Online Event

“The Global Rise of Authoritarianism – A Conversation with Chairman Adam Schiff”

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FEATURING:
Representative Adam Schiff (D-CA),
Chairman, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence

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Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome. We’re delighted to have you here today. My name’s John Hamre. I’m the president of CSIS. We have the really rare privilege of inviting for a conversation today Congressman Adam Schiff. Everyone – (laughs) – everyone in America knows him. He’s not just a national figure, he’s also the representative from the 28th District in California. And I know that he spends just as much time working for his district as he does for all of us. And I don’t know how he does it, but we’re grateful that he’s able to devote the time he does on national issues.

Of course, you all know that he’s the chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. He’s currently stepped off of the Appropriations Committee, but he is – you know, so it gives you a sense of his stature in the Congress. He’s been a champion throughout his career for upholding and strengthening democracy and rule of law. And we’re going to explore that today because authoritarianism is on the rise. The space of civil society is increasingly under pressure. Congressman Schiff has been one of this lead figures in the Congress to speak out with clarity and conviction and forcefulness. And we’re grateful that he’ll be with us today.

Congressman, thank you. We’re delighted you’re here. Let me turn to you for your prepared remarks, and then Seth Jones will engage with you in a question and answer period. Thank you, sir.

Well, John, thank you very much. Thank you for the kind words and thank you for bringing us all together today. I really look forward to the conversation.

I thought where I would start off this afternoon is talking about the intelligence declassified report that came out just a few days ago documenting interference in our 2020 election. This declassified report didn’t come about on its own. It was a requirement that we placed in the Intelligence Authorization Act, that after an election that the intelligence community produce an assessment that analyzes what foreign powers did to try to interfere to have a full accounting so that the Congress could take whatever steps were necessary to hold other nations responsible that had interfered in our affairs, but also to make sure that we took additional protective steps to safeguard our democracy.

As it would turn out, though, it had another salutary effect which I didn’t contemplate at the time we were including this in the intelligence bill. And that is it provides a mechanism to hold our own intelligence agency leaders, particularly political appointees, accountable. And one of the things that is apparent when you read the assessment is that several agency heads, including former Attorney General Bill Barr and former Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe, his predecessor Ric Grenell, National Security Adviser O’Brien, and others were not candid with the country. We knew at the time as we were watching this that Russia was actively interfering in
our election. We also knew that China was considering it but had not made a decision to become involved.

Ultimately, China concluded it wasn’t worth it. The risks outweighed any benefit they would get from interference. But, nonetheless, you had top agency heads out pushing a misleading narrative in support of the president, deemphasizing the threat from Russia and suggesting or affirmatively stating a falsehood that China was actually the bigger threat to our election. That was a disservice. If we don’t accurately diagnose and warn the public, we’re not doing our jobs, and what’s more, it leaves us unprepared.

But we were aware of this in real time. I was reading the intelligence. It was clear to me where the threat was coming from. But, of course, I was hampered, as were my colleagues on the committee, because we couldn’t produce the intelligence report, and the administration was able to say, well, they’re just saying that because it’s a partisan difference.

It wasn’t a partisan difference. It was what our intelligence professionals were telling us. So the declassification had a salutary impact in holding those former officials accountable, and I think it’s useful in the future that intelligence leaders know that if they don’t speak plainly to the country, if they withhold information or they try to shade it to favor the incumbent, that their actions will be revealed.

So what’s actually in that report that’s of significance? The first is that Russia wasn’t deterred from all of the reaction to its interference in 2016. It continued through an aggressive social media campaign, overt media campaign, to try to influence events in our election, and more than that, it used one different vector.

Back in 2016, of course, they, in addition to their covert and overt media, they also hacked Democratic institutions and leaked the documents through cutouts. You know, there were, certainly, efforts at spear phishing and other malign activities. But we didn’t see a hacking and dumping operation of the scale that we saw four years earlier.

But what we did see was the willingness of the Kremlin to use U.S. persons to launder their disinformation. So they wanted to push out this narrative and have for several years that Russia hadn’t interfered in our election four years ago, that it was Ukraine, and they also wanted to smear Joe Biden, who the Russians considered a grave threat. The former president, Donald Trump, was the gift that kept on giving to the Russians. So they had a very big stake in the outcome of our election and they pushed out this Kremlin-originated smear against Joe Biden. And they were able to successfully launder some of that information through U.S. persons, including people in Congress, and that ought to be a warning to us.
I think if you look at 2016 to 2020, there are a number of through lines. In fact, the Kremlin used at least one of the same people, Konstantin Kilimnik. In 2016, Donald Trump’s campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, was secretly meeting with Kilimnik, an agent of the Kremlin, an intelligence agent of the Kremlin, and providing Kilimnik with inside campaign polling data and strategic insights at a time when Russia was engaged in a social media campaign to help Donald Trump’s election.

Four years later, Kilimnik would be back at it, also Andrii Derkach, and they would be pushing out many of the same narratives and smears. So some consistency. Clearly, Russia was not deterred, and yet again, one other consistency that’s important, which is election interference did not go so far as to try to tamper with the technology to change the tally, and that’s important.

It is notable that China was deterred. Now, I don’t know that China had a plan to do so. But, nonetheless, China was deterred from intervening in the way that Russia had. We also see that new actors are getting in the business of election interference with Iran’s malign activities, which were of a far lesser scope and scale than Russia but pretty aggressive – pushing out a false flag operation pretending to be the Proud Boys and threatening Democratic voters that they better register Republican and support Donald Trump.

So I think what we can be assured of is that this isn’t going to stop with the 2020 election. And really, the very best defense is one we were not capable over the last four years. The best defense for us is to develop a national consensus that regardless of who it helps or who it hurts, both parties will condemn any kind of foreign interference, and neither will seek to exploit it. If we can’t achieve that consensus, then foreign powers will continue to be able to manipulate us and our elections.

Finally, of course, one of the Russian aims was simply to divide us, to accentuate our already profound divisions. And here, I think most destructively the Kremlin piggybacked on a falsehood that the former president was pushing, that our elections were marred by massive fraud, that the system was rigged. It must have been quite a delight for the Kremlin to realize that their best propagandist in that respect was the president of the United States, Donald Trump. Well, that effort hasn’t stopped. There are continuing divisions in our country over the election. And many millions of people believe that big falsehood about the election being stolen or rigged. And the Russians are only too happy to keep fomenting that.

So this – we’ll get into other challenges we have that I look forward to discussing, in terms of the information environment in which many of those kind of falsehoods are subject to amplification. And with that, I look forward to our discussion.
Seth G. Jones: Thanks, Chairman Schiff. Great introductory comments. We've got a lot of questions from folks in the audience. And where I wanted to start was to pick up on your use of the term “deterrence” here. And you talked a little bit about the importance of condemning – bipartisan condemning of this activity when it happens – whether it’s the Russians, the Iranians, the Chinese, or others. But I’m wondering if you could unpack that a little bit more. And that is, whether it’s defensive measures and protecting U.S. infrastructure, including on the cyber end, or offensive measures, what are your thoughts – specific thoughts on how, if at all, really to deter this kind of activity in the – in the future? I mean, deterrence – U.S. successfully deterred the Soviets with nuclear weapons during the Cold War, but this is a very different battlefield, in a sense.

Rep. Adam Schiff: No, I think you’re absolutely right. And it will not be a one-size-fits-all remedy, depending on who the nation-state actor is. You know, I would start out with one of the first prominent hacks several years ago that hit very close to home for me, which was the North Korean hack of Sony. Now, when that took place I was gravely concerned that if we did not react more strongly that others would learn that cyberattacks are essentially a freebie. That there’s always a level of deniability. You’ll never want to be able to – you’ll never want to show all the proof that you have, because then that will help the adversary evade you the next time – or evade attribution the next time. And I don’t think we adequately responded to that North Korean hack. The result is I think others watched and they learned that, well, they too could get away with this. It was just – it was very low risk.

Now, in the case of North Korea I was not advocating necessarily that we have a cyber tit for tat. Our capabilities are obviously far greater than North Korea’s, but our vulnerabilities are also far greater. North Korea could do such a heavily wired society as ours considerable damage if it chose to. My recommendation at the time was that we do what the South Koreans do when they are attacked by North Korea, which is they respond with information warfare. They aggressively push out information about how bad the regime is, how impoverished the country is because of the regime. And so I was advocating at the time that we respond with information warfare. That, to me, would be a deterrent for the North Koreans.

Now, when it comes to the Russians, you know, as long as they feel they have a sufficient incentive to do so, they’ll continue to hack and meddle and sow discord on social media. Depending on the severity of what they do, we should use both defensive and offensive means. We should use – where they’re, for example, attempting to infiltrate critical infrastructure or mess with voter-registration databases, we should take offensive action to disrupt their technical capability. And you know, where it’s necessary, obviously, we need to harden our defenses. The SolarWinds hack is a prime
example of just how extraordinarily vulnerable we are, particularly to supply chain cyber actions.

And then, of course, there are the use of other remedies like sanctions, but they only go so far. Sanctions aren't a particularly useful remedy with North Korea because they're already so heavily sanctioned.

So the long and the short of it is we need to use the tools that we have, taking none of them off the table, but letting other nations know that this is not a freebee, that they will pay a price. And we may not always be public about that price, but they can count on it not being a cost-free venture.

Seth G. Jones: So picking up on this theme of paying a price, you know, there is a broader discussion. It goes back to some of the issues that the U.S. considered and in a few cases actually did during the Cold War. When we look at authoritarian regimes – it’s one of the subjects of the discussion today, the rise of authoritarianism across the globe – you know, countries like China are weak and vulnerable in areas. They’ve got democratic movements and activity and demonstrations and protests in Hong Kong. They've got to deal with some instability in Xinjiang province. They, obviously, have to deal with Taiwan. So when – or, with the Russians, the protests around Alexei Navalny.

So how do you think about what the U.S. can do to support these democratic movements in some of these countries? And where do we draw a line where activity’s potentially, you know, too unstable for the United States to conduct? How do you draw the line of what we should and what we shouldn’t do in and around, even inside of China and Russia?

Rep. Adam Schiff: Yeah. Well, I think that we have a moral obligation and a strong national interest in supporting freedom-loving people around the world, in supporting democratic movements around the world, in championing people’s rights to associate freely and speak freely and choose their own representatives. So I think we should be unabashed about it. It needs to be a priority in our diplomatic discussions.

I'm proud to see with the Biden administration that in meetings with Russia and China there is no shying away from raising these issues. As uncomfortable a topic as it may be for China and as distasteful as it is for Russia, I'm, you know, proud to see our representatives going toe to toe.

Now, I have to say that’s a lot more difficult today than it was four years ago because the last administration revealed and accentuated so many challenges to our own democracy. And it brought home, I think, a fundamental truth, which is when we strengthen our own democracy, we strengthen the very idea of democracy around the world. And when we weaken it, we do the same.
And you know, it, I think, has long been the case that the Russians don’t make many bones about being a democracy anymore. But in Putin’s worldview, there are no democrats; there are only autocrats and hypocrites. And you know, for four years we had a president that played into that false equivalency, that false narrative. Indeed, one of the most unforgettable moments, I think, of the last four years was when Donald Trump was asked by a Fox News host, I think O’Reilly, why he couldn’t condemn Putin because the man was a killer. And his answer was, are we so different. That’s exactly the narrative the Kremlin wants to tell. And when we – when we weaken our own democracy, we make it too easy for despot's everywhere to engage in whataboutism.

So I was proud to see Tony Blinken being unabashed in championing human rights and bringing up the situation involving the Uighurs and in Hong Kong and elsewhere. I was very proud to see Joe Biden stand up to Vladimir Putin. And I make no bones about the fact that he is a killer, a soulless killer for that matter.

At the same time, you know, I think the administration quite correctly recognizes, as our adversaries do, that there are still some areas of common interest. You know, the fact that Russia’s engaged in all this malign conduct isn’t going to stop us from entering a New START Treaty when it’s in our national to do – interest to do so, which it is.

So I think it has to be very much a part of our agenda. I think we need to be supportive in every way we can, up to the point where we simply give fodder for these autocratic regimes to paint pro-democracy movements in countries as some kind of a tool of the West. So I think we need to be careful that we don’t allow them to characterize organic movements of people around the world as somehow the hidden hand of the CIA.

Seth G. Jones:

And it is interesting to note the U.S. participated, for example, in a covert program to provide assistance to Solidarity in the 1980s, which has recently become declassified. And the Soviets – well, the Russians today – have certainly used that as a historic example of U.S. meddling.

But I wanted to go to a slightly broader issue. I mean, you talked about democracy, and I wanted to broaden it a little bit to U.S. allies and partners. I mean, I think there’s no doubt that when you look at the last couple of years U.S. relationships with some of its allies and partners have taken a bit of a hit, whether it’s in Europe or in Asia, including the South Koreans, the Japanese, even the Australians. So as you think about ways to compete against these kind of authoritarian states from an intelligence standpoint, what ways would you suggest are important to rebuild our intelligence relationships with our allies in the U.K., in Germany, Five Eyes countries more broadly against this kind of authoritarianism?
Rep. Adam Schiff:

Well, you know, it's a very good question. And I think that our relationships have been strained over the last few years – strained, you know, both because our relationships to our allies have become strained, but also because at times the prior administration politicized the intelligence to a degree where it both attacked our foreign partners and also risked exposing sources and methods belonging to our partners.

So you may remember when the former president was pushing out the false narrative that he had been the subject of wiretapping at Trump Tower. He went on to make the suggestion that the British were implicated. That's not – you know, first of all, it was totally false. But second, that's not how you treat an ally and one of our most important intelligence allies.

But more than that, if our allies lose confidence that what they share with us will not be safeguarded as strongly as they safeguard the information, they'll stop sharing it with us. And I think there were profound concerns among some of our allies that our former president couldn't be trusted with what they were sharing. And so rebuilding that trust is going to be important.

I think the intel-to-intel relationships have remained strong, but nonetheless we have some rebuilding to do. That gets to the broader issue of politicization of intelligence. And you know, there I think job number one for the new leadership of the IC is going to be underscoring to the workforce again how much it wants, needs, and will protect objective analytical work, that that's exactly what the country needs to keep it safe.

I was doing – you know, more than four years ago I started to do townhalls within the intelligence community at different agencies and I'm going to go back to doing that. I want to underscore in every way that I can that I want the intelligence analysts and others to report to us exactly what their best assessments are, whether they think we want to hear it or they don't. And I know that that's how the president, President Biden, feels about it. So I think that will also help reassure some of our liaison services that neither the Congress nor the administration is going to disclose information that they shared, because it becomes part of a political circus.

Seth G. Jones:

Thanks.

We have a question that is – takes this particular subject, on the politicization of intelligence, but in a slightly different direction. It kind of brings it back to Congress and bipartisanship. And this person asks – well, starts off by noting that there has been some concern that congressional committees and members have politicized intelligence on a range of issues. And it's not been helpful. It's undermined U.S. credibility. So you talk for a second even within the congressional side, how serious are some of these concerns about the politicization of intelligence, even in how Congress has used it and on committees? And how do we adopt, as part of that, a more
bipartisan approach as we combat authoritarianism? Because that’s part of getting our house back in order as well.

Rep. Adam Schiff: Well, I’ll tell you, you know, what I think is the good news/bad news of the situation with the intelligence committees in particular, but it’s probably true more broadly of Congress. The good news is that even through the worst of our differences over the Russia investigation and the Ukraine investigation, we continue to be able to do the work of the committee and produce our annual intelligence authorization bills. So all the work of overseeing the agencies and setting their budgets and working on civil liberties and privacy protections, all that continued in a pretty nonpartisan way.

Now, on those very high-profile investigations we were not so successful. But, you know, I believe in accountability. And because of accountability I don’t believe that you can simply say, well, a pox on both houses. The House majority – that is, the Democratic members of the Intelligence Committee – agreed with the bipartisan work of the Senate Intelligence Committee. That report was consistent with our minority report. The outliers were the GOP members of our committee, led by Ranking Member or Chairman Nunes, depending on the time. So we need to make our best efforts to work in a nonpartisan way. That’s certainly what I try to do. But it has to be reciprocated. And in the case of those two very important investigations, we ultimately were forced with the choice – particularly after the infamous midnight run – of doing a real investigation, which meant that it was going to be difficult and fractious, or in the name of bipartisanship doing a whitewash and calling it progress. And so I don’t think we had much of a choice. But I am hopeful going forward that now that we are in a different position, where we’re not dealing with a president who is affirmatively trying to exploit and politicize the work of the intelligence community, that we can restore some level of comity. And I’ve been talking with my Republican colleagues about trying to do exactly that.

Seth G. Jones: Great. Thanks, Chairman Schiff. And I think – you know, I think Americans in general would certainly support that, from both sides of the aisle.

We have a question here on – this goes primarily towards the Chinese, and Chinese – and this is an intelligence-related question. But it does get to this issue of authoritarianism. What is your sense of the threat and how do we counter and respond to Chinese attempts to purchase American companies, whether it’s defense or dual use, the espionage concerns that the U.S. continues to have about the stealing of a wide range of information, both commercial and defense related? What’s your sense about the gravity of that threat and how we better protect ourselves from it?

Rep. Adam Schiff: Well, I think the threat is extraordinarily grave. And it crosses every domain. China is a worthy rival in every respect – on land, on sea, in the air,
in space, in the cyber realm, in the diplomatic world, in the development world. And we need to be at the top of our game. You know, we still have, I think, tremendous advantages over China, and one of them is our system. But nonetheless, China is a very powerful competitor. And I think that we’re clearly going to have to harden our defenses against the theft of government data, the theft of private data, and the theft of trade secrets, the theft of intellectual property.

We’re going to have to find ways to penalize those kind of violations of the rules of the road. But there’s a broader threat. And that is that China, through its technological prowess, is exporting its version of digital totalitarianism to other countries, in the form of its Orwellian-sounding Safe Cities initiative, in which it helps other authoritarian countries maintain control of their population through ubiquitous CCTV cameras, big data analytics, facial recognition software and the like, creating, you know, really a society not unlike what George Orwell imagined.

That, to me, poses the gravest long-term threat to democracy. You know, Russia is the kind of threatening actor that you see in a wounded and dying animal, that’s dangerous because it’s wounded and dying. It is a declining power and will lash out like a declining power. China’s a rising power, and already an extraordinary power. And I think the digital hold that it is offering to other countries is far more destructive and dangerous than the kind of hacking and dumping or social media campaigns that the Russians run.

So ultimately, in terms of the rise or fall of global democracy, China presents the gravest model. And, you know, the two aspects of this – the theft of data and the export of technology – surveillance technology – they go hand-in-hand. The greater the Chinese economic might, the greater it can use its currency to buy friends and influence people around the world to utilize its technologies, like Huawei, by heavily subsidizing those technologies. Or through aid agreements that are onerous, that indebt nations to China. So all of those aspects of Chinese power projection we’re going to have to meet and push back.

Seth G. Jones:

Thanks, Chairman Schiff.

There’s a question here that builds on your comments on Chinese technology. And the questioner says, given the resources China has to throw at the problem and their lack of legal constraints, how do we counter China’s efforts to buy influence worldwide with subsidized technology? I mean, what do you think is the next 5G, where China's products pose a threat to secure communications? We’re already there with the 5G issue, but if you can look down the road where should we be monitoring very closely looking down the road?
Rep. Adam Schiff: Well, I think that 5G presents us with a real test case, that forces us to consider whether we need to make changes to the level of public-private partnership to compete with a country that can throw billions and billions of dollars to underprice any competition globally so that it can obtain a monopoly, and then it can raise prices at will, or utilize that technology for global espionage. And is it possible for private companies – whether it’s Verizon, or AT&T, or Sprint, or others – can they or European companies compete with a state-backed, you know, essentially bottomless source of revenue for a competitor?

And if the answer is no, and the answers certainly in a 5G context appear to be no – now, there may be some workarounds, and obviously we’re looking at those workarounds. But even if we find workarounds to 5G, there may not be a workaround to the next big thing, technologically. And so I do think that we really need to think outside the box and explore whether, you know, the patchwork of things that we do with In-Q-Tel and other efforts to invest in research and development, whether they’re just too small to compete with this economic behemoth that is China Incorporated.

And, you know, I can’t tell you exactly what the next technology will be, but I do think we need to think about, as the pandemic has revealed, the need to bring some of our supply chain, all of our supply chain for really critical infrastructure needs, back home and – but also make sure that industry and government are working together in a way that will allow us to be globally competitive and push out technologies that preserve people's freedoms and privacy, at the same time providing an alternative to what the Chinese are selling.

Seth G. Jones: Thanks, Chairman Schiff.

I think we have time probably for one last question and it builds on what you just noted, which is – which is COVID-19 pandemic. And part of the question is, really, how has COVID-19 impacted the rise of authoritarianism around the world? Part of this gets to even how the Chinese have impacted the investigation into the origins of COVID-19, the broader influence within international institutions, whether it’s the World Health Organization or the World Trade Organization, and gets into this sort of broader issue of a competition for influence within major international institutions.

So, looking down the road, how do you see – how do you see this competition occurring within international institutions? Some of it we saw with COVID-19. And how do we work with our partners to protect American – democracy more broadly overseas?

Rep. Adam Schiff: Well, you know, I think one of the reasons why – one of the many reasons why Russia had such a strong preference for Donald Trump, and I think there’s a strong case to be made that Trump was so much better for China
as well, is that our relationships with our allies atrophied so badly over the last four years.

They went from being very positive, constructive, and essential to, often, relationships of hostility where the president of the United States was affirmatively hostile to our closest democratic allies and embracing of autocrats around the world in a love affair with Kim Jong-un and speaking glowingly of Vladimir Putin and his relationship with President Xi.

What Russia and, I think, China are most concerned about with the Biden administration is the administration's ability to rebuild those multilateral relationships, to reinvigorate those global institutions. For four years, we were unilaterally surrendering, leaving the climate accords and leaving WHO and we were disengaging. It was America first and everybody else be damned and as if we could isolate our own security from the need to work with others.

And so I think that the effort to communicate that America is back; that we value, need, are much better off with strong allies. And so I think the administration is off to a very good start rebuilding those relationships.

The pandemic – and we've – we have, as a requirement of our last intelligence bill, asked for a national intelligence estimate on the impact of the pandemic, and I hope that we'll examine the impact on the rise of authoritarianism, even as it analyzes other things like the degree to which it might have provided even more fertile soil for the growth of terrorist organizations like ISIS or Al-Qaeda or al-Shabaab or others.

I would – I would expect that without the ability to gather particularly large numbers for a time that provided another advantage for autocrats. They didn't need to worry about mass demonstrations as much in the streets. Now, people are braving the pandemic to do it nonetheless, and as more people are vaccinated they'll probably feel more freedom to organize and associate to try to stand down some of these – face down some of these autocratic regimes. But we are going to need to both analyze the impact on the pandemic and where it has exacerbated our national security vulnerabilities, as well as analyze – and we're doing a deep dive on this, and have been for much of the last year – what's the intelligence community's role in pandemic awareness and being a tripwire for a pandemic.

And this is a very tricky area because the intelligence community is not the most important actor when it comes to pandemics, but it does have a role in identifying where there are unexplained illnesses that another government may wish to conceal. And not just – you know, it's actually less important after the fact than it is while it's ongoing. And there are any number of tools that can be used if they're able to tip and cue each other. If a parking lot at regional hospitals in Wuhan – if parking lots are suddenly full compared to last year, maybe that tells us something. Maybe not enough in isolation, but
if it tips and cues other information and we – and this gets to another point we may not have time to discuss – but we make much better use of open-source information, we may be able to put two and two together quicker. And given that we’ve already lost half-a-million lives – you can imagine the structural changes we would bring if it were a terrorist attack that cost half-a-million lives. And so this we consider one of our highest priorities on the committee.

Seth G. Jones: Great.

Well, Chairman Schiff, we promised to end this on time. We really appreciate you taking a few minutes out of your day. We’ve covered a lot of ground, from support to democratic movements overseas, to technology, to Covid-19. I think it’s a reminder that as the United States continues to compete and in some cases cooperate, this is much more than about a military struggle, which is what it’s often conceptualized as. But this is – these are different political systems. And really, the importance of allies and partners become important because this is about authoritarianism and in many ways versus democratic institutions, the U.S. and its allies around the world.

So really appreciate you touching on a number of these issues with us at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Thank you, again.

Rep. Adam Schiff: Seth, thank you so much. John, really appreciate the opportunity. Stay well, everyone.

Seth G. Jones: Thanks.

(END)