost in the overarching picture is that what we've also seen is unprecedented Asian and Indo-Pacific engagement and solidarity on some of the challenges that we're facing in Ukraine, and it just – I think it's important to pause a moment and reflect on what we've seen, much of it not coordinated but, basically, inspired by countries acting either independently or together.

So in the aftermath of the tragedy, we've seen a number of things take place among key partners in the Indo-Pacific. The first has been steps to support some of the energy challenges presented in Western Europe, so complex natural gas swaps between key partners in Northeast Asia to provide support in this immediate, challenging period of late winter in Western Europe, and that has been impactful.

Secondly, almost all our key partners and allies have joined with G-7-related sanctions, both financial, some institutional and individual, that has been deeply impactful. Also, we've also seen Japan, Australia, and others follow through on specifics associated with SWIFT sanctions and other specifics related to the banking community.

Other countries have stepped up dramatically – I see my good friend, Paul, here, the ambassador to Australia – has not just stepped up with respect to sanctions relief but has sent support for the Ukrainians. Prime Minister Morrison had a great quote last week, "We're not just sending our prayers, but we're sending ammo." A tremendous response throughout the region.

Even countries, Ted, in Southeast Asia, like Singapore – obviously, with the prime minister visiting last week – have joined in this overarching effort and, I think, a deep recognition that this challenge is not just the challenge for Europe but a challenge for the Indo-Pacific.

So you ask yourself, why is this? Why are we seeing this degree of, I think, I would call it common purpose? The first is that it's just undeniable. There is a ubiquitous quality to what the Ukrainians represent, a tremendous sense of hope. It's deeply inspirational. That inspiration not only affects us in the West – in the United States and other parts of Western Europe – it's deeply impactful across Asia. We see it in almost every social media venue. We see it impacting social commentary across Asia, a deep sense of common, you know, concern about the travails of the Ukrainian people, the determination to support wherever possible.

The second is a quality that, I think, we're seeking to build on. There often, Ted, is a tendency to think about these theaters – Europe and the Indo-Pacific or Asia – as completely separate and that somehow that you have to make choices between two geographic areas.

But in many respects, what we're finding is that these two critical theatres are linked in important ways, in ways that would suggest that in some features it is one theater, a sense of that these key countries are invested in an operating system that has supported the maintenance of peace and stability, a larger project with respect to the norms of global governance.

We could go on about that, but just the – I have been struck in this new job and, Ted, I, obviously, do a lot of diplomacy with partners and allies across the Indo-Pacific and China. I also engage deeply with countries in the Indo-Pacific in Europe who want to learn more and our focus on the Indo-Pacific. And having done this for years, I see more sense of common purpose and joint efforts than I've ever seen before. And I think that's powerful and important and a critical feature of global governance.

And I would just say there's a third feature that is perhaps unspoken but is also critically important, and that is that every country in Asia, in the Indo-Pacific, wants to ensure that Ukraine is a cautionary tale, that no one contemplates again or in another theater some sort of operation that would be so destabilizing and so destructive. And I think that message has come through loud and clear.

I will also say, though – Ted, you've worked your life in Asia – it's still too early to make fundamental judgments about what are the important lessons learned from this endeavor. The one that I'm most focused on, if I can be quite direct, is that the United States has in the past, you know, made clear its determination to focus on the Indo-Pacific or the Asia-Pacific, only to be detoured or focused elsewhere on other pressing challenges.

When President Biden began his meeting last week with Prime Minister Lee, the first thing he said is that we understand that the dominant arena for engagement for the United States in the 21st century will be the Indo-Pacific. And we are determined to not veer from that course. For now, that requires us to be deeply engaged both in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific, at the same time finding these linkages between these two theories, but recognize that we must not turn our attention away from the critical technological, trade, security, political, diplomatic field that presents itself to us in the Indo-Pacific.

Amb. Osius:

Thank you. So what I hear you saying, Kurt, is the implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategy that you have put out to the world goes ahead and that it won't be deterred. We will be engaging in the intersection of these two theaters, but the movement will continue.

Part of the Indo-Pacific strategy refers to an empowered and unified ASEAN. What is it that the United States can do to help facilitate that goal?

Dr. Campbell: Yeah. Thanks, Ted.

Well, obviously I think, as many of you know, the idea of a strategy is to have component pieces that work in a kind of harmony together, so a lot of investment and focus on the United States. We're deeply engaged right now in the CHIPS Act and other elements of domestic investment in technology, trying to focus more on creating spheres of bipartisanship where we agree on common purpose. I'm grateful, Ted, one of the things that you have done is reached out to the Hill to make clear that this is an area of common purpose for all Americans.

I think working with allies and partners individually, working with them together, is critical. New venues like the Quad are important. But foundationally, from our perspective, what is critical is a strong, vital, innovative, committed approach to ASEAN. And that's what we're seeing.

I think what the president has indicated is he very much wants to host the ASEAN leaders here in Washington in the spring. I think you all have planned big events. Sometimes getting everyone's calendar together can be challenging, but that is what we are determined to do, in which, in addition to deep engagement with the business community, with key stakeholders on Capitol Hill, that the leaders will have an opportunity to engage across a broad front, not only with the president but with other key players inside the U.S. government.

And our idea here, Ted, is to broaden and deepen the scope and engagement of the U.S. government with respect to ASEAN. And that means everything. So we tend to focus more on diplomacy or security, but we see so many avenues of potential engagement – whether it be on climate change, or investments, or we have a newly empowered DFC that's determined to step up its game in Southeast Asia. We see opportunities with respect to everything from support for microlending to forestry. There's such a broad array of things that the United States and ASEAN can work together. We want very much to support the work that you supported on education – educational opportunities for ASEAN students to come to the United States.

So we do believe that ASEAN is foundational, Ted. That it has to be the center for our overall engagement in Asia. And we're excited about hosting this first-ever event in Washington. It's a little bit like planning a very big event. You get anxious about the place settings, and the like. But I'm confident that once we are able to put this in play, this will help essentially project the – you know, the future of our relationship with ASEAN very much in a forward direction.

Amb. Osius: I think we share your confidence that it will. It will be the first time to have the ASEAN leaders in Washington for such a summit. Maybe I could – we have Ambassador Bianchi here, but maybe I could ask, since that is part of this process, what is the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific economic framework?

Dr. Campbell: Well, it's great that you've asked Sarah, who's a wonderful partner, tremendously energetic and very much committed to this effort at USTR and, as importantly, a very close confidant, and the president respects her views enormously. And the fact that she's going to play a leading role here is deeply significant.

Look, Ted, I don't think it is a secret to anyone in this audience that trade and economic issues are contentious. They are – they are debated and divisive between our two parties. That is undeniable. But it is also undeniable that it is essential for the United States to put together an optimistic, engaged, focused effort that sends a message that we're committed to the region and that we want to work on common approaches, common standards to create mutual prosperity, and to do it in a way that's politically viable. Not only for the countries involved, but for us. And that is not an easy path.

I don't think I'm saying anything that's – I find myself often in situations where you walk into a room and you're not exactly sure, you know, who's going to support, who's going to have a different perspective. But I'm finding more and more, when you sit down and talk to key stakeholders, there is an understanding that this is an essential feature of American strategy. It's just undeniable. And we need to understand it, face it, do our best to implement. And that's exactly what we're going to do. And you will see, we're deeply involved – and, Ted, you've been involved in this – deeply involved in consultations now with both countries and key stakeholders. And we're looking forward to a high-level, engaged effort in the weeks and months ahead.

Amb. Osius: Thank you. And we won't steal the thunder from the next panel, but I can tell you that our members – 178 members of the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council – we're hearing a lot from them, and a lot of support for what the administration is undertaking. Well, you mentioned the Quad earlier and I want to come back to that – the Quad, and AUKUS, and ASEAN. The Venn diagrams don't exactly connect. So when you look at these pieces of the regional architecture, how do you reconcile them?

Dr. Campbell: Well, look, Ted, I think the key is intersecting, overlapping. We're going to find missions in which some groups of countries are primarily focused on technology or on climate change, and other groupings that will be more focused on security or trade. I think the idea is to have a web of these interactions that are, in many respects, reinforcing more generally. So the

Quad is an unofficial gathering. We think it's of critical importance. We're building habits of cooperation across key countries, key maritime democracies. We believe that engagement with India, in particular, is central and critical for the 21st century. We are very supportive of that and we have doubled down on engaging closely with Indian partners going forward. But it is also the case that AUKUS has a very specific security component associated with that, and it bridges a key partner in Europe, in Great Britain, with our longstanding partner in Australia on a specific security set of engagements. But even that trilateral forum, Ted, we believe will have opportunities for participation, other technologies and military engagements with key countries that seek to join.

So I think what we're primarily interested in are not closed architectures but those that encourage participation, that are about promoting common purposes and approaches to what we believe will be a complex security and political arena in the Indo-Pacific.

Amb. Osius: Last question from me and then I want to make sure that folks from this audience have a chance, and we've got a microphone right over there. But one of the pieces of that architecture is the G-20, chaired by Indonesia this year. It's an important opportunity to get the world going and to pursue economic recovery. But how do we square the circle? Because the G-20 includes Russia.

Dr. Campbell: Look, Ted, it's an important question to raise at this juncture. All I can tell you is – and no fundamental decisions have been made – but I think you have heard the outrage across the international community at what we are witnessing in Ukraine. So it's difficult, frankly, to imagine an environment where President Putin is invited in for a civilized discussion about how to promote development and work on climate change. I'll leave that to the future, but I would say that the urgencies and the tragedy of what we are facing now in Ukraine are real and undeniable, and there will be international consequences.

Amb. Osius: Yeah. Thank you.

Let's start with John Brandon's question: What do you think could be the biggest deliverable the U.S. could give ASEAN to strengthen the relationship? What is the biggest deliverable ASEAN could give the United States?

Dr. Campbell: Hmm. I think that the United States – and I'm hopeful we will work closely with the DFC and other vehicles – I think we need to support both continuing efforts to ensure that the region has safe and effective vaccines, particularly in this period, although we, you know, think that, you know – I'm not sure where we are in our journey here in the United States, but it's clear in the world and particularly in key places like Southeast Asia more work needs to

be done. The Quad has played a role in trying to provide vaccines through an ambitious agenda that we've laid out over the course of the last year, and we want to continue with that. I also believe that financing and technology partnerships on issues like climate change will be essential. And I also believe that educational opportunities are critical.

So I'm not sure that I can settle on any one thing. I think, in fact, the key to an effective engagement between the United States and ASEAN is that it is multifaceted and has many strands. And in fact, that is the key that we seek when the leaders come to Washington, is not any one deliverable but a series of substantial efforts that, again, broadens and deepens the partnership and the relationship between the United States and these critical countries in ASEAN.

And I think the greatest gift that they could give us is to come to the summit. So – (laughter) – if we schedule it that we're able to host everyone, and with a tremendous sense of gratitude and hope.

Amb. Osius: Thank you.

I think a word of congratulations is in order. The visit by Prime Minister Lee, when you issued the joint statement and the two leaders held their press event, it was deeply substantive. For those of us who – you know, policy wonks who follow these things, it was so impressive the array of issues on which we're cooperating.

Dr. Campbell: If you wouldn't mind me just making a point on this, Ted, if you look at the series of engagements that we've had over the course of the last year, beginning with the first visit of the Japanese leader, the Korean summit – we are hosting now in Washington the Korean transition team that's here. Everything that we've tried to do in the Quad – what I think what we are seeing is, across the region, a desire not simply to do general words in a polite document but really consequential commitments to deal with challenges that people are facing to try to uphold norms that we all now, I think, recognize are significant, to be ambitious about areas of mutual cooperation, and to try to sustain and build what we have labored for for decades, and I'm proud of that and I'm also proud of the fact that organizations like yours have gotten in and really committed to building and deepening a relationship.

I will just say for a moment, you know, we now hold a monthly engagement with ASEAN ambassadors, something that, you know, in the past was, you know, occasional engagement but now deep, high-level engagements with key players in the U.S. government, and it's been Ted and his organization that have been right behind us finding opportunities to fall in behind to support initiatives, to ensure that these engagements are not simply words

but are real and following through on commitments made. And we will be calling on Ted and ASEAN and CSIS, frankly, as we head into the period of making sure that the leader summit here in Washington is a success.

Amb. Osius: Well, it's a privilege to be able to help. We are deeply invested in your success. We know the time pressures on you are great, Dr. Campbell. Really grateful that you could come –

Dr. Campbell: Again, I'm sorry to keep you all waiting earlier today, but one of the challenges in a job like this is you don't have as much control over your time as you would like, but I really appreciate you waiting around. Thank you.

Amb. Osius: We're glad it was worth the wait. And thank you so much for joining us and thank you for your leadership. It means a lot.

Dr. Campbell: Thank you, Ted. Thank you very much.

Amb. Osius: Thank you. (Applause.)