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TRANSCRIPT

The Asia Chessboard Podcast

**“Rethinking U.S. Strategy on the Chessboard with Mike  
O’Hanlon”**

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SPEAKERS:

**Mike O’Hanlon**

*Senior Fellow and Director of Research in Foreign Policy, The Brookings  
Institution*

HOST:

**Mike Green**

*Senior Vice President for Asia and Japan Chair, CSIS*

Andrew Schwartz: Welcome to the Asia Chessboard, the podcast that examines geopolitical dynamics in Asia and takes an inside look at the making of grand strategy. I'm Andrew Schwartz at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Hannah Fodale: This week, Mike is joined by Mike O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution to discuss his new book, *The Art of War in an Age of Peace* and how his new vision for U.S. grand strategy relates to the Asia Pacific. The two begin by defining what resolute restraint means for U.S.- Asia policy, especially regarding the rise of China. O'Hanlon makes a distinction between restraint and retrenchment and argues for prioritizing existing commitments in Asia to our treaty allies.

Mike Green: Welcome back to the Asia Chessboard. I'm delighted to be joined by a good friend, Mike O'Hanlon to talk about, not just military strategy, but grand strategy in the Indo-Pacific on the back of his impressive new book, *The Art of War in an Age of Peace*, which is a book on grand strategy, a large chunk of which looks at the region we talk about. Welcome, Mike.

Mike O'Hanlon: Thank you, Mike.

Mike Green: Now you and I like to joke, we've known each other since 1942, because our moms were friends and my aunt, as well as little girls on the outermost part of Long Island, where, as my mom told it, they got in their elementary school flashcards with silhouettes of German bombers and sat on a long island together, eating candy and looking for planes when they were 10 or 11. But anyway, we've been friends since 1942, so good to have you on board.

Mike O'Hanlon: It's nice to be here.

Mike Green: So people in this podcast are always interested to hear how our experts got here, and your new book actually starts with a really interesting chapter called "Education of a Defense Analyst," which tells your story. But tell us quickly, how'd you get here? What was the education of Mike O'Hanlon defense analyst?

Mike O'Hanlon: Thanks, Mike. Well, of course I began this little prologue by looking at my post-formal education. So, in theory, my education was supposed to be over when I got to Washington, but building on my old friend, Harry McPherson, the LBJ advisor, who I used to hang out with when he was alive in the 90s and 2000s, he wrote a great book called *The Political Education* about his experiences in Washington. This, for me, was the defense analysis equivalent, and I noted that when I showed up in Washington in 1989, in the spring of 1989, I wound up getting a job at the Congressional Budget Office, and then we had the amazing events of the next few years, starting with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Later that same year, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, then the dissolution of the Soviet Empire. Francis Fukuyama was not

looking too good with his argument that history was over because it looked as if history was speeding up, not ending.

Mike O'Hanlon: And then we had a little bit of a, what some would call a semi-halcyon period of the '90s, but even that, for those of us who remember it, it wasn't really all that comforting because we started with, shortly after Desert Storm, we had Black Hawk Down. Bill Clinton didn't quite have his sea legs yet as commander-in-chief. We were worried about loose nukes in Russia, and this was the golden moment as we look back on American unilateralism, so to speak, or the time when the budget was in good enough shape, we could even talk about surpluses. There were articles in The Washington Post: how do you possibly survive in an era where you don't have any federal debt? Those were some of the problems we had in the '90s.

Mike O'Hanlon: Crime was continuing to go down domestically. Bill Clinton was suggesting maybe there was a way to create a third approach in politics that would be less polarizing. And yet, first of all, though, those moments were never as happy as they look in retrospect, and we really struggled to use force even when Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda bombed the embassies in Africa in 1998. All we could muster was a cruise missile response. We were terrified of losing one pilot in the no-fly zone operations over Iraq because our casualty aversion was so extreme. And then, of course, in the last 20 years, everything accelerated again with 9/11; the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns; the global financial crisis and great recession. And then there was some hope that maybe an Obama presidency – or if not Obama, Mitt Romney or John McCain presidency – those are three, pretty good people to talk about by comparison with some of what we've sometimes seen since.

Mike O'Hanlon: But that was a hopeful moment, but it didn't last. Pretty soon, ISIS is rising and then getting to the issue of the day, and of your podcast, of course, China's rise and Russia's return. What I was struck by is just how fast history was moving, and how many things have happened in the 32 years I've been here and how many of them are historical, not just tactical, not just the news of the moment. And then, if you forgive me and I'll be brief on this last set of observations, but I really started to see, even more than I had before, just how difficult the use of military force had been, or always would be in the real world. My role in the Iraq debate with people like Phil Gordon and Ken Pollack was to warn that if we did overthrow Saddam, it was going to be a lot harder than people thought. It was Phil and I who wrote an op-ed that provoked Ken Edelman's famous cakewalk piece, where he said, "it's going to be easy, don't worry."

Mike O'Hanlon: And that was in response to what Phil and I had previously published in The Post. If anything, I didn't warn enough, and I was too willing to support the war with caveats and conditions and so on. Looking back, I wish I had been even more reluctant. So, that's one big lesson that I got. And then you mentioned 1942 and also, my grandfather who was a German immigrant from Hamburg, he was part of the Coast Guard Auxiliary, watching for German submarines while your mom and mine were looking for airplanes. And it's just amazing to me that

our moms were alive in this period when Adolf Hitler came to power, Joseph Stalin. The world was up in arms, and the idea that human progress is inevitable and that people are getting better, I just find completely unpersuasive.

Mike O'Hanlon: I sort of like Steven Pinker's book, the Harvard scholar who wrote Enlightenment Now and The Better Angels of Our Nature, and try to give a case that life really is getting better as the centuries go by because we need that kind of encouragement, but to the extent he implies that it's almost an extra rubble law of civilization or history, I think that's completely misleading. And I've been struck by, in a way, how close World War II and other such tragedies really still are to the here and now and how much, therefore, they could perhaps, if we're not careful, come back again. That's a quick history of my life in Washington over the last 32 years. Thanks for asking.

Mike Green: And so the punchline, if you will, is humility and the tragedy of grand strategy. But before I get to that, I have to ask you, Harry McPherson, you know, giant in Washington politics, Truman's aid, he must've been in his 70s or 80s when you played tennis with him; you must have been in your twenties, who won?

Mike O'Hanlon: Well, quite often, I played with McPherson against my good buddy David Gerken, who's a fantastic player, my generation, much better than I am from Princeton. And so if I was playing against Gerken, I usually lost. But one quick thing on that note, another Washington story is that Gerken arranged a doubles match on Thanksgiving Day, I think 1996. It was him and me against Ilie Nastase and George Mitchell, just to show how Washington has strange bedfellows.

Mike Green: Around that same time, in the early '90s, I was research assistant for Harold Brown, the former defense secretary, and I used to play tennis with him all the time. You're a better tennis player than I am, but I was good enough to keep a 70-year-old Harold Brown entertained. What I value the most were the conversations between when we switched sides, basically, between sets.

Mike O'Hanlon: Absolutely.

Mike Green: So much of this business is learning from people like that whenever you have the opportunity. I will refrain right now from talking about the football league we had in Bethesda with you and me and Kurt Campbell and Phil Gordon, because we weren't that good.

Mike O'Hanlon: Did Kurt ever play? I thought he just sat on the side and was the cheerleader, but anyways, just teasing.

Mike Green: He certainly talked a lot, but as I recall, he played.

Mike O'Hanlon: Okay.

Mike Green: It was a kind of a Brookings versus CSIS thing and yeah. But those days were over where our knees are too cranky, creaky and that won't work.

Mike O'Hanlon: But more people are very briefly mentioned because I know it gets into the subject matter that I was lucky to play tennis with and learn from, Jim Delaney, whom I know you know very well.

Mike Green: Oh yeah, I knew Jim well, and he was a good tennis player, former CIA station chief in Tokyo and Seoul...

Mike O'Hanlon: Exactly.

Mike Green: ... who used tennis and golf to basically... as part of his trade craft. Remarkable guy ... passed away, what four years ago now?

Mike O'Hanlon: That's about right and then Steve Solarz, who passed away about 11 years ago and was a very good friend of mine, and the Congressman from New York who really took a huge interest in foreign policy, as you well know.

Mike Green: So we better stop because we'll get listed as a sports podcast if we keep going. So humility, I think Charlie Edel and Hal Brands wrote the book a few years ago on the tragedy of grand strategy. Your education in the post-Cold War world sounds similar. What does humility mean in terms of thinking strategically?

Mike O'Hanlon: That's a great question, and you're talking about books and also whether the concept of grand strategy matters. I guess one way to think about an answer to your question would be that some of what I'm advocating is what I think Barack Obama tried to do instinctually because he talked about hitting singles and doubles and don't do stupid stuff and don't overreact. And sometimes that served him well, but he also got a reputation, I think, somewhat unjustified, perhaps somewhat justifiable for retrenchment, for not using American power adequately. I think part of the problem is he didn't explain what he was doing very well, apart from these soundbites and bumper stickers. Ironically, for such an eloquent guy, I think what he could have said is, "Listen, we are in a much stronger global strategic position than people appreciate, and we don't need to turn every contest over an uninhabited Senkaku Island or South China Sea Island or over the Crimea or Donbas in Ukraine into the ultimate showdown as if we're back in 1938 or something like that."

Mike O'Hanlon: We got to be at least as wary, this is my interpretation of Obama's worldview, at least it's wary of things like the outbreak of World War I, which was sort of rivalry run amok, or the weakening of a country's internal strength because of its foreign policy extravaganzas and adventurism. Maybe that's how some people would interpret the decline of Britain over the centuries. To me, what Obama lacked was ironically explaining how he put all these pieces together. It took that famous article in the Atlantic about Obama by Goldberg to ultimately try to begin to explain it, but it was a little bit too late. For me, humility means

resoluteness in defending your core allies and your core interest in the rules-based order -- the sea lanes airwaves, what's made global commerce possible, what's created this unprecedented era of prosperity and this unprecedented era of great power piece.

Mike O'Hanlon: The last thing I'll say by way of responding to your question, because I'm in a way turning it on its head and saying how you also have to not be humble. Bob Gates is famous, the former Secretary of Defense, for saying, "Though we have a perfect track record in predicting the future of war, we always get it wrong." There's a lot of truth to what Gates said, but there's a flip side, which is if we put our mind to preventing a given war, we usually get it right. So, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, the U.S.-Korea Alliance, those countries haven't been attacked since we formed those alliances and stationed U.S. forces forward (the same thing with NATO). In a sense, we should give ourselves credit that when we really have a serious commitment to a crucial part of the world, back it up with a treaty and forward deployments of military forces, we've been pretty effective at preventing war. I'm not advocating any humility or restraint in that regard. I'm talking more about new obligations and also about how we manage crises, especially in the global periphery, if you will, at least the strategic periphery of the world, where our interests are not quite as crucially engaged. And it's on those matters where I favor restraint than humility.

Mike Green: You use the word restraint and the title resolute restraint, and I want to clarify this with you, in a very different way than the Koch brothers, Quincy Institute, so-called restraint, which is pretty close to what we used to call isolationism, reducing commitments. You just described several commitments to allies that restrainers would say we shouldn't make. My reading of your restraint is number one, ways and means. So, relying less on military means as much as possible, for example.

Mike O'Hanlon: Right.

Mike Green: It's rejiggering how much we rely on military tools, as opposed to diplomacy and development and economic tools. It's also about the ends, not just the ways and means, but the ends. And you talk about prioritizing and you quote Canon in terms of prioritizing where we're willing to risk war, but you also quote Madeleine Albright saying, "We're the indispensable power and American leadership is indispensable." So, in between those two is a big question mark for me. In the context of rising China, for example, are you talking about American primacy? Are you talking about American preeminence? Are you talking about China not having primacy? How would you define the leadership? You described leadership as an end, not just a ways and means, so how do you define that vis-à-vis a rising China?

Mike O'Hanlon: Those are a lot of good point, lot of good sort of catch words or phrases. First, let me explain why I use the word "restraint" in my title, even though some people like my good friend, Ken Pollack told me not to because it would risk confusion with the offshore balancers and the so-called restrainers. I think there

are some really smart people in the so-called restraint crowd, like Barry Posen at MIT who wrote a book called *Restraint*, but when I read that book, I thought he mistitled it. I thought he was making a case for retrenchment, and I believe I'm making a case for restraint because restraint is what possible future actions I won't take that I might have. Retrenchment is undoing the system of alliances that we built up painstakingly over 70 years with a very impressive track record of preventing World War III or any other kind of major power conflict.

Mike O'Hanlon: I just think there's such a huge distinction between retrenchment and restraint, and that restraint is the right word to describe what I'm advocating and not the right word to describe what the offshore balancing school advocates. Some of them like to use that term, because it sounds better perhaps in polite company, but they're talking about a huge experiment in international relations and social science we've never done, which is to simultaneously dismantle dozens of alliance relationships and then see what happens. The transition period of their concept, in and of itself, is far more fraught than most of them acknowledge. So, I wanted to have the fight over the word restraint and not give it up. Now, in terms of leadership, you mentioned indispensable nation and primacy, and those are interesting terms, but if you don't mind, I'll start with the term American exceptionalism, which is another concept that people talk about and my colleague Bob Kagan has helped me think through.

Mike O'Hanlon: I don't want to quote Bob or imply this is exactly his interpretation, but to me, American exceptionalism doesn't mean that we're any nicer or more ethical or certainly more domestically supportive of each other at this moment in our history. I'm not sure it means we're smarter in decisions on the use of force, for example, but we have an unusual geography. We're here on this North American continent with good neighbors and a safe strategic position, a big landmass, a lot of resources, and we're quite secure at one level in our own position, but we also know our security can be overtime threatened by what happens in Eurasia, so we're not disinterested in those continents. We've learned through the experience of the World Wars, at least most of us have, maybe not the offshore balancers, they might not agree, but I think we've learned that what happens in Eurasia is important enough that we should try to shape it and deter conflict, rather than going in too late as we had to in the early 20th century twice to resolve a conflict already underway. That's what American exceptionalism means to me. It means we have a unique place in the global order that nobody else can play that role.

Mike O'Hanlon: Also, one more thing is that we're a melting pot, which sometimes shows all of our warts and blemishes and racial problems and everything else, but it also means we don't define our national purpose in terms of an ethnic narrative. And as you and I know, and certainly in East Asia, most countries do. I think that makes it harder for them to claim the mantra of global leadership if they are... all countries put their own country first and Donald Trump wasn't really the first American president to do that. He was just the first one to say it quite so bluntly, but when you're basing a lot of your national narrative and your role in the world around an ethnic cultural linguistic tradition, you're different than a

melting pot country with a huge demographic variability. So we have these innate advantages that do make us indispensable and do make us fundamentally different from China, even separate from the question of democracy versus autocracy and therefore, mean that to the extent you can imagine creating and sustaining a coalition of like-minded nations in support of core values, we are far and away the best candidate for that, given the combination of our size, our demography, our constitution, and our location, not because we're smarter or more ethical.

Mike Green: And while some polls around the world show increased concern about American reliability and staying power in the wake of everything we've seen over the last four or five years, at the same time, polls still pretty consistently show that with the exception of Russia, China, to some extent, most of the world thinks we're a much more benign hegemon for them and indispensable for them, compared to the alternative. That's a good definition of exceptionalism. Now, your version of restraint is quite different from retrenchment because it's about prioritizing, not pulling back everywhere. Can you give a quick tour of the Western Pacific or the Indo-Pacific and tell us what are the priority areas in the old Morgenthau definition of primary interests, in other words, you'd be willing to fight? Who gets on the list of Mike O'Hanlon's priority areas in the Indo-Pacific?

Mike O'Hanlon: Existing treaty allies, probably minus the Philippines at the moment, although I think that could change, and with Thailand in a little bit of an ambiguous position, and Singapore closer to being an ally than not. So it's essentially Japan, Korea, Australia. Yes, New Zealand partly because it's so easy to defend and we do have a strong history together, even if we sometimes have disputes in the modern era, and then Singapore. To me, that would be the beginning of maybe even the main answer to your question.

Mike Green: And you also mentioned earlier and in the book: sea lanes.

Mike O'Hanlon: Yes, absolutely. Those are the countries and then certainly sea lanes. So I don't want to fight to knock China off an uninhabited island where it built an airfield, but I do want to contest with China for access to the South China Sea.

Mike Green: Okay, good. That's a good clarification and a good segue to the question I wanted to ask you to test the O'Hanlon grand strategy in historical retrospective practice. So it's 2015, the Chinese have just stunned the world by rapidly building these four artificial islands and then they put air fields and created the air cover for the entire nine-dash line in the space of a year. How would your resolute restraint, if you could go back to Obama six years ago and advise him, how would it have been put into practice, or would it not have been? Would that not even worth risk of any kind?

Mike O'Hanlon: I will get to that question in just a second. First, an advertisement for something you wrote at CSIS that we just used in a Columbia course that Steve Biddle led, the Minjinyu 5179 incident, and your explanation with Kath Hicks and others about how the history of this Senkaku and South China Sea region became so

complex and it's just an outstanding report that I recommend to anyone. Also, your previous question, I should have said in terms of alliance formation, not just in terms of naming countries, I don't really want to create more alliances because, especially alliances on the Eurasian landmass, when I put on my military analyst hat, they're awfully hard to defend. For example, Vietnam, wonderful country. I'm amazed at how we've buried the hatchet with Vietnam. I give both countries a lot of credit for that and I think we can be important partners, but I don't want an Article Five-like commitment, a mutual defense pact that would oblige us to come to put land forces on their territory and help them fend off a Chinese invasion.

Mike O'Hanlon: I just don't think that reaches to the threshold of things we should be trying to do with an already over strapped U.S. military, despite the fact that it's been 740 billion a year on national defense, which is 200 billion above the Cold War average, and yet we're still strapped to even maintain existing commitments. To your question about the Senkakus, and I'm sorry about the South China Sea specifically since 2014, 2015. I would not have tried to use military force to prevent what China did. I don't think international law was clear enough on that. We know from the Hague ruling that most people aren't very impressed with what China did and think it was quite questionable, but we also know that there's a little bit of ambiguity when you're essentially developing an uninhabited and maybe not even previously above the high watermark piece of real estate, and I don't think that we had a strong enough predicate for action to physically prevent that. I'm also not convinced that we could have in a way that would have ended neatly.

Mike O'Hanlon: The Chinese would have had all sorts of options for escalation beyond and again, going back to my Education of a Defense Analyst, whenever you think you've got a cleanly defined limited military operation in your back pocket, you can just dust off and trot out, usually you're wrong. You better think about what the enemy might do by way of response, certainly when it's a superpower with a lot of pride and a lot of resources and nuclear weapons. I think that that was the right time to really double down on sea lane presence. We did some of it, but it was a little too begrudging and belated, and it was never as transparent as I would have liked. Even reading the best CSIS reports in the world, I sometimes felt like I never quite found the latest data on how many ships we put through and which other countries we persuaded to sail through with us.

Mike O'Hanlon: And I would have thought about, and you know, I guess we did some of this, but again, it always felt a little bit belabored and belated, more ship visits to places like Vietnam. And I would've started some of the development of options for where we could expand our own basing in the region. At whatever point we felt that that was a necessary and prudent thing without pre-committing to doing so. Again, some of that's happened since then, but it's been small little footprints in Palau, or what have you, I would have probably been a little more systematic and comprehensive at looking for other options. I don't know if you want to name names, maybe a lot of these countries aren't quite ready for these sorts of American bases yet, but you know Indonesia, someday the

Philippines under a different president, some of the smaller Pacific islands, I'd be looking into that.

Mike O'Hanlon:

And then finally, you're not going to, of course, hear me give a whole lot of praise to Donald Trump in this podcast or anywhere else, but I do think that Trump getting tough with China, even if it was largely in his case over economic issue, that was good because it sent the Chinese a clear message that we're prepared to risk some pain at least on the economic side of things and some decoupling. And a whole different relationship in the future may result in order to push back hard. Again, some of the things we believe they've already been doing, not just hypotheticals like an attack on Taiwan, but even the smaller salami-slicing kind of stuff. And I think Trump showed that we can use across the board tariffs. We can use CFIUS, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States. We can prevent Chinese acquisition of American companies. We can limit other kinds of investment in both directions, and we can encourage our allies to do that too. I would have probably created more of a conversation with allies about what are the kinds of next steps we have to get ready to take if this continues much longer. Most of what I just said is not radically different from what Obama did, but it maybe just would have been at two or three times the pace and intensity.

Mike Green:

Yeah. That's a really helpful retrospective policy recommendation, which by the way, the Obama administration belatedly started doing a few years later. I think they went into office with some assumptions about how great power politics worked about, and they were quite divided on that by the way. Also, some of the administration had a false hope, in my view, that work on climate change, global issues would make these geopolitical problems easier. Like most administrations, they hit reality and your strategy eventually is what they did and I actually see more continuity than change in that sense from Obama, the end of Obama to the beginning of Trump and the end of Trump's to the beginning of Biden. It's a helpful complication because one of my many frustrations with the retrenchment argument is there's no tools for shaping the environment. It's all reactive; it's all retrenchment. And you just described tools to shape the environment and to demonstrate willpower and to build coalition. From that, I assume you're pretty positive about the Quad and about ... you don't want new security commitments, new Article Five treaty-type commitments to countries where we'd have to fight, essentially, if they're attacked, but I gather you're quite open to networking current alliances, building partnerships, shaping the environment – short of security commitments.

Mike O'Hanlon:

Yeah, and again, that's fair. Again, a nod to you guys at CSIS with a lot of your previous thinking on hub and spokes and many of the other concepts that have been around for a while, but have really been continuing to refine and expand a similar set of concepts for probably a decade now. Yes, I mean, one of the beauties of the Quad is that it is what it is, and that can change. It's not as if the different members of the Quad are all equally committed to each other's security. In fact, of course, we have no security obligations to India, per se, we

just have more of a partnership. And certainly, the countries within the Quad don't have obligations to each other, except with bilateral alliances like U.S. and Japan. I would love to hear your thoughts on, and many Korean friends' thoughts on whether Korea should affiliate. My lesson over the years is we have to let Korea go at its own pace whenever China's involved. And whenever we try to push too hard for Korea to take sides, we probably hurt our cause more than we help it.

Mike O'Hanlon: I'll be fascinated to see where the U.S.-Korea Alliance goes in the years to come, especially if someday, somehow, the North Korea problem can be gradually diffused and Korea wrestles with the long-term issue of how does it want to affiliate in a security partnership, being a mid-sized country in a, as they say in a sea of whales, and whether they'll stick with... or want to stick with the U.S.-ROK Alliance, even if Korea's reunified or what have you, but that's a longer term question. For now, I think we have to let Korea decide, tactically, where do they want to push back against China, send China a message, but where do they also want to sometimes be a little more conciliatory towards China? So I'm not in a hurry to expand the Quad.

Mike Green: Yeah, I agree with that. I think keep it to four and let the rest of the world play à la carte where and when they want to. My dad taught litigation at Georgetown Law School, and one of the things they teach is you don't ask a question in the classroom if you don't know the answer you're going to get, or if you might get a negative answer. When Don Rumsfeld pushed the Koreans in 2005 to give us strategic clarity that we could use forces in a contingency off the peninsula, obviously Taiwan being at the top of people's mind, the Koreans said "no", and that set us back in this game of shaping and strategic influencing in the region vis-à-vis China. So yeah, you got to have an à la carte approach for these relationships. I think we're in the same place on that.

Mike Green: When I read your book, and I think when others and many will read your book, you go through the education of a Defense Analyst, you learn about your definition of restraint, which is a much more proactive and internationalist version. You move along and then you hit the chapter on deterrence, and it's like, "Whoa" because you go right to deterrence by punishment. There's nothing offshore about that really. I mean, it's not offshore denial. It's deterrence by punishment, which means you hold critical targets basically, or interests, at risk within your adversary country. That's a piece of the Mike O'Hanlon playbook too, kind of hearkens back to 1942 in Long Island and the German threat or something, but say more about your concept of deterrence because that's anything but pacifist really.

Mike O'Hanlon: Yeah. Well, thank you. Do you mind if I use the Taiwan case as the test case?

Mike Green: Yeah, that'd be great.

Mike O'Hanlon: As you and I know, there's now this renewed debate over strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan and our good friend, Richard Haass, very distinguished

president of the Council of Foreign Relations, has suggested that concept has been useful, but it's outlived its utility, and we should be clear that we would help defend Taiwan if it were attacked by China. Jim Steinberg, my good friend and co-author of my 2014 book we did on China has just come out in defense of strategic ambiguity and our response piece and also suggested the Biden team may be headed that way itself, but we'll find out soon enough. I welcome this debate, but to me, the missing ingredient, at least at that level so far, is what could we really do militarily to defend Taiwan and how has that problem evolved with time. In fact, yesterday at Brookings I, so this was May 18th, I interviewed the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General David Berger, who, of course, is well known for pushing a lot of this way of thinking. And I quoted the line from Chris Brose, the former McCain staffer that, "17 times in a row at Pentagon war games over Taiwan, China defeated the United States." I'm not really sure what that means, you know, and war games are what they are and no more.

Mike Green: By the way, they're classified, so I don't put much credence at all in those... [crosstalk 00:29:51]-

Mike O'Hanlon: Yes.

Mike Green: ...claims that people know what happened in the outcomes of these games.

Mike O'Hanlon: Thank you. A lot of cold water is appropriate; however, when I've done my own analysis of what it would be like to try to, for example, break a Chinese blockade of Taiwan using American anti-submarine and anti-surface capabilities in the modern era, and trying to deal with satellite capabilities that are threatened by Chinese jamming and perhaps other techniques, and coping with the 40 quiet submarines that China now owns, I come up with a much more ambiguous prediction about who wins and on what time horizon. And that doesn't even treat the big uncertainty, which is who escalates if they're losing? To start using attacks against each other's homeland and or even limited nuclear strikes. Since Taiwan's pretty important to China, I don't rule out those kinds of eventualities. Therefore, for me, on deterrence, it's not enough to just say, "Well, we could commit to Taiwan's defense." I want to know how are we going to defend Taiwan in a way that, like you said, we know the answer in advance that we can at least be pretty sure that we'll play to our own strengths.

Mike O'Hanlon: And so I advocate a policy that especially in the event of a blockade, a Chinese blockade of Taiwan, where the goal is gradual strangulation, to me, the essence of our response should be a counter-blockade of China, which is harder to do for us than a Chinese blockade of Taiwan for them, Taiwan being a small island. But we can interfere in the Indo-Pacific region, and especially in the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf with Chinese shipping, with a lot of Chinese access to oil and other raw materials, with Chinese exports. I'd like to see the military design actually more non-lethal weapons to incapacitate ship engines, but even if we can't use non-lethal weapons. If you're shooting at propellers of ships with 10 or 20 people aboard, 5,000 miles away from China, that's a much less escalatory

method of response than trying to sink the Chinese submarines as they come in and out of Chinese ports to rearm and refuel, for example.

Mike O'Hanlon: I want those kinds of options. I don't want to tell China those are the only options, and keeping the direct defense of Taiwan as a possibility may be useful in the toolkit as well, I'm just not sure it's as credible as it used to be. But I do sympathize with Haass in saying we can't pretend there's any wartime scenario over Taiwan to which we are indifferent. But I sympathize with Steinberg, not only on the potential of trying to restrain both sides with strategic ambiguity, but also being a little bit cautious about what this kind of a conflict could entail, if we decide to bring it right up to China's coastline, which is the old school way of doing it. That's where I'm trying to think through how do you make deterrence more robust.

Mike Green: I think Richard's argument has an important predicate, which you just described. The problem is focusing on strategic ambiguity. When I was in the Pentagon in the late '90s, the term was strategic ambiguity, meaning we wouldn't give China a green light by saying we won't do anything, but we wouldn't give Taiwan a green light for independence by saying, we'd do everything, so ambiguous about that strategic context, but tactical clarity we can prevail. But that tactical piece is the problem, it's a lot harder, and you're talking about focusing on our tactical ability to deter and defeat. That's really important to your version of resolute restraint. Your description of how we deal with these things is we broaden our toolkit, we don't go kinetic, we don't draw blood first, but if we have to, we have to prevail. That's about tactical clarity in the Taiwan scenario, I'd say.

Mike Green: And this is great. Mike O'Hanlon is at Brookings Institution. He's one of the very few people in this town who can range from questions of technology and tactics and operations and coin to big grand strategy questions. This book, which is great, *The Art of War in an Age of Peace* is the grand strategy piece, but it's informed by everything Mike has done over the last 30 years on the operational, tactical, diplomatic pieces of what would go into a grand strategy, so can't recommend it highly enough. Thanks, Mike. Good working with you since 1942. Look forward to the next book.

Mike O'Hanlon: Mike, it's a privilege and there's no podcast I'd rather be on than yours. You're an amazing force in the field, and so thank you for the privilege.

Mike Green: Great. Thanks.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening for more on strategy and the Asia programs work, visit the CSIS website at [csis.org](http://csis.org) and click on the Asia Program page.