

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

## The Asia Chessboard

# “The Grandmaster: An Interview with Ambassador Richard Armitage”

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SPEAKER

**Ambassador Richard Armitage,**

*Former Deputy Secretary of State and CSIS Trustee*

HOSTS

**Dr. Michael Green,**

*Japan Chair and Senior Advisor, CSIS*

**H. Andrew Schwartz,**

*Chief Communications Officer, CSIS*

*Transcript by Rev.com*

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.

Ben Rimland: In this episode, Mike and Andrew interview a true grandmaster of the Asia chessboard: Ambassador Richard Armitage. Ambassador Armitage has seen it all, from riverine patrols with the "brown-water navy" in Vietnam to hard-fought bureaucratic battles as Deputy Secretary of State. Andrew and Mike discuss Ambassador Armitage's background in Asia. They grade the Trump administration's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy.' Plus, they forecast possible black swans shadowing the Asia chessboard. And Ambassador Armitage's all-time bench press record is revealed.

Andrew Schwartz: I wanted to go back sort of to the beginning in the Naval Academy. You were a student, but you also played on the football team, and you played with a guy that a lot of us have heard of named Roger Staubach.

Ambassador Armitage: Yes, I did.

Andrew Schwartz: Is that where you started thinking about grand strategy, things like that?

Ambassador Armitage: No. I was thinking about graduating from school, but it was in the Naval Academy. First time that I had really heard the word "strategy" beyond baseball diamond, or basketball court in high school was at the Naval Academy, but it wasn't the main focus of our studying. Everybody at the academy studies Mahan, but not in great depth. They study seamanship and things of that nature, but mostly it's like the curriculum at every other university.

Mike Green: We're going to come back to Mahan because I think the current strategic approach of the administration has one of its merits that it's based on Alfred Thayer Mahan's concept of maritime strategy.

Ambassador Armitage: I think I know someone who wrote a book about that.

Mike Green: Yes, indeed. By More Than Providence, highly recommend it, by the host of this program.

Mike Green: You have more experience doing strategy and policy in Asia than just about anyone in this town in Washington D.C. I know you went to Asia for reasons that are pretty important, but tell us a little bit about how you got into this game of policy.

Ambassador Armitage: Believe it or not, I actually validated French college, and I had substitute courses in for the French, which I got credit for. And I studied Communist China. This was the "Hundred Flowers Bloom" campaigns and things of that nature. I was kind of interested in Asia. Ended up six years in Vietnam and noticed that each time I went to Vietnam for deployment or for R&R coming in and out, every time but once I went through Japan, so it left me with the

impression that something is going on with Japan, and that really hooked me on Asia, the combination of all of those three.

Mike Green: When did you hit the ground in Southeast Asia and Vietnam?

Ambassador Armitage: I was on a ship for a year in '67, '68, and I hit the ground in '69, and left in '75.

Mike Green: So just reflecting a little bit, that's a long time and different jobs, too. You were working with riverine-

Ambassador Armitage: Well, I had three. I was an ambush team advisor for two of three tours, and then I have a riverine division, 20 PBRs for one tour. And then for two years, I was the defense attache of two-years plus.

Mike Green: So you saw the Vietnam War from offshore, onshore, in the policy type job-

Ambassador Armitage: And to the final day.

Mike Green: And you helped, as is famous in the Last Days of Vietnam, Rory Kennedy's really stunning documentary, helps get the south Vietnamese Navy out. So how did that shape your thinking about the applications of American diplomacy and military power in Asia?

Ambassador Armitage: When I went to Vietnam, I realized over time that we didn't have a strategy at all. Nobody had thought about it. And I also realized something that has again become true today, and that is that we had so many people involved in the military effort that we had lost almost a generation of people who knew how to think strategically in the military leadership. We have exactly the mirror image of that today because we've had folks downrange so long in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places that they've lost the ability to think strategically. And it takes a while, and you've got to readjust your thought.

Ambassador Armitage: So I came out of Vietnam not having a well formed view of what the strategy should be.

Andrew Schwartz: This is three tours of duty in Vietnam.

Ambassador Armitage: Yeah, well, four. One on a ship, and three in country.

Andrew Schwartz: Got it.

Ambassador Armitage: But realizing that you kind of had to know where you are and where you wanted to go, and so that was about the concept of strategy I had.

Secretary Armitage: At that time, even in Southeast Asia where we lost in Vietnam, there was still an enormous esteem for the United States. I can remember working out in the gym in the Jusmag in Thailand, and Thais were coming up, Americans were coming up. It was as if Vietnam never happened. They just expected

that they knew it was the wrong place, the wrong time, that we'd bit off a little more than we could chew. The guys were fighting for their country. We weren't. But the esteem for the United States was there, and that's what made me realize finally that we had to come back and start thinking about how to encourage that kind of thinking even more, and that was the fertile ground of the beginning of thinking of strategy.

Ambassador Armitage: And then having sailed alongside guys like Dr. Green, Gaston Sigur, and others, that together we could talk about these issues and come up with a bit of group think, but generally something that was pretty congenial to all of us.

Mike Green: Are there still lessons from the Vietnam War for how we do Asia policy today, Asia strategy?

Ambassador Armitage: Yeah, I think the main one is if you're going to get into something, simultaneously figure out what conditions allow you to get out of it, and that's the main lesson that I've taken through my career. And how we didn't always do that in 2003 and the invasion of Iraq, but that's the major lesson I learned.

Mike Green: We got out of Vietnam and we largely got out of Southeast Asia. We are not re-engaging Southeast Asia, or at least we were with rebalance and the pivot. Just reflecting again on many decades in that part of the world, what's the importance of Southeast Asia for us right now? The big pieces of this chessboard in Asia or Japan, China, Korea, India, but the game right now is being played in Southeast Asia.

Ambassador Armitage: Yeah. It's self-evident the geostrategic location of the Southeast Asia nations that combine the GDP of about \$3 trillion, population of over 600 million, and the largest Muslim country. So I wouldn't call them exactly pawns. They may be knights on the chessboard, but they count.

Mike Green: Part of the problem with Vietnam for us was our approach was derivative. It wasn't about Southeast Asia. It was about NATO and their touring Communist expansion in Europe. It was about Japan. It wasn't really about Southeast Asia, at least looking at it historically. Have we gotten over that? Because in the War on Terror, when we were both in militia administration, for you or me or Bob Zoellick, we got it but for a lot of people, you had to frame Southeast Asia strategy in the context of the War on Terror. For the Obama administration, they pivoted to Asia, but now it's derivative of China, in competition with China. Are we thinking about Southeast Asia on its own merits, the way you just described, or are we still stuck in this ...

Ambassador Armitage: No, I think we're probably still stuck. Even the language that we now use, Free & Open Indo-Pacific, the picture I have in my mind is in the north you have two great democracies of Japan and Korea. You've got India on one side, and the other bookend is the United States. And then in the south, you've got Australia and New Zealand. So that's the way I think we kind of see the nations, though we should and could spend a lot more meaningful

energy and time on Southeast Asian nations themselves. We do in Vietnam, so it's not a completely blank slate. We've made some progress there, but we have not in the other nations, in my view.

Mike Green: So the administration's national security strategy, the national defense strategy, the most recent iterations of the Free & Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, acting Secretary of Defense Shanahan unveiled his DoD report on the FOIP, Free & Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, for DoD. It's all about competition with China. Are we winning that competition, do you think?

Ambassador Armitage: No.

Mike Green: How come?

Ambassador Armitage: We're not winning it. We're not applying the total whole of government approach. Acting Secretary Shanahan's speech at Shangri-La was okay. I didn't find much new in it. It was all about defense, as you allude to, and it wasn't about the other elements of the other arrows in our quiver: education, political engagement, economic engagement, cultural engagement. And if we don't do all of that, then we're not going to prevail in this battle of ideas with China.

Mike Green: Which parts do you think we're doing better on, we the US or the administration, on the Free & Open Indo-Pacific right now?

Ambassador Armitage: I think we're doing pretty well on the development of relations with India. This has been a bipartisan approach for Democrats and Republicans. We're doing real well with the development of relations with Japan, and we're having some difficulties, not of our own making in many cases, with South Korea. It's a mixed picture, in my view, in Southeast Asia. For heaven's sakes, we don't even have an ambassador in Singapore now. It's two-and-a-half years into the administration.

Mike Green: What about the trade piece? Pulled out of TPP. "Free and open," those words sort of would connote a free and open economic system in Asia.

Ambassador Armitage: Well, they do. Pulling out of this, and then thank God that Japan and Prime Minister Abe stepped into the breach, and I think rescued the TPP from total disaster, but it won't be what it should be without the participation of the United States, and that's apparently not going to happen in this administration. The irony of this is, to me, that the things that I understand, for instance, that the Trump administration is desirous of getting from Japan by and large were contained in the TPP. So we couldn't take "yes" for an answer.

Mike Green: So you're a professor now at Keio University?

Ambassador Armitage: I am an honorary professor. Make sure you underline that.

Mike Green: So even more important than a professor. Do you give grades to students?

Ambassador Armitage: I do for graduate students.

Mike Green: Okay. So what grade would you give the administration for the Free & Open Indo-Pacific, assuming we're halfway through the semester?

Ambassador Armitage: I'd give them a C.

Mike Green: A C? Let's go around the region and grade some other grand strategies, which is the focus of this podcast. Shinzo Abe?

Ambassador Armitage: Shinzo Abe has been the brightest spot in the globe. This is a man who right now is the leader of the free world. Would that it be the United States, but we have eschewed that. It's Shinzo Abe who is the most desired visitor in capitols around the world. He's the one who is holding high the flag of human freedoms, human dignity, human rights. Thank God for Japan and Prime Minister Abe right now.

Mike Green: In late 2018, the Pew Foundation did a poll around the world and asked what world leader people trust the most. It was all American and European leaders, and so President Trump did not do well. Xi Jinping did not do well. He was the one Asian leader. Merkel was the most trusted. Abe wasn't on the question. But in Australia, Lowy Institute around the same time asked the question and added Abe. He was by far the most respected leader in Australia, and I suspect that would be true in a lot of parts of the world.

Ambassador Armitage: Well, I think look at our own society. Japan is in public opinion polls here extraordinarily highly regarded. The US Congress regards Japan and holds them in the highest esteem I think for their behavior, for their activities post-war, their support for the international institutions, et cetera. So there's a lot to recommend itself in the way Japan is approaching not only Asia but the world, but most importantly, I think, has been the indefatigable diplomacy of Shinzo Abe during this whole time.

Mike Green: I don't know if you're a hard grader at Keio-

Ambassador Armitage: I'm a pretty hard grader.

Mike Green: I'm a pretty easy grader at Georgetown, but I don't know if Abe has deserved an 'A' yet and the main reason is relations with the Republic of Korea. You and I have talked about this a lot, including to the Prime Minister himself and others in Japan and Seoul. It's kind of curious to me that a Japanese grand strategy that is so successful in so many ways is kind of failing on the area that animated Japanese grand strategy for a thousand years, which is the Korean peninsula.

Ambassador Armitage: Mike, you're a musician among other things, not a dancer.

Mike Green: No. Not at all.

Ambassador Armitage: But it takes two to tango, and Shinzo Abe does not have a partner right now in South Korea. The Japanese have since 1965 signed two international agreements, binding international agreements, with governments, legitimate governments of the Republic of Korea, and right now, the Moon Jae-in government has moved the goalposts, so it's a little difficult for me to pin this all on Mr. Abe. So prior to 2015 and the latest agreement between Japan and South Korea, I would agree with you. I would've given Mr. Abe a slightly lower mark. Since then, I'm pinning the tail on the Korean peninsula and South Korea on the President contretemps.

Mike Green: This Japan-Korea relationship may be one of the most strategic relationships for us, for the US, in the region. I mean, if China has a strategy to marginalize the US influence to create a sphere of influence in Asia, the Southeast Asia front is important in this, but the one that's probably the most consequential is the Korean peninsula, and I think most people in Washington would agree with you that the problem now is in Seoul. But that said, since this affects us, is there a US strategic approach for this, or just patience?

Ambassador Armitage: Well, there should be, but my observation from afar is that we haven't done what normally American diplomacy would do, that is to step in and quietly urge a settlement. You and I both have talked to the various ministers from both countries. I think the bureaucracies are ready for a betterment of relations. I don't think in the case with Seoul the Blue House is ready yet.

Ambassador Armitage: You mentioned China. This leaves the playing field open to China, and there are reports today that Xi Jinping may be visiting Seoul towards the end of the month, maybe right prior to the Osaka G20.

Mike Green: How do you grade Xi Jinping's grand strategy in Asia right now?

Ambassador Armitage: Well, grand strategy in Asia, he's got one and it includes the Russian Federation, and it's organized around one concept. That is the Americans are leaving and we want to usher them out the door as quickly as possible, so he's got an organizing reason for his strategy, and his much improved relationship with the Russian Federation. So that element, I give him high marks for his strategy.

Ambassador Armitage: There is another element and that is for his economic strategy, and I give him lower marks here because it's so avarice. It's so charging interest rates, all of those things. It's economic trade craft in a malign way, so I give him bad marks for that.

Ambassador Armitage: And finally, I give him the worst marks for his own handling of his domestic problems, whether it's the situation with the Uyghurs, which is a terrible human rights disaster, or the fear he has of his own people.

Andrew Schwartz: Secretary, let me ask you about the Uyghurs for a second.

Ambassador Armitage: Yeah.

Andrew Schwartz: There's been reports in the New York Times that the surveillance of the Uyghurs is just something like we've never seen before. These people can't move from one block to another without being surveilled. We're getting ready to take a look at this at CSIS in a pretty profound way. Is this anything like you've ever seen or contemplated?

Ambassador Armitage: Well, I've seen the same reports you have, Andrew, on surveillance of Uyghurs, but having occasionally traveled to China, I would say surveillance extends broadly to the population. You can hardly go anywhere in China without having a camera on you. The Deputy Prime Minister of Japan, Taro Aso, at a dinner recently told me that at minimum 300 million cameras.

Andrew Schwartz: 300 million.

Ambassador Armitage: And growing. So the Uyghurs, I'm sure, get special attention, but so do citizens.

Andrew Schwartz: So you can't get in a taxicab in China.

Ambassador Armitage: You can't without being surveilled.

Andrew Schwartz: Right. And this isn't something that's reported every day in America, and I don't think we think about it on a constant basis. We're thinking about tariffs, we're thinking about South China Sea now because of the work that we've done in AMTI, and some of the things that you all have been saying publicly. We're not thinking about what it's like if you actually travel to China and what it's like for the daily citizens there. They can't move.

Ambassador Armitage: I'm not very happy traveling to China anymore, and it's not just a matter of surveillance. It's a matter of having to give up so much data to get in. You can't use money. You have to use your phones and things of that nature.

Andrew Schwartz: You have to bring like a burner.

Ambassador Armitage: Yeah, it's just too much-

Andrew Schwartz: Like you're a drug dealer. You've got to bring a burner.

Mike Green: We wouldn't know, Andrew.

Andrew Schwartz: Right. This is a very clean podcast here.

Andrew Schwartz: I've watched The Wire. That's where I learned that from.

Andrew Schwartz: That's on The Wire. Yeah.

Mike Green: No, I mean one of the reasons that China scholars in the US, many of whom are very pro-engagement for many decades, have turned against China is because this just feels creepy.

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah.

Mike Green: It's creepy, and it also raises the question, is the administration right? We're in a strategic competition that's also about values and ideas.

Andrew Schwartz: Right. How do we do business with people like this? This is what I'm saying.

Ambassador Armitage: Well, you do business where you can cooperate. There are cooperations that you already engage in with the People's Republic of China. Aviation agreements, things of that nature, and we do it for the general public good. There are other agreements that we shouldn't be involved with which are bilateral perhaps, and we shouldn't be engaged in something that betters our life if you're a golfer and doesn't better the life of the general global population.

Ambassador Armitage: So we can cooperate with China on certain things. Climate change will be a perfect one if President of the administration would acknowledge that something's going on with the climate. Terrorism we have cooperated on in the past. Aviation, I've already mentioned. Global health, things of that nature. That's in everyone's interest. But to encourage the avaricious economic statecraft, no, that's not on. To encourage the bullying of countries like Sweden and Taiwan, that's not on.

Mike Green: Can I ask a quick follow-up? And you give Xi Jinping low grades for his grand strategy on that count. Is it because it's morally wrong, or because you think he's hurting China's interests ultimately?

Ambassador Armitage: I think ultimately it's corrosive of China's interests. I gave him, what, I think three different grades, and he went from pretty good grades to quite low, I think, and the lowest being his own handling of his domestic situation as I understand it from afar.

Andrew Schwartz: Let's talk about North Korea. President Trump has made this a big deal for his administration. He's engaged a North Korean leader. What do you make of all this?

Ambassador Armitage: I think there are probably two people in the whole world who actually think that some progress can be made on the nuclear issue with North Korea. One is named Moon Jae-in, and the other is Donald Trump. My views, there's absolutely no chance of Kim Jong-un giving up his weapons. By the same token, he's not suicidal. If he's anything, he's hedonistic. He's quite a bit shorter than I am, and about 70 pounds heavier.

Andrew Schwartz: It certainly seems like that he likes to party.

Mike Green: And not from weightlifting.

Ambassador Armitage: And not weight lifting.

Andrew Schwartz: By the way, I need to ask you, how much are you benching these days?

Ambassador Armitage: Not much these days. My personal best was 440.

Andrew Schwartz: 440.

Ambassador Armitage: But I've got a partially torn rotator cuff, so I'm having trouble.

Andrew Schwartz: 440. So my son is going off to play football in college next year, and what they want to do always is they want to do the combine bench. They want to be able to-

Ambassador Armitage: Yeah, 225.

Andrew Schwartz: 225, and they want to do as many reps of 225 as possible. If I told him that I was sitting here with you today, and 440 is your best, he might fall over. That's a lot of weight.

Ambassador Armitage: We have a naval academy midshipman who I think is going to be a junior this year. He benches over 500.

Andrew Schwartz: My goodness. My goodness.

Mike Green: Maybe he'll go into Asia strategy.

Andrew Schwartz: Well, Navy's looking good. Always looking good. The football team in Navy is always good, and I go to a lot of their games, because they play my alma mater Tulane, and I always go to those.

Ambassador Armitage: Green wave?

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah, and I always go to those games, and being out there in that atmosphere, there's nothing like it-

Ambassador Armitage: We used to sing a song against Army, is we don't play Notre Dame. We don't play Tulane. We just play Davis, because that's the fearless Army way.

Andrew Schwartz: That's great.

Andrew Schwartz: So back to North Korea though. What should we be doing right now that we're not doing?

Ambassador Armitage: My own view is that we ought to be making sure that our friends South Korea and our friends in Japan are absolutely sure that we're there for them.

Otherwise, I hate to say this because the Trump administration will have a cat, but they're back to the Obama administration's strategic patience. That's where we are.

Mike Green: Black swans.

Andrew Schwartz: Well, first, you got to tell everyone what black ... We know what black swans. Tell our listeners what you mean by black swans.

Mike Green: They are swans that are painted black. No, these are the swans that you don't expect to see because most swans are white, and what it says is you've got to be ready for the unexpected, and the significant or catastrophically unexpected. And when I early on joined the Bush administration, Secretary Armitage told me that-

Andrew Schwartz: Do they take you by the scruff of your neck and tell you?

Ambassador Armitage: Oh, no. We-

Mike Green: We were talking on the phone, but that's what it felt like. Things are going to happen, and we're going to move the ball down the field depending on how we take advantage of the unexpected crisis. And we had some of those cases. The tsunami in 2004 was a massive human catastrophe, but we the US, Japan, Australia, India formed the quad, changed the dynamics after Iraq where we were starting to really take a lot of heat in places like Indonesia.

Andrew Schwartz: That was a new way of dealing with-

Mike Green: Yeah. Our alliances in Asia are bilateral, and we created a consortium, a coalition, and the signal was, number one, we're the democracies who care about you in Asia, and, number two, hey, somebody pushes us too hard, we've never had a collective security arrangement like NATO, but we could. Pretty strong signal on both fronts to China.

Mike Green: Anyway, sometimes black swans, you don't get them right and you're much worse off. So what are the black swans we should maybe be thinking about?

Ambassador Armitage: There are different kinds of black swans. You just spoke about the 2004 tsunami, which devastated Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and others, and you're right, the response was a mighty coalition. There were other black swans. Thinking back to the 80s, even Gwangju riots. That was something unexpected, soldiers killing their own students in the streets of Gwangju. The KAL shoot down in 1983, the Soviets shot down a civilian airliner. And these are things that are terrible tragedies, but they all were part of the fabric of us finally overcoming the Soviet Union during the Cold War in Asia.

Ambassador Armitage: We've had other tragedies. We've had the twin earthquakes in '96 or so. The Hanshin earthquake, and of course the Tohoku quake here, and I've got a feeling that in the main, the black swans moving forward, because of climate

change, may look a lot more like the tsunamis and things of that nature than other events, like the shoot down of the KAL liner, et cetera.

Mike Green: The Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii calls it the Arc of Fire, sort of from the Indian Ocean through Southeast Asia. It seems like there's a tsunami or a typhoon or an earthquake every year now-

Ambassador Armitage: Well, and a major earthquake, but there are, what, 500 earthquakes in Japan last year, most unnoticed. And Bali has had their share this year. So, yeah, a ring of fire is when it shifts, follows all the way through to South America.

Andrew Schwartz: Are we paying enough attention to these black swans?

Ambassador Armitage: Well, by their nature, you can't anticipate everything, but Mike has put it beautifully. When a black swan comes along, you have to take a few seconds, a few minutes to realize how you best approach it, and I've got a feeling that it's a matter of size. If it's a black swan like the tsunami of 2004, we knew we couldn't handle this by ourselves, so it directed us one way. If it's a more minor issue, like a Gwangju or something like that, then you can handle it more bilaterally, or maybe having another interested party participate.

Mike Green: Gwangju was when, just for listeners who may not know when South Korean students came out in the streets in Gwangju, South Korea, and I think it was an elite parachute unit of the Korean Army opened fire on them, right?

Ambassador Armitage: The Korean soldiers, which were nominally under US command, were removed from US command, General John Wickham, and they were sent against their own students. An unknown number of students died in that violence.

Andrew Schwartz: With the United States seeming to withdraw more from the world than ever before, and you think about this a lot ... You're the father of Smart Power, after all. What are you thinking about as we withdraw from the world and we're not as well positioned to help? One of the things you've always said is even though we're not always seemingly there, we're always the first people that everyone calls when there's trouble.

Ambassador Armitage: Yeah, I used to say ... This was back in the 90s, and these people would say, "Oh, we don't want to be the police for the world," and I would respond, that's right, I'd prefer to be the police chief of the world. I don't have to show up on the scene of every mugging and petty larceny, but sometimes the crimes are so serious that the police chief himself has to show up and take charge.

Ambassador Armitage: You know, Andrew, when I think about today, the withdrawal from the world, I think of it in terms of China and the US. Here's China, who is desperately searching for friends, and China doesn't know how to make them. And here's the United States, who does have a lot of friends, and we seem to be discarding them. So will it always be that way? No, but some

things have profoundly altered in our society. Our congressional members, for instance. Some of the candidates for president say we're going to go back to normal. Well, it's going to be a new normal, I'm afraid. But we can get back to a more recognizable US position in Asia, and more broadly the world. I think that can be done in a year or two, but to be able to organize ourselves domestically in a way that supports that effort is harder.

Mike Green: One of the things that's really striking about the 1987 KAL shoot down, or incidents like that-

Ambassador Armitage:'83.

Mike Green: '83, yes. '83. ... Was the fact that Ronald Reagan and the Reagan administration knew where they wanted to go. They knew where the end zone was. What is that now? We're going to have these black swans, but what is Asia, what is the US-China relationship? What do we want this to look like in five, 10, 20 years? Realistically.

Ambassador Armitage:Well, first of all, in '83, you had to look at the *personae dramatis* in the administration. You had Caspar Weinberger, a very talented Secretary of Defense, and George Schultz, a really talented Secretary of State. You had Bill Crowe, a chairman at the time. You had the President. You had the Vice President, it was George Bush 41. These are folks who felt in their bellies where the United States should be in the world.

Ambassador Armitage:So we started from a much different place than you start now. They were all veterans of World War II. They'd all served in the Pacific and made our work in Asia for Paul Wolfowitz, me, and Gaston Sigur actually a lot easier because from the get-go, they were very supportive of the development of Asian relations. I don't know that we're going to have that kind of roster of folks moving forward, so I think there's going to be a lot of teaching and re-teaching of Asia, and the importance of Asia, the history of Asia, and things of that nature as we move forward 10 years, 20 years.

Andrew Schwartz: And is bipartisanship possible the way it's been throughout your career on Asia?

Ambassador Armitage:It is possible to the extent there's bipartisanship now in the Congress. It's still on Asia. It's not a matter of great controversy. The administration in themselves have not engaged as well as they should in my view, but the Congress on that issue, I think, is open.

Andrew Schwartz: Does the administration seek out your advice on these matters?

Ambassador Armitage:Are you kidding? No.

Andrew Schwartz: I mean, they probably should.

Ambassador Armitage:Well, they think they know best. That's fine. I get it.

Mike Green: What do you tell my students at Georgetown, your students at Keio who are studying Asia? They might be Rich Armitage in 30 years or 40 years. They won't be bench pressing over 400 pounds, but they might be in prominent positions in the State Department, or the NSU, or the Pentagon, or in the Japanese foreign ministry or career. What do you tell them? What's the Asia they should be working for?

Ambassador Armitage: And what I tell them is they have to themselves have core beliefs. They don't just wake up in the morning and play the ball where it lies. They've got to know where they want that ball to lie, and what's important to them, and what's their priorities. For me, for you, I know this having worked alongside of you that it was, as I say, human freedoms, human rights, the spread of democracy. Not perfect, but better than the alternatives as far as we were concerned.

Ambassador Armitage: So when we woke up in the morning, Mike, we knew where we wanted to go generally. We also knew where we were. Right now, I don't think the administration is sure where they are because the Secretary of State can't make any policy judgments. The acting Secretary of Defense can't make them. The President is the only one who can make them, so they don't know where they are, they don't know where they're going. They talk about free and open Indo-Pacific, as I say, and if you're lucky, you might get them to talk about the bookends. Two great democracies on either end. But beyond that, they can't.

Ambassador Armitage: You started off, Mike, in talking about the so-called pivot that became rebalance, and pivot I think was only used once, maybe twice, by Mrs. Clinton, and she got away from it because the image was not a good one. A rebalancing was much more congenial at the time. Rebalancing out of two unpopular wars and getting our issues straight in Asia. But at the end of the day, the Obama administration also did not make use of their whole of government approach to Asia.

Mike Green: No, it was a lot of messaging, and speechifying, and spin-

Ambassador Armitage: Yes.

Mike Green: ... which is part of the game. You've got to have a narrative.

Ambassador Armitage: Absolutely.

Mike Green: And we don't really have that right now, so kudos to them, but I think probably where the Obama administration fell short was understanding the raw power of politics in Asia that is so critical.

Mike Green: I think the Trump administration, at least the people you and I have worked with in the past and know, fully understand the power of politics.

Ambassador Armitage: Well, it's just the Secretary Randy Schriver or Matt Pottinger at the NSC. These guys aren't on the joke. They understand it. They've grown up alongside of us, steeped in Asia, and if they were the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, I'd sleep well at night. As they say, they get it, but-

Andrew Schwartz: And you have a good person in Steve Biegun also doing North Korea.

Ambassador Armitage: Steve Biegun. Terrific guy. Steve making policy on career. He gave a wonderful nuanced speech in Stanford, I thought. He's started to speak publicly a little more recently, but he can't articulate a policy that he's not an author of.

Mike Green: Yeah. He's a very capable guy.

Ambassador Armitage: He's an extraordinarily capable guy.

Mike Green: His challenge is the President wants us to be the Donald Trump Show, and is not empowering his own negotiators.

Mike Green: But this is all painful for those of us who have experienced that pulse in the past. There's talent in the administration to be sure, but it's a little painful to watch. That said, it is interesting, our allies and partners are not deserting us. We're doing a lot of on-side goals, but you look at public opinion polls and support for the alliance in places like Japan and Australia, Korea, it's pretty strong. To me, it feels like we have some time to get this right still. It's not game over.

Ambassador Armitage: No, we've got time, but maybe for the wrong reason. The reason we have time is the alternative is not there, and nobody can envision an Asian-Pacific or Europe for that matter without the President of the United States, and I think our president did us a favor in his D-Day comments and the 75th anniversary of Normandy. He spoke about alliances. He spoke in a very high-minded way, and I think that'll help because it'll translate from Europe to Asia.

Ambassador Armitage: But part of the reason we have time, and I agree with you, we do, is because there's no alternative right now.

Mike Green: Nobody wants to live in a Europe dominated by Russia, which is less likely.

Ambassador Armitage: Well, and how many people do you see trying to emigrate to China?

Mike Green: Yep. And if you look at the Australian, New Zealand white papers, Japan's national security strategy, it's interesting how much these allies who were reticent in the Reagan years to talk about democracy are now talking about what's at stake, which is our values. So the Chinese are doing us a little bit of a favor, but you can only cast that in for a while.

Ambassador Armitage: No, that's what I say. There's no alternative right now. The Chinese are learning. They're starting to get a little smarter on their Belt and Road Initiative. They are being a little more lenient on the rights of their lending, things of that nature. They can learn from their mistakes. I don't think they can learn tomorrow or next month, but they can learn, and we ought to be capable of learning from our own.

Mike Green: This is going to be a really, really important set of observations for a lot of people here in the US and Asia and Europe.

Andrew Schwartz: Absolutely. This is invaluable.

Ambassador Armitage: Thank you very much. Thank you.

Andrew Schwartz: Thank you, sir.

Mike Green: Go Navy.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening. For more on strategy and the Asia program's work, visit the CSIS website at [CSIS.org](https://www.csis.org), and click on the Asia program page.