

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

The Asia Chessboard Podcast

**“Conservative Players: Rising Republicans’ View of Asia
Grand Strategy with Eric Sayers and Zack Cooper”**

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Yuka Koshino: In this episode, Mike sits down with Eric Sayers, adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, and Zack Cooper, research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Eric and Zack are two of the rising Asia strategic thinkers in the conservative camp. Building on the previous episodes on the Democrats' Asia strategy, the three discuss the nature of the U.S. strategic competition with China, growing isolationism among some Republican thinkers, and the roles of government, values, and principles for future Republican administration's Asia grand strategy. Are the conservatives of the Republicans policies that different from the Democrats? Are we looking at all the chessboard pieces to get Asia right?

Mike Green: Welcome back to the Asia Chessboard. I'm Mike Green and joining me this episode are two good friends, Eric Sayers from the Center for a New American Security and Zack Cooper from the American Enterprise Institute. Last episode we talked to Mira Rapp-Hooper and Kelly Magsamen, who when you ask around Washington, who's the rising stars on Asia strategy, on the Democratic side their name comes up again and again. When you ask about Republicans or conservatives, because they're not necessarily the same thing these days; who's shaping the debate, who to watch, who's going to be in these key jobs for decades to come? Eric and Zack's names come up all the time, so we're going to interrogate them a little bit today and find out what they think about the region, about US policy, and about things that people who want to become Eric Sayers and Zack Cooper someday ought to be doing. But let's start a little bit with you guys. Eric, where'd you come from? Why are you doing this? The one thing you both have in common is you both spend time at CSIS, so that's obviously the magic potion to be successful in this business, but tell us about how you got into security and Asia yourself, Eric.

Eric Sayers: Thanks Mike and good to be on with Zack, a good friend going back seven or eight years now. I really got into Asia in grad school. This was the height of the surge in 2006, 2007 in Iraq. My colleagues were all focused on the Middle East, but in class we were studying history, World War II, great power politics, the cold war and theories related to that. I did a literature review focused on the U.S. Japan Alliance, right when Prime Minister Abe did his first year in office back in '06, '07, and that really launched me into this line of thinking that this region lined up with all these other issues and great power politics that I thought were interesting.

Mike Green: Where were you going to school?

Eric Sayers: I was at the University of Western Ontario. My parents are Canadian.

Mike Green: You're Canadian?

Eric Sayers: My parents are Canadian. I was born here in the United States.

Mike Green: All right. Our old strategic competitor, Canada.

Eric Sayers: Yeah, exactly.

Mike Green: I first met you or had a long conversation with you when you were working with the CSIS Pacific Forum and doing a project. Was that the first real Asia-focused work you did after school?

Eric Sayers: That's right. I had a few years in Washington working at the conservative Heritage Foundation, working on defense policy, but I found if I really wanted to focus on Asia, I needed to get to the region. I spent a few years there. So, I did a year at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, and then I had that opportunity to do the Sasakawa Peace Fellowship with Pacific Forum in Hawaii.

Mike Green: Something which is still an opportunity for undergraduates and graduates interested in Asian security. The Jim Kelly fellowship at the Pacific Forum and the one you did.

Mike Green: How about you Zack, you're from the swamp like me, right? You were born in DC?

Zack Cooper: Yeah, born right outside the CIA, lived there for most of my life growing up.

Mike Green: You make it sound like you were an experiment?

Zack Cooper: I was, yeah, I don't know if the experiment has succeeded or failed, we'll find out I guess. But yeah, I grew up in Washington, always wanted to get away from Washington but wanted to do policy work and so got dragged back here. I mean my path is a little different than Eric's, although I think we've ended up in pretty similar places now. I started out in government, I spent a couple of years in the Pentagon and then the White House right after school and in that experience realized that all the hard defense planning problems that I was looking at were in Asia.

Mike Green: And you were working for Juan Zarate at one point, the counterterrorism czar.

Zack Cooper: Yeah, that's right. Counterterrorism and a lot of sanctions, and that was an artifact of the time, right. I was hired on a post-9/11 billet and that's what people needed. But really it was clear to me that the most important thing moving forward was going to be Asia and that's where I wanted to spend most of my time.

Mike Green: And you did your PhD work at Princeton under John Ikenberry and Aaron Friedberg and Tom Christensen? That's a pretty good Asia crew right there.

Zack Cooper: They were great and are important mentors to this day.

Mike Green: And you also were part of this Stanford cohort over two or three years that includes seven or eight of the most prominent Asia thinkers in universities and think tanks right now, including Mira, who we had on last time and Dan Klinman at CNAS, Josiane Gabel here at CSIS. There's like seven or eight of you who all were there at the same time. Did you get together in a bar at Stanford and say, let's all work on Asia in 10, 20 years?

Zack Cooper: You know, it's funny. Most of us didn't know each other at all then. Actually I think a Oriana Mastro started out my year. Sheena Greitens was my year. Adam Liff, Hal

Brands. I only knew Sheena out of that crowd. The rest of them have become friends since school, but I think most of us didn't know each other.

Mike Green: It's really amazing. I mean, you're describing for people who've heard of them, some of the top thinkers on Korea, on Japan, on China, on strategy. Did you become a Republican/conservative because that's where the job was after 9/11, or is there something ... your dad's in the national security space as well?

Zack Cooper: That's right. I think you're right that it was an artifact and part of the fact that I got into government when there were Republicans in government, and I spent three years in government and big takeaway from that was that if I was going to stay in government, I wanted to have a mission. I wanted to know what I wanted to accomplish and not just be pushing paper. And so I felt like I had to go back to school, but it turned out that when I went back to school was the same exact time that all the Democrats were going in with the Obama Administration. So I was in with the Bush people, out when the Obama people were in. And so I just got to know the Republicans, I think a lot better than the Democrats.

Mike Green: And Eric, did you go to Heritage because there was opportunity to work on what you're interested in or Heritage, of course, is a conservative think tank, set it up by Ed Feulner back in the Reagan years. Were you drawn to it because of the worldview or did the opening come up and you jumped it?

Eric Sayers: I really wanted to work on international relations policy and kind of a research assistant position, a way to start out in Washington. And it was really about the person I wanted to work with and Mackenzie Eaglen who's now at AEI, but was then at the Heritage Foundation. I worked with Mackenzie for two years on just defense policy, and it was a great way to get exposed to Washington and the Department of Defense and the Hill, because Heritage kind of uniquely is one of the think tanks up on the Hill, a block from the Hart Senate Office Building. So when you're 23, 24 it really makes the world and Washington DC a lot smaller and had a chance to engage. My politics, I guess, were always conservative and so my perspective on alliances and defense spending aligned with Heritage so it was a great fit from the beginning and a great way to start a career in Washington.

Mike Green: People who heard the really interesting discussion with Mira and Kelly and are listening now, will probably be struck over the next few minutes, how little difference there actual is between conservative Republican and progressive or Democratic thinkers on Asia. That was not the case when I was in grad school. Now there's an awful lot of overlap, but let's explore that a bit more. Why don't I start with you Zack, but when you think of a Republican or conservative Asia strategy and the Trump Administration makes this an extremely hard question to answer. I'd say the President has one view, but a lot of people in his national security positions have a somewhat different view. You two would probably be pretty closely aligned with a lot of the senior people in the State Department or the Pentagon right now, but not always comfortable, in my case, quite outspoken about what the President says. So it's a little hard to answer, but what should

or would a Republican or conservative Asia strategy be Zack, either as you see it or as you would like to see it?

Zack Cooper: One of the core elements is that conservatives tend to focus more on great power politics. I think that's just innately in how conservatives tend to see foreign policy. And so I think for a lot of conservatives, China is the dominant focus in the region. What's important, and I think Mira and Kelly got at this in a really important way, is that we can't lose sight of the rest of the region by just focusing on China. And I think that's where sometimes we've struggled. And I know you've talked a lot about this in the Bush Administration, but one thing that I think the Obama team did a really nice job at was focusing on Southeast Asia. So I think one effort for Republicans going forward is to focus on that great power competition, but also think about what states in the region want and make sure that we're providing them the kind of support and leadership that they're looking for because if everything's just about China, we're going to alienate a lot of our potential friends in the region.

Mike Green: This is to steal the name of the show, a chessboard and we need to be attentive to all the pieces, not just charging the other side's king, which is how we lose the competition. Eric, how would you describe it?

Eric Sayers: I really think there's two models. I wouldn't say it's Republican or Democrat. It's what do you prioritize most in the region? There are some who look at the U.S. China relationship and say China is the most important, we should run our policy through Beijing. That's been more on the Democrat party in the past. There's others and I think you and Rich Armitage, You, Mike and Rich Armitage have talked about this in the past and that's Japan is the most important power in Asia. And Japan, in the U.S.-Japan Alliance will help determine that future. And so I think that while China is important and it's become the dominant focus, it's not so much about how do we get China right? It's about how do we get the region right. And that's where the conversation has been shifting and I would give the Obama Administration credit too for the focus on Southeast Asia. I give this administration credit too for looking more at the Pacific Islands and the focus on the South Pacific, like we've also overlooked in the recent five and 10 years.

Mike Green: You know, as the Chinese reach out and coerce and bribe and influence, different sub-regions in Asia light up for different administrations. So I worked for Kurt in the Clinton Administration it was the U.S.-Japan Alliance lit up after the Taiwan crisis in '95, '96, then in the Bush Administration it was India, Obama did Southeast Asia, and now it's the Pacific Islands. There is a lot more continuity than not, including on that question you just talked about, does Asia strategy begin with our allies or with trying to work a condominium with China and Mira and Kelly were clearly on the same side you guys are.

Mike Green: Maybe that debate is over, but one thing I pushed them a little bit on, which is still a clear difference I think is defense spending and resources, but that may be changing. I wanted to ask you about the Rand Paul wing of the Republican party, the more isolationist wing. In a way it's always been there. I'll start with Eric, does that worry you? Is that a more isolationist retrenchment view of U.S. strategy that could come to

dominate the Republican party? You worked on the Hill for a long time on the Senate Arms Committee and in the House. Does that trend bother you?

Eric Sayers: So I started in the House for Congressman Randy Forbes, who was a member who was very focused on China really before it was trendy to do that. We've come a long way, I guess is what I would say. There is the Rand Paul wing where there's just Rand Paul. He's very outspoken. He's focused on the issues of the day, and that tends to focus more on the Middle East. Rand Paul doesn't have a lot to say about Asia in particular. I think he's commented on North Korea in the past, but he stays away from that. And then that's where really where we talk about this interventionist debate versus isolationist debate. It really rests on kind of the history of the last 20 years in the Middle East. That's not really the discussion we're having in Asia. I think the discussion is just what is the nature of this competition with China and how forward engaged should we be and what should we prioritize?

Eric Sayers: And so, well, the military, and I'm happy to get to your question on the military, but the military in geopolitics are going to be a big part of the nature of this competition. I think there's other elements that Kelly and Mira raised that I think Zack and I would agree with, that also we're going to be the center of gravity in this competition and that's digital issues.

Eric Sayers: This administration I think deserves a lot of credit the last two years for focusing on digital issues, especially 5G. There's a lot of important speeches that have been given in the last few months on military civil fusion and the technological and economic elements of this competition. And I think that's where coming back to the Hill, we see the maturing understanding of what China is and what it could be coming to. And so on the defense spending side, Republicans are going to be in favor of a higher top line. It's never going to be enough. I don't consider myself a top line person. I think \$750 billion in growth on top of that over the next five or 10 years should be enough.

Eric Sayers: I have some concerns with the progressive wing or, as they described themselves, progressive wing and foreign policy, which are saying we can do less, we can do more with more quality, but they don't really have a number and they don't really have a strategy to match to that number. So it's a little wishy-washy right now. I think it needs to be fleshed out a little bit. Tom Wright had a great piece in the Atlantic a few weeks ago poking a bit of holes in this and where Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren and the Democrats are going on this.

Eric Sayers: Again on the Hill though, we've seen an evolution in the last five years. No one cared about China five years ago. You couldn't get members to focus on that issue. It was if you wanted to be on the Sunday shows this week, be smart on Iran, be smart on ISIS, that's what's going to get you attention. Now members are kind of filing in front of each other to try to introduce the next piece of legislation related to China. And they've really expanded the discussion beyond just the security to focus on, I mean Marco Rubio on capital markets and on the investment side of this issue. Senator Cotton on 5G, Mike Gallagher has been a big leader on this. And this competition for ideas I guess up there is a good one. Now it's really, what do we do with that? What do we do with that new

attention and how do we focus it in a way that's most productive in the next couple of years?

Mike Green: So Zack, did either of you go to the retreat in Colorado at the Reagan Institute in July? I was invited, couldn't go, heard a bit about it. Were you there?

Zack Cooper: It was the week after my son was born.

Mike Green: Oh, excuses, excuses.

Zack Cooper: So my wife made it clear that I had a choice to make and I stayed at home.

Mike Green: Of course, congratulations. I couldn't go, but I hear that what was supposed to be an offsite where Republicans and conservatives could think through, even in the era of Trump, what a long-term strategy for defense and foreign affairs would be, kind of broke down in a bit of a food fight, because some of the people they invited to represent the Trump worldview, were making arguments not about free trade or democracy or we're for military presence, but about sovereignty and nationalism and the kinds of things you heard in the Trump speech at the UN. Same question as Eric, but I'm going to push it back a little more. I mean, I find it a little bit worrisome that there's this divide and that the Koch brothers are funding a lot of retrenchment studies and so forth. But you want to reassure me or does it bother you?

Zack Cooper: Well, I think there are a couple of questions that Republicans are debating and we really have several different wings, maybe three different wings in the party, and we don't know which direction is going to win out. But I think one of the questions is, should we externalize our domestic strategy to foreign policy? The same way progressives are talking about externalizing a progressive foreign policy. So what's the equivalent of what Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren are saying on foreign policy? I think it's this focus on sovereignty, right? This focus on America doing for ourselves, whatever we need to do, ignoring what the rest of the world wants. I think that's what you're hearing from conservatives now. I don't believe in that kind of thinking. I think it's going to be hard to win friends in Asia if you do that, but that certainly is a strong voice out there.

Zack Cooper: I think the other two questions are maybe even more difficult. One is whether you believe that the era of U.S. primacy and Asia, is sustainable. I think the three of us might have different views on that, but that's certainly a huge debate that I'm seeing within conservative circles. And then the final one is whether we should be talking about values and principles at all or just walk away from them entirely. I think some of this is a reaction to 2003 in Iraq. That is, the freedom agenda is still poisonous in some ways. But my sense is talking to conservatives, you get extremely different views on these three questions and that's part of why sometimes I find myself agreeing more with Mira and Kelly, than folks on the Republican side who I think have really different views about some of those three questions.

Mike Green: Agreeing with Mira and Kelly on the importance of democratic norms in foreign policy?

- Zack Cooper: Yeah, on the importance of values and democracy on, for me, questioning whether the degree of primacy that the U.S. has enjoyed for much of the last several decades is sustainable, at least in the way that we have pursued it. I think many conservatives come to very different positions on those questions, which lead them to a totally different Asia strategy.
- Mike Green: So younger Asia scholars and younger foreign service officers don't raise that question. They think values are fundamental to our position in Asia in a way that the generation of Asian scholars have taught me. The more senior China and Asia heads in the foreign service would've put differently that they would have said, we can't afford to worry about democratic norms in Asia. Asians don't care about democracy, there are cultural differences. I find among younger foreign service officers and younger academics working on Asia, you don't hear that anymore.
- Mike Green: What about the primacy question? You did your dissertation on this in a way. Maybe you can summarize it in 30 seconds, but where do you come out on the question of sustainability of U.S. primacy and necessity of U.S. primacy?
- Zack Cooper: I think those two questions are intertwined. My personal view is if China continues along the direction it's heading, which is an if, we shouldn't assume that it will. But as a defense plan, I like to plan for the worst case possibility. If China continues to grow as it has, I think we're going to have to settle with less of a capability edge than we've been used to. And it may force us to think about trying to operate differently than we have. And I think we're going to have to start encountering some questions about how we project power into East Asia, what the cost of doing so is and whether it's sustainable in the long-term.
- Zack Cooper: And my view is that there are some answers to those questions that are uncomfortable to a lot of folks, including folks in the military and the defense establishment where we can keep our alliances, stay present in the region, but be somewhat less vulnerable than I think we are today to the kinds of anti-access area denial capabilities that the Chinese had been pursuing.
- Mike Green: And your dissertation looked back at cases of declining power in the military capability, deployment, presence choices they made, and you were generally pretty critical of all those choices.
- Zack Cooper: Well, I think you see some countries that make some really difficult choices. So the Brits in 1904 and 1905 make some hard choices that they have to focus back on the threat from Germany. They pull back forces from much of the rest of the world and they really have a strategic debate. I haven't seen that debate really happen here yet. Right? We have the national defense strategy which calls for us to focus on Asia and yet we're still very much stuck in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. We have a National Defense Strategy Commission which says that-
- Eric Sayers: Do everything. It says do everything.

Zack Cooper: ... right. But also it says that the Chinese are catching up very fast and we need to do much more and yet we don't really see a strong reaction to those debates. So I'm waiting for those debates to emerge and for some real tough conversations about what military capabilities we need to pursue and whether we need to change some of what we've been pursuing the last few decades.

Mike Green: Of course, the big difference between our situation and the British and the time of Jackie Fisher and pulling the battleships back home to deal with the Germans is that we have security commitments the British didn't have to major nation states that uphold the whole global order, so it's harder. But those alliances are also assets. And you've worked a lot on this in the Pacific Command when it was still the Pacific Command and on the Hill and the SASC. Do you think we can sustain primacy? Can we do what we've been doing? How do we change? How do we use alliances in particular? How do we change how we think about capabilities as Zack flagged without undermining alliances, which are so critical to our interest in sustainability.

Eric Sayers: Mike, I think we've been socialized since the end of the Cold War to think about American power in a unipolar way and an unrivaled way. We throw words out like primacy. The lessons of the Cold War is we can win, we can defeat the other peer competitor. I think we're going to have to relearn a lot of these lessons in the last 25 years and think again in a context of the 1960s and 70s and 80s. And I don't want to make Cold War analogies necessarily, but we're in a very different environment than Zack and I in our careers had been used to. The Hill still isn't quite ready for that conversation. We're still not ready to admit and say out loud, Oh, primacy is over. But we are certainly challenged in ways that mean that we can't sustain primacy without spending \$1 trillion a year. That's just not going to be possible in the budget environment that we're in.

Eric Sayers: The conversation, really is starting to shift there and that's why our system is great and a change in administration and another change in administration is going to bring about a continued shift towards where I think we need to be. I think in a historical context, we're more in, again, it's a Cold War analogy, but we're more in 1948, 49 figuring out our way, trying to understand what this competition looks like, where our allies want us to be, what the expectations are and where we're going to need to be. That doesn't necessarily mean that what Truman did was going to carry on into the Eisenhower Administration and Kennedy Administration, we saw very different approaches, but the logic stayed the same, the grammar shifted.

Eric Sayers: And so I think that's where we are with the Trump Administration and the next administration that follows that. We're headed in the right direction. The Hill certainly understands where the arrow is focused and needs to focus. I point you this week to dueling speeches that said the same thing. Senator Rubio and Senator Warner gave speeches in Washington this week about China and in great detail, and they said almost exactly the same thing.

Eric Sayers: And that brings me to another point, and Zack had a couple of great ones about some of the disagreements within the Republican party. This one I think is about the role of

federal government. Republicans and Democrats see that differently. You see candidates for presidency in the Democratic party talking about the role of federal government and taking on China and by investing here at home and investing in values too, but maybe investing less than defense to pay for that.

Eric Sayers: There's a disagreement within the Republican party too. I mean we had started by talking about how I worked at the Heritage Foundation. Heritage Foundation has a long history of talking about free markets and deregulation and lowering taxes and that's a great approach in a world where economics and security are completely separate where we have a security relationship in Asia and an economic relationship and they don't intertwine. We're now in an environment with the Chinese and things like we were talking about, their investment in digital or investment middle military civil fusion and kind of bringing down the walls between their companies and between the PLA, their military, where there's a debate about taking a very different approach and Senator Rubio and others have been saying that Pete Buttigieg has called China an authoritarian capitalist state where these are intertwined. We're going to have to find a way where the federal government does play a role in not industrial policy, I know that's a dirty word, it's a four letter word, but playing a role in investing in the types of R & D that we need to be competitive in the economic and tech space and in the security space going forward. Which has a long way to say that I'm not sure conservatives and free market conservatives have enough to say right now that's constructive in this China competition and we're going to have to think a little bit more about what the role the federal government's going to be.

Mike Green: Yeah. We're in the phase of this new-era strategic competition where there's a consensus we need to push back because we've lost ground on a lot of fronts, 5G is a really good example, foreign interference is another example. South China Sea and artificial island building is another example. There's a consensus we pushed back. Zack and Hal Brands wrote a great article for the Texas National Security Review saying, okay, now we have to answer some pretty important questions. One of them is what does victory look like? Another one would be, what's our sort of the Kennan Mr. X article? What are our assumptions about Chinese behavior? Is the Chinese foreign policy and defense strategy we see of Xi Jinping, is it because of Xi Jinping, is it because of the financial crisis? Is it because of structural factors?

Mike Green: Let me start with you on that one Zack. What are your assumptions about Chinese intentions? Are we shaping Chinese behavior? Are we doing what we have to do to hedge? Or are we now in a competition where this only ends with a collapse Chinese communist party as some people in this administration seem to think.

Zack Cooper: Well, I hope we're not in a competition where our goal is the collapse of the Chinese communist party. Because I think if that's what the administration wants, they should be doing some very different things, and I'm not sure that's the right approach in the first place. If you look at China and compare it to any traditional rising power, it's doing a lot of the things that rising powers do. I mean, look at the United States in the 1880s and 1890s, we're not exactly some particularly peaceful society during a good portion of those years. People forget that around the turn of the century we start war with a

European power in part to show that we can beat a European power in our region. It's not to say that China has been entirely restrained, but it's to say we shouldn't have been surprised at the kind of path that China is on.

Zack Cooper: I think the question for me is, as you said, number one, what do we want in the U.S. China relationship, but also what's the center of gravity in the emerging competition? And where I come out on that is I think the center of gravity isn't in China. It's the alignment decisions of regional states. And so I think that should be the litmus test for everything we do in Asia. Is this going to create more alignment in the region with the United States and the interests and objectives that we have or less? And I think on that barometer, if you look at a lot of the Trump Administration's actions, they don't grade out particularly well.

Mike Green: What in particular, TPP, withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership?

Zack Cooper: Yeah, TPP hurts, the tariffs on China hurt, the tariffs on-

Mike Green: In terms of alignment with allies and partners, you mean?

Zack Cooper: Right. Because if you look at Singapore, right? The Singapore economy is doing fairly poorly. And the reason is, in part because of our tariffs on China. Which isn't to say that there isn't a logic for them, but as to say the blowback is significant on some countries, we care a lot about.

Mike Green: I mean, Japan, for example, is probably more closely aligned with us on China strategy than anyone other than maybe Australia. They're not happy about these tariffs.

Zack Cooper: Right. And you know, putting tariffs on your allies.

Mike Green: Well, there's that too.

Zack Cooper: ... in any world would be kind of a crazy.

Mike Green: I think China tariffs are not popular in Tokyo. It's messing with their development supply chains.

Zack Cooper: And you've brought this up repeatedly, as has Eric. You know, one problem is also that if we're looking at countries in the region and we want to find more friends and build up those relationships, we have to think about what those countries want.

Zack Cooper: So for example, in the South China Sea, it doesn't really matter whether we're doing freedom of navigation operations, if our friends in the region can't access their own exclusive economic zones.

Mike Green: So focus on alignment, focus on the chess board. You're not making any assumptions about China's long term intentions, it sounds like, and it sounds like you're assuming we can shape Chinese behavior with this, because that fundamentally is what alignment

would mean, deterring and dissuading bad Chinese behavior and ultimately shaping Chinese choices. And in a way that's what our strategy has been even with flaws for decades, isn't it?

Zack Cooper: I think that's right. And where Hal and I come out, and we have slightly different views, is towards something that we labeled collective balancing. But the idea being that we should try and band together to change Chinese decisions and shape their decisions, but recognize that that might not work, in which case we're going to have to come up with a harder-edged approach. But I don't think it's time yet to completely give up on trying to at least deter China from some of the actions that we find most concerning.

Mike Green: We haven't been pushing back. We haven't tested that maybe. Eric, what do you think?

Eric Sayers: I want to start by agreeing with Zack. I don't think that our objective should be the end of the communist party. And I know we need to go further down that, but there's certainly a discussion there within the Republican party itself. I think that also agreeing with Zack, we need to find ways to create positions of strength with our allies, not just in a bilateral way, but in a multilateral and trilateral way and this administration and Obama Administration was starting to do that. How do we capitalize on that and how do we move it forward? At the end of the day, the Chinese aren't 50,000 feet tall and they aren't a foot tall. They're not as strong as we think or as weak as we think. I think we've been a little bit afraid the last five or 10 years because we need them to other areas of climate change and these types of issues. We've sort of stayed back from pressuring them.

Eric Sayers: If there's anything I've learned in the last year, year and a half though, is that they do have strengths and weaknesses. They do have insecurities. The tariffs, although not the best approach, have created leverage and it put them on their heels in a way that I didn't necessarily think was possible. What we do with that, how we capitalize on that is really the question at hand. If we just come away with a mini deal, that was quite a bit of a damage to the world economy for such a small takeaway. But beyond that, I mean, I think that the Chinese at the end of the day want to find ways to create leverage and coercion over others. You know, if we were at this table 10 years ago, we'd be talking about their military and their investment in anti-ship ballistic missiles, and four or five years ago it was probably more the gray zone and some of the great work you guys did here at CSIS on that space.

Eric Sayers: Now it's turned to the digital issues and coercion of and can come about as a result of those investments in 5G. And so how do we align our strategy and create these new relationships with countries that could be under threat from Chinese coercion, whether it's a larger power like Korea that wants to make its own decision on a defensive issue like the THAAD deployment or it's a smaller power like Singapore and its relationship with Taiwan, but I think China would like a veto power over. We've got to find ways to empower those countries to not feel like they have to make a choice but feel like they don't have to choose China.

Mike Green: Last lightning round question. Zack, you took essentially after some government service, the academic route and ended up being an important voice on this stuff. What's your one piece of advice for somebody now looking at a PhD who wants to be doing policy, because the two are harder to combine than used to be the case?

Zack Cooper: I think you have to go in knowing that you can't do both perfectly. So if you go in trying to-

Mike Green: Unless you were Mike Green or Zack Cooper, of course.

Zack Cooper: Well, I'm not a university professor, I just adjunct. So I think it's really hard to get a top tier academic job and still do policy work early on in your career. And so I made a choice that it was more important to me to do the policy work and that I wanted to be in Washington and use my degree for that purpose. And I think it's hard because the Academy tries to train that out of you, but my experience was that actually the PhD has been remarkably useful and not just for connecting me with folks like you and getting to come to CSIS as I was finishing my PhD, but also for actually learning something about the world that I think is useful in Washington and people shouldn't discount the value of that academic work.

Mike Green: Good. Eric you got this.

Zack Cooper: I did not get a PhD.

Mike Green: Well you came up, I'd say largely the Hill gave you your opportunity to really show what you got and what would your advice be to somebody coming out of college and grad school looking at the Hill, who wants to be doing what you and Zack are doing?

Zack Cooper: Yeah. After my master's work, I thought seriously about the PhD route as well and there's an opportunity cost to anything and I happened to just get a great opportunity to work for a member on the Hill who wasn't just focused on their district or their state, but on this broader series of questions and in a pretty senior role. So that the Hill was a great place for somebody in their mid to late twenties to kind of get their chops and have that experience. The other thing I'd say is that this is a career path where you're not just going to line up with one institution or one sort of theme in this town and go in that direction.

Zack Cooper: I changed jobs every two years, three years at most. I haven't had a job longer than three and a half years actually. I did time on the Hill, I did time in think tanks. I did the degrees and the fellowships, and all that accumulated by the time I was in my early thirties to great set of experiences where I think I had a decent background in the theory and in the history of this region, but also in how the practical and how to apply it and how things get done in the black box of government, especially on the Hill.

Mike Green: So if this were Singapore, you two guys and Mira and Kelly would all be in government together, right? Because the best and brightest would all be pulled by the Prime Minister and the People's Action Party. But it's not Singapore. I guess the consolation is

even with our crazy roulette wheel of politics, there are enough people like you and Mira and Kelly out there that we have a pretty decent chance of getting good people in government like we have now with people like Matt Pottinger and Randy Schriver and others. So keep on doing the good work and thanks for joining us today.

Eric Sayers: Thanks Mike.

Zack Cooper: Thanks Mike.