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TRANSCRIPT

Podcast

"Twilight Struggle: Lessons from the Cold War for China Strategy Today"

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FEATURING

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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 Hal Brands, the Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at Johns Hopkins SAIS, to discuss his new book, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today*. Mike and Hal analyze the merits of applied history and how the Cold War is an appropriate lens through which to gain insights about current US-China long-term competition. How can lessons from the Cold War inform current US strategy?

Mike Green: Welcome back to The Asia Chessboard. I'm joined by historian and strategist, Professor Hal Brands, the Henry Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at Johns Hopkins SAIS, my alma mater, a senior fellow at the AEI, the American Enterprise Institute, and columnist for Bloomberg. Hal's a prolific author, applies the lessons of history to statecraft, and has a new book out called *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today*. Congrats on the book, Hal, and really glad we can spend half an hour with you.

Hal Brands: Well, thank you, Mike. I'm a fan of the podcast, so I'm pleased to be here.

Mike Green: So I heard buzz about this book before you probably even had the proofs in your hand. There's a lot of interest out there. One thing I heard people say is this isn't the Cold War. China is bigger. China's share of global GDP is bigger. US trade with China is 15 to 16% of our overall trade. It was never even 1% with the Soviets. So the first thing I want to say right away is that's not what this book is about, obviously. It's about how you think about strategic competition, what the dynamics are like, what we should brace ourselves for, looking at the last time we had a serious strategic competition of this existential nature.

Mike Green: Before we get to that argument, though, I want to talk about you a little. This is a family business for you. Your dad's an accomplished historian as well. A lot of historians think that this kind of applied history is bad history. Did you ever get family feuds in the past about this or your historian colleagues disowning you, or do you think there's room in the discipline for actually applying history to statecraft the way you do?

Hal Brands: Yeah, I'd say there needs not just to be room for this, but I think it should really be at the center of the profession. I mean, I know the reason that I got interested in history in the first place wasn't kind of as some sterile academic undertaking. It was because I felt that history could be useful in understanding challenges we face today. Actually, as an undergrad, I started out as a political science major and, in fact, double majored, and political science was one of those things. But the reason I was drawn to it is because a long, long time ago, political science was basically applied history. I mean, it was basically qualitative historical work that was meant to provide some deeper insight about the way that the international system or US foreign policy works. That was always what drew me to the study of the past, and then over the past, you know, 15 years, I've kind of lived a life where my primary home is in the academy, but I've always been engaged in policy debates in one way or another, and so writing a book like this is really just kind of a natural extension of the work that I've done.

Mike Green: The transition you made from political scientist to historian was quick. You're smarter than I am. I started as an undergrad history major, did a PhD in political science, and then went back to my original undergrad to pursue for the reason you said. I sometimes feel like both disciplines have moved away from each other in ways that are really counterproductive and unhelpful because the early political scientists were exactly that at Wisconsin and at Harvard and Princeton. They were taking history and putting a rigorous set of questions and variables around how you interpret it. With that said, you know, historians are right to worry that applied history, when you're making an argument about policy, can get distorted, can get, you know, manipulated. Every historian, every scholar has a bias. How do you make sure you're being an archivally accurate, careful historian while trying to say something about policy? What are the disciplines you keep in your head and with your pen?

Hal Brands: Well, I think the key is really to come at it without preconceptions about what you want the policy argument to be, right? I think where you get in trouble is where you start the article or the project with the policy takeaway already in mind and then you write the history to fit that policy narrative. That can lead to the sort of distorted or biased history that I think a lot of historians are wary of. But if you go into it sort of from a good faith perspective so that... You know, the question that I was trying to answer in doing this book was really a bit open-ended. It was kind of what can the Cold War teach us about long-term competition? There wasn't kind of an answer that was implied in that, and so I think that frees you up to really do kind of the hard historical work that leads to good analysis.

Hal Brands: The other point I would make about this, just briefly, is that, you know, the reality of the matter is that whether I write this book or not or whether people study the Cold War or not, the Cold War as an analogy is going to be central to our thinking about the US-China and US-Russia rivalries, and the reason for that's pretty simple. It's that the Cold War is actually within the living memory of a lot of current policymakers, even if they may have been quite young when it ended. It's really the only time in American history when we have done determined, multi-decade competition with an authoritarian rival. So we're going to reach back to that past for insights in one way or another. We might as well do it on the basis of serious history that really tries to unearth the true story as opposed to a more superficial reading of it.

Mike Green: My favorite quote of the people you quote in the book is the quote you have of Kennan, who argues that... At the very beginning of thinking about containment, he argues there is no real security in this strategic competition we were starting out with vis-a-vis the Soviets, no real security and no alternative to living dangerously. That really stuck with me because we are, it seems to me, at a cathartic moment in American strategic thought, and, as you know well, by the way, Australia and the Japanese and a lot of other allies, about this problem, and that just was kind of chilling. There is no alternative to living dangerously. That, to me, is the strategic point of discontinuity we've hit in the last few years. We now realize there's no responsible stakeholder. There's no new model of great power relations. There is no alternative to living dangerously. That really stuck with me. But that's a little bit of a depressing note to strike, so how would you characterize... What does it mean, in your words, to be preparing for a long struggle?

Hal Brands: So it's a great question, and I think maybe I'll start by starting in the present and then working my way backwards. You mentioned the transition period in US-China relations that probably began about five years ago with the advent of the Trump presidency when we decided that the responsible stakeholder was more or less dead and we were moving into a period of competition. In a way, I think that realization kind of felt liberating for a lot of American policymakers. I mean, there was less concern about not rocking the boat in the US-China relationship, and there was freedom to do things that the United States might have wanted to do but felt constrained to do in economic competition or technological competition for a while.

Hal Brands: But I think we've reached the point now where it's actually more sobering than anything else. I mean, competition is not free of danger. We've learned that very much over the past year, both in the US-

Russia and the US-China relationship, where I think when a lot of people were thinking about competition with China even a couple of years ago, it was sort of in this abstract way and now you realize that, very tangibly, there is a danger of military conflict that attends any geopolitical competition. It could happen in the Taiwan Strait. It could happen in Eastern Europe. It could happen in a number of places.

Hal Brands: So it's important going into the study of great power competition not to have a sanitized view of what it means, and this takes us back to the Cold War, where we look back on the Cold War now and we think of it as the "Long Peace." The exaggerated version of this is almost that, you know, there was a 45-year principled agreement to compete short of war but not go into war, and that really, obviously, wasn't how it worked. There were pervasive fears of global military conflict during the Cold War. The United States had to think very seriously about how to deter such a conflict or to fight it if it occurred, and so competition was really kind of a terrifying experience, especially given the presence of nuclear weapons in that competition and how new and terrifying they were. So I think Kennan's quote is quite appropriate in the sense that when we talk about competition, we're actually talking about something that can be quite perilous.

Mike Green: Looking at the Cold War precedent, again, this is not the Cold War again, but embarking on a long struggle like this is an experience where you got to look back at the last time you did it, as you argue throughout the book. How prepared do you think the American people are? How much consensus is there behind this competition compared with, say, 1948, '49? The Korean War was cathartic, but before the Korean War, before June 1950, you had the America Firsters, you had isolationists, you had people opposing NATO. It was not as if the entire American population read the "Long Telegram" and got it, right? Where are we today, do you think, compared to the beginning of that struggle?

Hal Brands: In some ways, we're better placed than we were back then for the reason that you allude to, which is it's a mistake to think back that there was this rock solid Cold War consensus that came about in 1946 and lasted through the end of the Cold War. That's not how it happened. There were left-wing critiques of containment in the late '40s. There were right-wing critiques of containment in the late 1940s. There was not an acceptance, really, until the '50s, maybe even the '60s, that the United States was going to maintain this network of global military and diplomatic commitments that it had kind of been left with after World War II and took up in the course of the Cold War.

Hal Brands: So if you looked at where we are today, you know, the United States actually has a lot of the things that it needs to compete with China and Russia, right? We have a network of alliances that's still probably our foremost tool in competition. We don't have to build that from scratch. We don't have to build an intelligence community from scratch, a national security state from scratch in the way that we did during the Cold War. So I think we're better prepared in those ways. Where we're maybe a little bit worse prepared comes from the fact that I think that the consensus on competition, and let's focus on China here, is probably broader than it is deep right now, and so there is a bipartisan consensus that China is a competitor of the United States, whatever that means. It came from the Trump administration. It's come from the Biden administration. It has bipartisan support in Congress, and the polling on this stuff indicates that the American people are more or less on board with that proposition. But when you start getting into specific issue areas, I think the consensus looks a little bit shallower.

Hal Brands: So when you start asking people, "Should the United States restrict outbound investment into China to prevent Chinese companies from using American money to pursue the goals of the People's Liberation Army" and things like that, you start getting less consensus. When it comes to aspects of technological competition, when it comes to, you know, things that might actually pose some difficult choices for the United States economically or politically, I think there's less consensus. So I think we're still at a fairly early stage of the competition in that respect, and part of the reason is that, and I'd maybe put an asterisk next to this statement, there hasn't been something quite like the Korean War to have the galvanizing factor in American public opinion. COVID maybe comes close. I think COVID had a pretty disastrous effect on China's global image, and it certainly had a liberating effect on China hawks within the United States, but I'm not sure that the effect is as profound as some of the early Cold War stuff was. So, for those reasons, I think we're in a little bit better position but also maybe a little bit more tenuous position than we were in, say, 1951.

Mike Green: And maybe the biggest difference... And, again, you're not saying this is a new Cold War. But in terms of using that experience to understand the dynamics of geopolitical competition and what it means for the American way of government and strategy, probably the biggest difference, you'd agree, I think, is you didn't have such a stake in Soviet economic interests. You didn't have, you know, prominent Wall Street financiers, to this day, calling for basically no decoupling and faith in the marketplace with China. You didn't have soybean farmers in most states of the union getting most of their

income from exports to China. You didn't have all of these stakeholders within the US system who had so much to gain from the Chinese economy.

Mike Green: You didn't talk a lot about that in the book, but how would you amend the lessons, given that piece of it? We've surveyed this, you know, at CSIS, and both thought leaders and the American public are quite willing to decouple on high tech and do things like that. But when it comes to stopping agricultural exports or things that benefit us or cheap consumer goods, there's not a lot of support, and that's very different from the Soviet Union. We had no economic relationship, really, that affected average Americans. So what do you do with that one when you're trying to look at the parallels and the lessons?

Hal Brands: Yeah. What's different is that there are very powerful interests in American society that have a very strong stake in a stable US-China relationship and an open US-China relationship, and that's not entirely a bad thing. I mean, I think that the key is to think not so much about broad or complete economic decoupling as to try to figure out what are the areas in which we absolutely cannot be dependent on China for critical goods or critical inputs? What are the areas in which we absolutely cannot be enabling China's development? Presumably, we don't want to make it easier for Huawei to wire the world with 5G telecommunications, things like that. And then what are the larger areas of not particularly sensitive or strategic trade where it's fine if there's a particularly extensive US-China relationship? I don't know that China buying a lot of agricultural products from the United States is necessarily a point of strategic vulnerability for us. I think, if anything, it testifies to a strategic vulnerability of China's, which is that they are highly dependent on imports of food and other goods from abroad.

Hal Brands: So you could make the same argument about clothing that's manufactured in China. We shouldn't buy clothing that's made from cotton that's done using slave labor in Xinjiang and things like that, right? But, nonetheless, there's a lot of aspects of the economic relationship that aren't particularly sensitive and don't require broad decoupling. I mean, you could make a similar point about an issue, I think, that both you and I probably think about a fair amount in our university jobs, which is the flow of Chinese students to the United States. I don't think that we should be staunching the flow of Chinese students to the United States, and I don't think that just as an educator. I think about that as somebody who believes that the flow of up-and-coming Chinese elites to the United States is actually a point of strategic advantage for us in this competition. Now, there probably are things we need to be doing better with respect to dealing with the

small number of cases that involve intellectual property theft or censorship and intimidation on campus and things like that. But that's really an approach where you need a scalpel more than a hammer.

Mike Green: Yeah. I do agree with you on remaining open and inviting to students from China, probably because they're great to have in the classroom. In courses we teach about grand strategy, having voices in the room from the countries we're talking about is educational and interesting, but also because it's a strategic advantage in the long-run. I mean, we're talking about the next generation. So my premise for saying that is that this struggle, which I completely agree with the premise of your book, is here and it's tough and it's dangerous, but it's not permanent, that there's a theory of victory where the generation who are educated, whether it's Chinese or Americans, are going to get along a lot better than our generation is, right? Is that where you see this all ending, to take a David Petraeus?

Hal Brands: That's certainly how I think about it, and I think that's actually a case where there is a really interesting Cold War parallel. So what's striking about the generation of officials that starts shaking up the Soviet Union in really profound ways during the 1980s is that a lot of them had spent some time in the United States or elsewhere in the West earlier in their lives. Sometimes, it was on student exchanges. Sometimes, it was being stationed abroad as an ambassador or an embassy official or something like that. But a lot of them had a taste of what it was like to live outside the Soviet Union, and it's pretty clear that seeing how thriving, democratic open societies worked had the effect of increasing their discontent with the way that a deeply authoritarian system worked at home.

Hal Brands: Now, China is not the Soviet Union. You can't say that enough. But it is an increasingly repressive system today. I would imagine that one of the effects of bringing up-and-coming Chinese elites to the United States is giving them a sense of how a different type of system works and, frankly, just establishing some of the human-to-human ties that can actually be quite important in international affairs. So I think we're on the same page when it comes to the way we think about this as a strategic advantage.

Mike Green: So the way you write the book is looking at different themes in Cold War strategic competition and then, at the end of the book, tying together some lessons or implications for us. You don't come out and say, "We need to recreate exactly NSC-68, or we need"... It's not redo what we did but what are the implications for how we prepare for this ourselves? There is a bit of a contradiction in there, which may be something you can resolve for us. But, on the one hand, you want an

open educational exchange with China, for all the reasons you just said, but you also quote... And I agree with this, too, by the way. You quote Kennan on the need for offensive, not just defensive, but offensive political warfare, information warfare, so poking at the seams, the inconsistencies, the contradictions in the adversary's way of life.

Mike Green: The contradiction is this. This is the excuse Xi Jinping and other authoritarians used to shut down civil society and free academic learning and discourse, because it's all just part of an American campaign of offensive political warfare. This is a kind of tactical question, really. I don't think we ever figured it out in the Cold War, really. How do you take advantage of our open society, the attraction of our values, even within an authoritarian state, and therefore wanting to preserve an open exchange in academic and intellectual, rich interaction with China while at the same time engaging in political warfare, which we need to do? Do you have any sort of lessons from the Cold War or thoughts on the way forward?

Hal Brands: Well, the framing point here is that when Kennan and others thought about political warfare early in the Cold War, I think they were motivated chiefly by the idea that the Soviet Union certainly isn't going to hold back from trying to divide and weaken our society and pry us apart from our friends and allies, and so if we limit ourselves to purely defensive measures, that's a form of unilateral disarmament in this struggle. Since the struggle is really, hopefully, going to be waged using primarily means short of war, that's a part of the toolkit you just can't leave to the side in a competition like this. I think that's basically right today as well. I think it's fairly well established the Chinese have a pretty well-developed program of political warfare that they pursue vis-a-vis not just the United States but other democratic societies that's meant to make it harder for us to be an effective competitor. So I think we're going to have to do things in the same area.

Hal Brands: The point I would make, though, is that you don't always have to think of political warfare as the really sexy covert action, dangerous type stuff that it sometimes gets described as. So we did a lot of political warfare during the Cold War that frankly wasn't that effective, right? We would parachute Albanian exiles back into Albania to try to link up with the anti-Communist resistance there, and they all got killed because Kim Philby had infiltrated British and American intelligence service. We trained Tibetan guerillas to go fight against the Chinese communists and they pretty much all got killed as well. So those types of things weren't always the most effective forms of political warfare. Some of the most effective forms of political warfare could be things like finding ways of introducing unbiased information into an

otherwise closed information ecosystem. We used Radio Free Europe, for instance, to do this during the Cold War. There are parallels today that would come with finding ways of circumventing the Great Firewall and things like that. Political warfare can also be, you know, sort of a synonym for standing up for your own best values abroad.

Hal Brands: I mean, when the United States gets together with other democratic allies to sanction Chinese officials who are involved in doing terrible things to the Uighur population, that's a form of political warfare. It strikes at the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, particularly under Xi Jinping. But it's something that we ought to be doing simply to validate our own values as well, and so I think we need kind of a broad version or a broad vision of political warfare, one that is not entirely constituted by, sort of, sneaky and subversive acts. I think we just have to accept the tension as well. I don't think there's anything the United States can do, by the way, that would convince Xi Jinping that we are not trying to overthrow the Chinese Communist Party. It's not just Xi, by the way. Deng Xiaoping thought that the United States was trying to overthrow the Chinese Communist Party as well back in the 1980s when that was basically the last thing that we had in mind. So there is a degree of ingrained suspicion here that we're not going to be able to overcome.

Mike Green: So the political warfare, the offensive... It's unfortunate the word warfare goes with it, but the offensive tool that works best for us is our openness and just, as you said, getting rid of the firewalls, opening up information. I went to college during the Cold War, so I remember it. I ran our radio station, and we used to get the weekly world news from Radio Moscow, and they'd encourage us to play it. We'd play it with a laugh track. It was so ridiculous. It was propaganda, and we knew, and it was funny. It was like a drinking game.

Mike Green: After college, I took the Trans-Siberian Railroad from China through the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, which made for interesting security clearance interviews a few years later. The most effective piece of American political warfare I saw behind the Iron Curtain was outside the US Embassy in Warsaw, where they had a huge placard with Herblock cartoons making fun of Ronald Reagan and dozens and dozens of Poles just staring at it in amazement. "You mean you're allowed to make fun of your leader?" So I think that's what political warfare meant, probably what Kennan had in mind, too. Don't emulate the other side. Play to your own strengths, which is openness, information, challenging conventional wisdom, and all of that.

Mike Green: You have a whole chapter on the contest and the periphery, and there was a great... The Soviets and the Chinese had an advantage because,

for example, the fight in the Korean Peninsula or Vietnam was a continental Asian fight. They had interior lines. We had to go across the vast maritime space, and we ended up getting sucked into continental wars. The peripheral problems this time, with a few exceptions, are maritime. That's different, isn't it? It's South China Sea, it's East China Sea. It's increasingly not only the first but the second island chain. It's closer to home, and it's sort of more vital in the sense of American sea lanes and the, if you will, Anglo-American source of hegemony for 400 years. How do we think about these peripheral risks and which ones worry you, like Taiwan?

Mike Green: Riffing off what I just said, to me, it sort of says, "Worry more about the maritime periphery than the continental." But how do we think about these peripheral challenges? We're not looking at a direct US-China fight. It's about the periphery. It's about third states. It's about spheres of influence and all that. How do you think about it? What are the ones that worry you, and what does it mean that it's now increasingly maritime and, therefore, in our face?

Hal Brands: So I think there's maybe at least three ways of thinking about this issue, and so one area that I worry about is the one that you flagged, which is basically the maritime periphery of East Asia, right? You think a lot about East China Sea, South China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait as potential US-China flash points. In fact, those areas are so central to the competition that I don't know that we would even describe them as peripheral. I mean, that might be the core of this competition.

Hal Brands: East Asia might be the core in another way as well in that it's probably the most economically dynamic region of the world, or at least it has been for a while, and so it's not like fighting in Southeast Asia during the 1960s when that was the Third World, it was economically underdeveloped, and so on and so forth. It's a bit of a different situation. But, nonetheless, I think that's where the potential for direct conflict between the US and China is most severe because that's where our security commitments, or our ambiguous security commitments in the case of Taiwan, overlap most directly with things that China is increasingly defining as its own vital interests and indicating that it is very serious about pursuing.

Hal Brands: The second one would be, I think, kind of the Eurasian hinterland of China, and so one thing that we sometimes forget when we think about China is that it's a really big country that reaches really far into Eurasia, in fact, and Xi Jinping doesn't forget this. Remember he debuted the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia, and so there's certainly a realization, I think, in Chinese policy that China needs to be

thinking about its territorial hinterland as potentially an area to expand influence in the context of a US-China competition, maybe just because you want better access to and sort of overland access to resources coming from the Middle East, for instance, so that they're not subject to interdiction if they have to pass through the Strait of Malacca or something like that, but also because the Chinese have been talking more and more about trying to create, sort of, a Eurasian space that is oriented toward China economically and otherwise. So that might actually be a pretty good parallel for kind of the Cold War periphery.

Hal Brands: Then the third area is maybe the developing world or the developing regions writ large. So when we think particularly about technological competition, it seems fairly unlikely... I mean, it seemed more likely about three years ago that China is going to get some sort of technological hammer lock on key American allies in East Asia and Europe. Most of those countries have started throwing up firewalls against Chinese technological influence in one way or another. It's more plausible when you think about developing countries in Africa, in Central Asia, in Latin America, Southeast Asia, places where Chinese technology will be more attractive for price reasons above all else and where some of the security concerns are perhaps less keenly felt. So maybe that's a third area where you see peripheral conflict playing out in a US-China context.

Mike Green: That's a good opening for the other thing I wanted to ask you, which is, going back to your earlier comment, that we don't have to create institutions. The National Security Act created the NSC, the Pentagon, the intelligence communities, our alliances, the Bretton Woods system. We have everything. We created all of it. It's all there. It's all strong. The one we're not using, which may be as important as any of them, is the Bretton Woods system, is trade and finance as a tool of influence to prevent hegemonic rivals from displacing us. We're just not using it.

Mike Green: We've got all the necessary trade laws. Congress would give the administration trade promotion authority, but the administration doesn't want it because it doesn't want to suggest it's going to do TPP or trade agreements because they're controversial with the base. The politics are all gunked up. That is one tool we built in our toolkit at the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, and we're completely not using it. With the consequences being much bigger today, I would argue, than they were in the early Cold War, it's hard to draw a direct parallel to what that would be in the Cold War, but what do you think about the economic piece of all this?

Hal Brands: This is the single most disappointing aspect of American strategy over two administrations now. I think the Obama administration, for all the problems it had in dealing with China, recognized that you had to create a counterweight to Chinese economic influence. You had to create an alternative center of gravity in the region so that countries like Vietnam wouldn't just simply become totally dependent on the Chinese market. So this, of course, was the impetus for, the geopolitical impetus, at least, for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which obviously the Trump administration got out of after it proved to be a lightning rod in the 2016 campaign. The Biden administration has now said that's not going to get into the successor agreement to the TPP, CPTPP, and the Biden administration really hasn't given much indication of what it thinks can take the place of CPTPP in American policy. It's a huge handicap for us. I think the Chinese recognize it. They're trying to take advantage. They've now announced their intent to try to join CPTPP. We have some good allies, the Australians and the Japanese, who I think will see it as their responsibility to keep China out.

Hal Brands: How long they will be successful in doing that, I think, is an open question. But this is kind of the equivalent to... I think Kurt Campbell, Biden's Asia Czar, said "This is the equivalent of fighting with one hand or even both hands tied behind your back." It's a huge, gaping liability, and the problem, actually, isn't that trade is politically impossible in the United States. That's, I think, the superficial explanation for this. If you look at opinion polls, trade polls quite well. If you look at the way that the China issue itself has changed over the past five years, you could get the votes to put something like CPTPP through, I think. The problem is that it would take a big investment of the president's political capital, and because he has other priorities, it's an investment that he has chosen not to make. I hope very much that that's a decision that this administration will revisit sooner or later because I think we're going to regret it if we don't.

Mike Green: Well, the fact that our friend Kurt Campbell keeps saying that kind of thing and doesn't get fired I take as a sign of hope because I think they know. I think they know, and they're just trying to figure out the politics of when they'll prioritize it, but we pay a huge strategic price. My view on that one is we're a little bit lucky, special providence and all that. We have a very attractive economy for investment, especially high tech, and our economy's recovered better from COVID than many, and that's going to keep us deeply engaged with the most important economies in Asia. But that's for now, and China will get into TPP. They will if we don't make a move. It may not happen in two years or five years, but we can't keep dithering on this.

Mike Green: Two fun questions I wanted to ask you. You may not think they're fun, but this is what geeky history, poli sci, IR strategy nerds do. The first one, have we written the Long Telegram yet or NSC-68? Whose day are you going to make by saying that's it, that over the last two administrations, this was the NSC-68, the Long Telegram, the Iron Curtain speech? Have we done it yet? I don't see it, but who's in contention for that so far, or are we still waiting for that seminal strategic insight, or is it too obvious? You tell me.

Hal Brands: I think there's been some really good writing on the subject and by a number of people, but I think what made the Long Telegram the Long Telegram wasn't simply that it was sharp analysis. It was that it was seized upon by the US government and became a more or less consensus definition of what was driving the problem and, then with the X Article, where we were going over the long-term. I don't think we have that in two respects. One, I don't know that we have reached consensus on the source of our China problem, right? Is the source of our China problem sort of a classic realist tale where it's a rising power meets an established power and so there's conflict there? Is it something that's driven by the nature of the Chinese political system or, perhaps better said, the clash between the Chinese political system and an international order that the United States has built to reflect its own democratic values? Is it Xi Jinping? Is it more of a personalized thing? I think we haven't quite gotten a full answer to that question yet.

Hal Brands: The Trump administration took a run at it in some speeches and documents issued very late in its administration, but the Biden administration hasn't really given us that answer yet, and that leads to a second point of ambiguity, which we have not yet resolved, which is, you know, suppose we start competing much more effectively with China. What do we think happens next, right? What's the theory of how this results in a better status quo for the United States? Is the theory that we start competing more effectively, the Chinese are chastened, and so you get some sort of parallel to the 1970s era détente where the US and China are still competitors, but it's managed competition, vital interests are more or less respected, and it's something that is no longer threatening to touch off big war, and sort of that's the end game, right? It's competitive coexistence, as some folks have called it.

Hal Brands: Or if you think that the problem is more deeply rooted in the nature of the Chinese regime, does this mean that you have to do the Cold War style thing where you basically contain the malign expression of Chinese power until you get some sort of evolution within the Chinese system or you get some sort of drop-off in Chinese power and so

China is no longer so interested in destabilizing or able to destabilize the international system? I don't think we've answered those two questions, and until you answer those two questions, it's not clear to me that you can have a Long Telegram-, X Article-style consensus.

Mike Green: So the most interesting thing about Kennan's article then wasn't that he laid out a strategy but that he basically spotlighted the nature or the sources of Soviet behavior and made it clear this was a long struggle, right? We've seen Rush Doshi's book, *The Long Game*. Bates Gill has a new book on domestic sources of Chinese foreign policy, Jude Blanchette's done work, and Elizabeth Economy's book. People are starting to get there, I think, and starting to lay it out, and there's remarkable overlap. The differences are pretty subtle and sophisticated, so we're getting there. So the prize is still out there to be grabbed by someone, right?

Hal Brands: No, that's right. I think you're absolutely right about Kennan's article. It is 98% diagnosis and 2% prescription, and that's often forgotten. I didn't mean to imply that there aren't analysts tackling these questions. I mean, there are, and you mentioned a lot of the really good ones. I think where we lack clarity is not within the academic community. It's that the US government has not sort of publicly articulated its theory of success in this competition, and so that's more of the ambiguity that I was referring to because I would share your view that we're getting more and more good analysis of precisely these questions and that the differences are not as profound as one might think they are.

Mike Green: So last question, fantasy football. If you could put together a league of strategists, a couple people from the Cold War, to help us figure out the current problem, who'd be on your fantasy football team for strategy from the Cold War?

Hal Brands: I might go with the two great frenemies, Paul Nitze and George Kennan. That may be a cliched answer, but I think it's actually indicative of what good strategy requires. So Kennan was much more of the intellectual and the deep thinker. He thought a lot about grand strategy as grand strategy in the early Cold War. He was the leading Sovietologist in the United States, and he represents the kind of big think, long think you need to be effective in long-term competition. And I think he earned the reputation that he has to this day.

Hal Brands: Nitze was something that Kennan never was, which was bureaucratically effective, and Nitze was sort of a bulldog. So Nitze woke up every day thinking about how he could strengthen the United States and the West vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, even if it required

bludgeoning the mind of top government, as Dean Acheson put it, with respect to NSC-68 with a really ponderous and repetitive analysis of what the United States should be doing. That was what Nitze did, really, over the course of the Cold War, and he did it in different forms. His career is actually remarkable. He's there at the beginning of the Cold War in the late 1940s. He's there at the end of the Cold War with the INF Treaty in the late 1980s. But he's really an indication that strategy is aspirational in the sense that Kennan formulated it, but it's also deeply operational, and you need people who know how to get things done in government to make strategy work. I think Nitze was a good example of that.

Mike Green: That's a great answer. The other thing it really spotlights is this was not a constantly revolving cast. There were new people who came in and out, but there were people who were there from the beginning, who thought it through, who revisited it, who considered changes in the strategic context and the nature of the adversary, and I'm not sure we have that right now, to be honest. I would've put George Shultz on the list because no senior American foreign policy thinker in the postwar period understood, really understood, Asia and Asian alliances like Shultz, which is where the center of competition is, of course. But you look at the wise men who basically convinced Johnson we were losing in Vietnam. These were the early Cold Warriors brought back. There was a lot of reconvening and pulling back of the architects. We don't have that. Our politics have become so partisan, we tend to... There's a lot of forming of pickup teams, isn't there, as we try to form strategy these days?

Hal Brands: It's harder. I mean, Nitze was in Republican administrations and Democratic administrations. There are a few people who manage that today, but it's much, much harder. I mean, you could make the same point about somebody like Henry Kissinger, right, who makes his bones in the 1950s thinking about limited nuclear war, works sort of as a consultant for the Kennedy and Johnson administrations before going on to be national security advisor and secretary of state in Republican administrations.

Hal Brands: You mentioned Shultz, and the other reason I would put Shultz on this team is that not only did he understand Asia, but he was really one of the earliest American policymakers to understand the implications of the Information Revolution and how it was changing geopolitics. It's fascinating. He actually gives Gorbachev and Gorbachev's advisors seminars on the Information Revolution and what it means for command economies in the mid-1980s, and there's pretty good evidence that it affected how Gorbachev and his team thought about Perestroika and Glasnost. So Shultz, I think, he is perhaps... It's hard to

say that he's underrated because I think his reputation is quite good, but he must be one of if not the most important American policymakers during the Cold War, certainly during the late Cold War, and he's also a bridge to the post-Cold War in that respect.

Mike Green: I interviewed him at length for my last book, and I just found him fascinating. And Information Revolution, he was an economist. He understood economics. He was a very thoughtful and effective wielder of American values and democracy in our foreign policy. Anyway, we better stop, Hal, because we'll be doing fantasy football for strategists for hours. Maybe we'll have to do another podcast or bring together a couple colleagues to do that. But thanks very much. Congrats on *The Twilight Struggle*. Great book. It hits the bookshelves January 25th, right after this podcast, and encourage everyone to read it, and hope it gets translated broadly in Japanese and Korean and Chinese, too.

Hal Brands: Well, thank you, Mike. I really enjoyed the conversation.

Mike Green: Thanks.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening. For more on strategy and the Asia Program's work, visit the CSIS website at csis.org and click on the Asia Program page.

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