“Welcome Remarks and Announcement of Myanmar Scholarship Fund”

DATE
Tuesday, April 5, 2022 at 9:15 a.m. ET

FEATURING
Ambassador Ted Osius
President and CEO, U.S.-ASEAN Business Council; Former U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam

Ambassador Derek Mitchell
Patron, US-ASEAN Business Council Institute Myanmar Scholarship Fund; Former U.S. Ambassador to Myanmar

CSIS EXPERTS
Gregory Poling
Senior Fellow and Director, Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, CSIS
Welcome. Welcome, welcome to CSIS. This is great! We actually have an audience. What, two-plus years we’ve all only seen each other from the top thirds. I’m really happy to get back to warm bodies and handshakes and all of that here at CSIS. For those who don’t know, I’m Greg Poling. I direct the Southeast Asia program here at CSIS, as well as our Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. And this is, in case you are lost, our U.S.-Indo-Pacific conference, which we’re co-hosting with the US-ASEAN Business Council.

And I couldn’t be happier that, one, US-ABC brought this opportunity to us at, I think, a really opportune moment. And, two, that this is the first big hybrid event that the Southeast Asia Program here has been able to host. Really, one of the first, and probably the biggest in-person event that CSIS has hosted post-COVID. So we’re all a bit of guinea pigs here. If you have any comments or complaints, let my colleagues know and they’ll take care of it. Everything you hear today is going to be on the record. We’ll have it up on CSIS.org. It’ll also be broadcast over YouTube, and then the videos and the transcripts will be available for anybody to watch online.

We’re going to have a modest audience here in the room throughout the two days, and then we’ll have a much bigger crowd watching online. For those online, you’ll also be able to ask questions of the panelists and the keynotes when available. You can do that by typing in the questions online. The event today, in addition to U.S.-ABC’s support, is made possible by a number of corporate sponsors, including 3M, Abbott, Amazon, Energy Capital Vietnam, Ford Freeport McMoRan, GM, Google, Marriott, Pfizer, Samtec, and Visa. And I think that list, and the fact that we have both CSIS and US-ABC here, shows you how important the Indo-Pacific is in this town and to the United States, and particular how important our economic and commercial engagement in the region is. It is not just about politics and security. It cannot be.

Now, this event was, of course, primed to occur just a week after the mooted US-ASEAN special summit. We now hope that that will happen sometime in the next month or two. In the meantime, I would encourage you – any ideas, any thoughts, any questions you had for that summit, go ahead and throw it to one of our panelists over the next two days. We’re going to have a number of fireside chats with Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell, with Senator John Cornyn, with Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, as well as four great panels on post-pandemic recovery, the digital economy, infrastructure and decarbonization, and the place of ASEAN and the Quad in a free and open Indo-Pacific. And I think it’s going to be a great discussion across all of them.

Now, with that, let me cede my time. I want to call up my co-conspirator in organizing this conference, US-ABC president and former ambassador to Vietnam, Ted Osius. Ted. (Applause.)
Thank you. I am very happy to be Greg’s co-conspirator. I love it. Thanks, everybody, for – who’s joining us in person. Really happy to see people in person. And thanks to those of you who are joining us online. I’m Ted Osius. I’m the president and CEO of the US-ASEAN Business Council.

And just brief background, the council was formed in 1984 to help U.S. businesses grow in Southeast Asia, and to promote opportunities for ASEAN in the United States. We are the only American organization recognized in the ASEAN charter. And we serve as a bridge between the United States and the world’s most dynamic region. We have nine offices, including seven in Asia. And today we represent 180 of the world’s most dynamic companies, those companies that have ties to the region. Our members generate about $7 trillion in revenue and employ more than 14 ½ million people.

The Indo-Pacific – I don’t have to tell this group that the Indo-Pacific is the most consequential region for America’s future, home to half of the world’s humanity, seven of the world’s largest militaries, nine of the world’s 10 busiest seaports. The Indo-Pacific powers our – powers the global economy and outperforms the rest of the world’s markets by several metrics. So over the next few days – next two days we’re going to examine the various facets of the U.S. relationship with Indo-Pacific. And this includes, as Greg mentioned, our shared challenges around security, around public health, as well as opportunities in the region’s energy transition and the digital economy.

And we have a stellar lineup of U.S. and ASEAN government officials, corporate leaders, and prominent academics. And in advance, I’d like to thank all of our speakers for their contributions. Greg listed the companies that have supported this effort. Just for those of you online, make sure you see those logos as well as hear their names. We’re deeply grateful for that support. I think it’s clear that U.S. industry on the whole recognizes just how much the Indo-Pacific matters to America, and America matters to the Indo-Pacific. CSIS has been a great partner through this whole process, and I hope we’re going to be able to call this the first annual U.S.-Indo-Pacific Conference and continue these conversations over the years.

Now, I’m really excited to introduce a very good friend, someone I admire a lot, Ambassador Derek Mitchell. Derek, from 2012 to 2016, served as U.S. Ambassador to Myanmar. He was the – he was the United States’ first ambassador to that country in 22 years. And prior to that he served at DOD as principal deputy assistant secretary of defense. He was here as a senior fellow for Asia. We’re both alumni of this great organization. He was from 1997 to 2001 special assistant for Asian and Pacific Affairs in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. And today he serves as the president of the National Democratic Institute and, we’re really happy to say, as patron of the
US-ASEAN Business Council Institute Myanmar Scholarship Fund. So please join me in welcoming Ambassador Derek Mitchell. (Applause.)

Derek Mitchell: Well, good morning, everybody, or wherever you are, good afternoon, good evening online. Thank you, Ted. As Ted said, we got back a little bit. He was ambassador in Vietnam when I was ambassador in Myanmar. And congratulations to the US-ASEAN Business Council for getting him as your president. Thank you as well to Greg Poling. Congratulations to everyone organizing this event. It is great to be back at CSIS, by the way. This is home. It’s great to be back in person and talking Asia.

And in particular, I am pleased to open this and talk about something – a country and a cause that is so close to my heart, which is Myanmar. The headlines these days have been all about Ukraine, of course. But it shouldn’t be too difficult to see the connection between when is happening in Ukraine and what is going on in Myanmar. I consider Myanmar a kind of domestic version of Ukraine, featuring an invading force trying to steal away the demands of an entire population who is seeking democracy and sovereignty. The people of both countries are not only unwilling to cede what they gained in recent years but are unwilling to sacrifice virtually everything – but are willing to sacrifice virtually everything to defend their rights and dignity against those who would brutally and brazenly take it away.

In Ukraine, of course, we all understand the future of European security is at stake. But Ukraine also represents a pattern that should deeply concern even those outside Europe. The forces that believe might makes right are on the march in country after country around the world, from inside and outside nations. Assaulting democracy and national sovereignty with impunity and supporting one another in the process – as Russia, and it seems in recent days China, is doing in support of Myanmar’s illegitimate regime. And Myanmar, in return, is returning that favor. These autocratic forces believe the democratic world will respond tentatively, weakly, and partially – adhering to a deluded form of realpolitik that says the will of a nation’s people doesn’t matter in international affairs, as if our values and norms can be divorced from our own individual and collective security.

Political leaders everywhere are watching closely and will adjust according to which way the wind is blowing. It is sometimes difficult to comprehend just how utterly bankrupt – morally bankrupt and corrupt Myanmar’s military, called the Tatmadaw, is, and has been really for years. Its fundamental mission, to remind everyone, its pacing challenge, as we say these days, is killing its own people. They’ve demonstrated little hesitation to destroy the country’s hopeful future in order to protect its power and privilege. An essential element of that destruction of Myanmar’s hopeful
future has been its attacks, direct and indirect, over many generations on Myanmar’s young people.

When I served as ambassador, I saw that promise firsthand. Myanmar’s young people knew the stories of the country’s dark past, but clearly saw a different future for themselves than what their parents and their grandparents had experienced. I watched during the years of Myanmar’s nascent opening as they seized every opportunity presented to them. They worked hard, thought big, built businesses, became tech-savvy entrepreneurs, and eagerly connected to the outside world. And in the process, they proved themselves to be endlessly creative, energetic, smart, optimistic, and resourceful.

Last year’s military coup set that all back. It has devastated the country’s educational system, and at the same time it is significantly more difficult for Myanmar students abroad, including in the United States, to receive the necessary financial support. As a result, many of these international students, the best and brightest of their country, face the possibility of having to abandon their studies and return home to an uncertain future, at best. Anyone who cares about the future of the future of the Indo-Pacific must care about Myanmar’s future, situated as it is at the crossroads of South and East Asia. And anyone who cares about Myanmar’s future, must invest in its young people.

That’s why I was so keen to serve as a patron of the US-ASEAN Business Council’s initiatives – new initiative – Institute’s new initiative to financially support Myanmar students currently studying here in the United States. The US-ABCI Myanmar Scholarship Fund seeks to raise $2 million per year in each of the next three years for a supplementary scholarship program to support U.S.-based Myanmar students whose education has been disrupted by the political situation in Myanmar and are now facing financial difficulties in completing their degree programs.

The program aims to provide grants of $5,000 per academic year to 340 of these Myanmar undergraduate and graduate students. To administer and manage the issuance of the scholarships, the U.S.-ABCI has established a partnership with the Institute of International Education, IIE. So far the U.S.-ABCI has raised more than $800,000 from U.S. companies and private individuals. And some of them are on this room, and we want to thank them. That includes an initial endowment from Chevron and contributions from Meta, the Asia Group, BowerGroupAsia, McLarty Associates, and other friends of Myanmar.

But we are seeking more sponsors for the program, and I urge everyone here in this room, everyone listening with the means to do so, to strongly consider supporting this initiative as a way for members and friends of the U.S.
business community to invest meaningfully in Myanmar’s future. IIE’s extensive screening and vetting system will help ensure that all donations go towards purely educational purposes and do not involve any politically contentious entities or affiliates. The funds that are donated with never leave the United States.

So let me take the opportunity, again, to applaud Ted, Ambassador Osius, for this initiative. And, if I might say, Jack Myint, who’s probably somewhere in this room or in the back here, for his commitment and energy and personal passion – there he is. There he is there. Congratulations, Jack. (Applause.) This is really all Jack, and with his passion and energy to bring this personal vision to reality.

Finally, let me say I stand here this morning in the place of someone who left us recently but who also had long interest in Myanmar and was as inspiring and important an American public servant in any in my lifetime. And that was Madeline Albright. Madeline had agreed to serve as co-chair of this initiative. Over the past decade, she and I had countless conversations about the situation in Myanmar. She was chair of the NDI board, which I am president. She had a keen interest that began when she was U.N. ambassador and continued as U.S. secretary of state, to the present. She, like the rest of us, was heartbroken over the destruction of the country over the past year.

As many of you know, Madeleine taught for decades at Georgetown. She loved it because she found hope and inspiration in the promise of younger generations to find new and better ways to advance human society. In that vein, she loved to quote Robert Frost, who said something along the lines of, the older I get, the younger are my teachers. Myanmar can use some young teachers, a new generation with fresh perspectives to break the cycle of chauvinism, underdevelopment, repression, and violence that have held back a beautiful country with such vast potential. As a young woman fighting the Tatmadaw in the Myanmar jungles told The New York Times last week: Our generation has ideals. We believe in freedom.

I know Madeleine would have been inspired by those words and would have loved to be able to support them herself. I hope the rest of us may do so in her absence, to invest now in that different, more hopeful future for Myanmar. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

And I believe Ted is supposed to come up and introduce Kurt. I don’t know if they’re back there, or they’re waiting for Kurt, or whether I need to tap dance in order to – (laughs) – so do I just – I’ll leave the stage and let somebody else come up. Thank you. (Laughter.)

Mr. Poling

All right. Thank you, everybody. Thank you, Ambassador Mitchell, very much. We’re going to take a five-minute coffee break in preparation for our
next fireside chat. So you are welcome to hang out in your seats. You are welcome to enjoy the coffee and beverages. Those online, just hang with us. We’ll be right back. Thank you.