

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Online Event

CSDS-CSIS Transatlantic Dialogue on the Indo-Pacific

“Keynote Address”

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FEATURING

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Victor Cha: Thank you to our audience for continuing to join us online for this Transatlantic Dialogue on the Indo-Pacific. My name is Victor Cha. I'm senior vice president and Korea Chair at CSIS.

And we have the distinct pleasure of having with us today Kurt Campbell, the special – deputy assistant to the president and coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs at the White House. He goes – he really needs no introduction, so let me just leave it at that and invite Kurt to join us on the stage. Thanks, Kurt. (Laughs, applause.)

Kurt Campbell: Thanks so much, Victor. And I really appreciated the brevity there.

And I was here – (laughter) – I was here a little earlier, so I – pretty shocking conclusion, we need to increase cooperation and dialogue. Let's make sure we get that out in the report immediately because – (laughs).

I'm pleased to talk on this topic because, you know, many of us have periods where we come in and out of government, have periods to reflect on the outside, and then when you come back in sometimes that you're confronted with surprises, things that you did not anticipate. When I was at the State Department before and I, you know, worked with many of the people around this room, I had the chance to have a fairly substantial set of dialogues both with individual European countries but also with the EU at a general level. I think most of those discussions were difficult; challenging; often suspicious, probably a little bit on both sides; questions about, you know, what are these dialogues about. It's now 10 years later, and the circumstances and the nature of discussions both with individual states and with the EU more generally about the Indo-Pacific is dramatically different.

And so I was teasing at the outset about a call for greater dialogue and communication. In fact, we're in the midst of that now, which is almost an unprecedented level of dialogue between the United States and Europe around issues in the Indo-Pacific. I spend more of my time engaging with European partners around various initiatives in the Indo-Pacific almost than I do with Indo-Pacific partners. Those discussions are deeply productive, extremely professional. I would say we've probably made more progress in a year and a half on specific issues – and you've just heard about the TTC, discussions about supply chains – but even more generally broader discussions around shared strategic perspectives than I would have thought possible.

And so I would say that it is one of the – if you look at the way President Biden has laid out, and I think we see it across the political aisle, one of the, I think, important contributions of a steady and stable Indo-Pacific approach is to work more fundamentally with allies and partners. I think when that

was articulated early in the administration, the expectation that that would be primarily associated with partners in the Indo-Pacific, but what we've seen is really just an incredible – almost an explosion of dialogue and engagement with Europe on the Indo-Pacific. And I will tell you, my own experience – and I realize that previous panels probably have done a good job at giving you the specifics, but I can give you a sense of some of the larger conversations and perspectives and how they animate these issues.

I think I would have normally anticipated that the crisis in Ukraine – the consequence of that would be a drawing of all attention to Europe and a sense that there really is very little left over to focus on the Indo-Pacific. That has been exactly the opposite of what has occurred. In fact, what I've been struck by, first of all, is the level of engagement on Indo-Pacific countries around issues associated with Ukraine and Europe. In every dialogue that we have with Japan, with South Korea, with Singapore, with Australia, with ASEAN more generally, one of the first questions is let's compare notes with respect to what's transpiring in the Ukraine. One of the earlier speakers was talking about how some countries in Asia are more concerned about some of these discussions. So I'm finding more and more countries wanting to engage with us on Ukraine, wanting to hear perspectives, and concerned about the trajectory of this conflict.

What we've also seen – and we've talked about it before, actually, in these halls – is an unprecedented level of engagement from Asian partners into the European theater. And you know, much of our discussion to date has been about how the Indo – how Europe is tilting or more focused on the Indo-Pacific. But what we have also seen is a much greater interest across the Indo-Pacific in developments in Europe, and that has manifested in a number of ways and I think you've talked a little bit about that. But what we have seen are not efforts that are coordinated or directed by the United States; they are indigenous and they have taken on, in many respects, a life of their own; which is steps to support sanctions policy, natural gas swaps from countries in the Indo-Pacific to support countries in Europe, support for SWIFT sanctions. And several countries in the region – in the Indo-Pacific are providing tangible military assistance and equipment and taking in refugees, providing humanitarian support. That's pretty much across the region. These are very substantial efforts. We've never seen anything like this before, which is this Indo-Pacific commitment to what is playing out in Ukraine in general. And I think the questions – and I think we've all explored some of these – the question really is, why? Why have we seen this and why has this been so profound?

I think the first reason is the ubiquitous quality of the Ukrainian appeal. And we've seen this basically play out in our social media, in much of our commentary, not just in Europe but in Asia. There's something about President Zelensky and his team struggling against just incredible odds that

is transcendental. It basically appeals not just to those that, you know, have an understanding of European history in the region as a whole, but also in the Indo-Pacific.

The second is I do think these efforts that have taken place over a long period of time to build these careful bridges between the Indo-Pacific and Europe are bearing fruit. And so we're starting to see discussions that suggest these are not two separate, unique geographic theaters, but that there are characteristics that unite and combine the Indo-Pacific in Europe. And so when we had very good dialogues with German friends just a couple of weeks ago, you had very senior German strategists, government thinkers basically suggesting there really are not two distinct theaters but one, and that this common purpose, this need and determination to sustain the operating system that transcends Europe in Asia is increasingly in play.

I think the third reason is unstated, which is all countries in Asia were struck by the major document issued at the time of the Olympics between Russia and China. Concerned but that, but also determined to send a cautionary tale that nothing like what we've seen with respect to this military action in Europe should be contemplated in the Indo-Pacific region. A desire to make Ukraine, in many respects, a cautionary tale. And that has also animated a lot of the quiet strategic thinking across the Indo-Pacific more generally.

And so in addition – so the previous panel talked about a lot of dialogues that are underway, and that should be begun. I do want to underscore, I think the comment about the – this is one of the circumstances where government bureaucrats, strategic thinkers, think tankers have gotten way out in front of – importantly, and have taken the lead in articulating issues and views around supply chains, around technology, about technology screening – all of that. I think what is lagging and what will be necessary is to back that up with business-to-business engagement. And I think that was the point that was made in the previous panel.

We have not seen enough of that. And I think there are a variety of reasons for that – you know, COVID, and the like. But German industrialists, others in Europe have not had the same kind of dialogues, both with Asia and with the United States, on these matters. And that's going to be important. It is also the case that the agenda, in many respects, is multifaceted. It is not just on the issues that we are describing.

So one of the things that is clearly underway between the United States and Europe is a desire to engage more fundamentally in a recognition that in this new strategic context India, in many respects, is a swing state. And that it is in all of our best interests to try to work with India over time to bend its trajectory more to the West. And so we've had deep discussions, for instance, with France, with Britain and others, about how to support in that effort. And

some of that transcends not just technology, but security and military fields as well.

I think there is also a recognition that a subtle message can be sent through dialogues between the United States and Europe that we have a profound interest across the board in the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. So in the past, our discussions were only about some technology issues, developments more generally in various capitals. But I think now there is a recognition that a very careful message about what is necessary to sustain the status quo in the Taiwan Straits is going to be critical going forward.

I will also say that I think that the discussions have an educational quality to them. I find that sometimes we have discussions around issues that countries are coming up to speed. So for instance, I think the initial phases of discussion were primarily around Northeast Asia. Secondarily around India. And we're finding now much greater interest associated with ASEAN. So, as you all know, later this week – or, you might know – President Biden will be hosting for the first time all the ASEAN leaders here in Washington, D.C. for substantial discussions, you know, a number of things that we hope to do on technology, on education, on infrastructure.

And Europeans have been very active in asking that we brief them in advance and after. And they, themselves, want to follow suit. They want a similar set of dialogues, engagements with ASEAN. And we support that as well. I think what's important here is that, you know, in the coming weeks, with the president traveling, I think what the message – the overriding message that we are seeking to send is that although there are urgent and immediate tasks ahead of us in Ukraine that are unavoidable and must be met by a transatlantic unity that is profound, deep, and sustained.

But at the same time, we must recognize that the larger, more fundamental challenges for the 21st century really lay in the Indo-Pacific region. And not just in the – you know, the second part of that framing is Pacific. And a recognition that we've worked a lot on these other theaters but one of the areas that we need to really step up our game on, between the United States and EU, and we just had discussions on this, is in fact the Pacific areas, where they do have interests and they do have capabilities to bring to bear.

And I think there is a general recognition that that is the case. Several administrations in succession in the United States have tried this effort to launch more fundamental efforts, policies, frameworks in Asia, East Asia, Indo-Pacific, and found themselves stymied, or misdirected, or directed towards other pursuits. And that has been something that I think all of us are deeply aware of in the formulation and execution of policy.

One of the things that has been helpful in this current period, I remember when I worked on the rebalance or pivot in the Obama administration. One of the major challenges – I would say mistakes – that were made was a sense that we were somehow pivoting away from Europe. And that we didn't understand that everything that the United States has ever done of consequence on the global stage, we've done with Europe.

And what has happened this time is rather than this idea that somehow we're moving away, there is a deep sense that we are now moving and engaging together, not just in Europe at the time of these enormous challenges in Ukraine, but also thinking constructively about strategy and approaches to the Indo-Pacific going forward.

So just in conclusion, I would just say this dialogue, this discussion comes at an incredibly important time. And each of us have a responsibility to play. My biggest responsibility is to make sure that strategic frameworks are more aligned between leaders – between the leadership in Asia, Europe, and the United States. And I am very pleased to say, in a generally bleak global landscape, this is a very positive sign. But it will be essential over time to build out those frameworks.

More business engagement, more recognition of other parts of the region beyond Northeast Asia. Coordinating – not necessarily aligning – but coordinating and understanding how we bring aid and assistance to bear in certain places like the Pacific. Setting up appropriate mechanisms for dealing with the Indo-Pacific. For me, how to think about establishing a framework that carefully unifies and engages the United States, the EU, and – or, elements of the EU – and Asia are at the top of the list. The TTC is a very important endeavor. Some of our dialogues in Europe with the EU are critical. But thinking more about an action plan and how we instrumentalize dialogues and discussions going forward are really the next phase of these collaborative approaches.

So I'm here to tell you that I think the report card – and this is across the board. We've just briefed Speaker Pelosi on some issues on her upcoming engagement with ASEAN. A strong sense of commitment – bipartisan commitment on these issues, an alignment between leadership in Japan and South Korea and elsewhere that is really unprecedented, both thinking about our common efforts in the Indo-Pacific but in Europe as well.

So I think this is one of those times where we have a rare alignment. And what's most important is to seize this opportunity, probably the next couple of years, because we do not know how long it will last. And it will be critical to bring resources to bear, because I think the question that we face in each of our societies in the United States, Europe, and in Asia, is will we be able to

sustain this – the optimism, the hope, and the programmatic initiative that we have all promised to our people as we go forward?

So I'll stop there. I'm happy to take any questions. And I want to thank Victor very much for inviting me. And I commend CSIS, as always, for convening an absolutely essential dialogue on a critical topic. (Applause.) Thanks. That's polite applause. Thanks.

Q: Hi, Mr. Campbell. Farrah Tomazin from the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age.

Mr. Campbell: Yes. Hi.

Q: You talked in your speech about stepping up efforts in the Pacific. In view of your recent trip to the region, I wanted to ask you about the pact between Solomon Islands and China. The Australian prime minister has said that any attempt to – by China to establish a military base there would constitute as a geopolitical strategic redline. Firstly, do you agree with that comment? And what – I guess, what would you like to see Australia or some of the U.S.'s allies do to better safeguard that region? And secondly, if China does, indeed, make moves to create a military base there, can the U.S. rule out military action?

Mr. Campbell: Thanks. Look, I'm – I'll just underscore some of the points I've made, and that we made after our trip to the region. First and foremost – first, we have an incredibly close strategic dialogue between the United States and Australia. Not just on the issues associated with China, and Northeast Asia, and Europe, but on the Pacific as well. And we consulted closely with Australians, with New Zealand, with Japan, with other countries before we embarked.

I would say that the most important element going forward is that the United States has to step up its game across the board in the Pacific. And we've been encouraged strongly to do that by Australian friends. And what I mean by that is that I think we have to meet the Pacific where their needs are. And that means addressing issues of climate change, illegal fishing, unexploded ordnance, health, COVID, you know, supporting educational initiatives. And those are – our diplomatic presence – those are all the things that we're going to underscore directly.

In our engagements in the Solomons we've made very clear our own desire to step up our bilateral engagements. We indicated clearly that, you know, Solomons is a proud, sovereign nation. They have the ability to make decisions. We recognize those rights. We respect them. But we also laid out that if they decided to take certain steps that we thought that created a potential security risk to the wider region, that we would have concerns with it. These were respectful conversations. I think we intend to follow up. We

will be back in September. And we will also continue our conversations with Australian friends more directly.

I do want to just underscore that I think there is a broad understanding – there is something called the Pacific community. It matters. And how steps by one country affect others is a thing that we care about, and we intend to follow up on. Thanks.

Dr. Cha: Would anybody like – we have time for maybe one more question. Would anybody like to ask a question? Yes.

Q: Thank you. Well, it's actually a related question. The Solomon Islands came up in the previous session as well.

I'm from GRIPS in Tokyo. And together with JICA we have been conducting sort of a capability buildup program for coast guards in Southeast Asia. And as you might know, our – GRIPS's president, Professor Tanaka, moved to JICA April 1st and we're still looking for a new president actually. Do you see possibility that maybe we can sort of extend this law enforcement capability enhancement program to a larger Pacific area that we together, you know, as partners engage in strengthening coast guard and other law enforcement capabilities in this area?

Mr. Campbell: Yeah. It's a great – it's a great question, and this links back to the previous question. Grateful for both of them.

So it turns out, you know, one of the biggest challenges in the Pacific is, in fact, illegal fishing, and this can be gotten at a number of different ways. First of all, we're in the process of renegotiating our own tuna treaty with the partners in the region, and we're taking that very seriously, and we're trying to put our best foot forward in this set of engagements with our Pacific partners.

The issue of illegal fishing begins fundamentally with maritime domain awareness. And these are vast areas, and the ability to step up our game in that arena is essential. We believe in the next couple of weeks we are going to, through various institutions, announce a major set of capabilities designed to improve maritime domain awareness.

In the past – and these seem like boring and technical, but they're deeply significant. In the past, if a particular ship or set of ships would go into a region and turn off their identifier, then they would be able to sort of proceed accordingly. I think we're looking at capabilities that will continue to track shipping. It will allow us to vector limited resources, both coast guard/ship riding agreements to specific areas to be able to prosecute a – almost a rampant amount of illegal fishing that affects the health of the

fishing stocks across the Pacific more generally. So that's, I think, going to be critical.

And then, in addition, a number of countries are stepping up with patrol boats, training, issues that are associated with managing coastal waters that are able to basically – it's one thing to declare; it's another thing to be able to actually police and to have awareness about what's taking place. We're looking to address these issues using technology, integrated capability.

But as importantly, if I could just conclude with this. Look, the United States – when we landed in Solomons, I was struck. We closed our embassy in 1993 and we had a couple of people on the island. We just have to do better. And the State Department is going to take steps. We're going to have many more folks diplomatically, Peace Corps, just a reintroduction of a lot of our capabilities across the region.

But I will say in aggregate there is actually substantial partner commitment in the Pacific. But what is striking – and there are a variety of reasons for this – there is not as much coordination among some of those countries as you might expect. And what I think, given the new strategic circumstances that we are facing, it is essential to step up coordination, engagement, partnership, sharing of information. I won't go through details, but when we were having initial discussions with the Solomons about some projects that we might think about as we go forward as a sign, as a gesture of goodwill, and also in the Solomons what became clear is that a number of nations were contemplating the same projects but had not coordinated very effectively on them.

And so this is not just the United States, Australia, New Zealand; it's Japanese friends, it's Korean friends, it's friends from the EU as well. We want very much to be able to be in a situation that we can work together to promote the well-being of the Pacific islanders, and that is a multifaceted, multiyear, substantial effort that's going to be necessary among all of our countries. Thank you.

Dr. Cha: Kurt, we know it's been a very busy day for you. We really appreciate you coming out. You've created a very busy schedule for the president going forward on Asia – the ASEAN summit and then the travel to the region – so we're really appreciative of the time you've given us. Thanks so much.

Mr. Campbell: Thanks, guys. (Applause.)