Dialogues on American Foreign Policy and World Affairs: A Conversation with Kurt Campbell

TRANSCRIPT

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- Daniel McKivergan, Vice President of Government Relations, Hudson Institute

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- Kurt Campbell, Chairman and CEO, The Asia Group
- Walter Russell Mead, Ravenel B. Curry III Distinguished Fellow in Strategy and Statesmanship, Hudson Institute

About Hudson Institute: Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, health care, technology, culture, and law.

Hudson seeks to guide public policy makers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings, and recommendations.

Please note: This transcript is based off a recording and mistranslations may appear in text. A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/1784-dialogues-on-american-foreign-policy-and-world-affairs-a-conversation-with-kurt-campbell32020
Dan McKivergan:

Good afternoon. Welcome to the Betsy and Walter Stern Conference Center here at Hudson Institute. I'm Dan McKivergan, vice president for government relations at Hudson, where our mission is to promote U.S. international leadership and global engagement for secure, free and prosperous future. We develop policy solutions by thinking about the future outside the limitations of conventional thinking. We are delighted to welcome Dr. Kurt Campbell to Hudson as the latest guest in our bipartisan speaker series, Dialogues and American Foreign Policy and World affairs. With Hudson Institutes, Ravenel B. Curry III Chair, Walter Russell Mead. Today's discussion is part of an ongoing series of dialogues we've held here at Hudson the last few years.

The series brings together leading form of policy experts from both parties to discuss international affairs and the security challenges facing the United States now and in the coming years. Videos and transcripts of past discussions around the Hudson website and if you get a chance to look, I think you'll find just as much agreement as disagreement among participants on some of the major foreign policy challenges facing the United States. Dr. Campbell, who is currently chairman and CEO of the Asia group, served in several senior government positions including assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs during the Obama administration, and deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asia in the Pacific.

He also served as a U.S. Navy reserve officer on surface ships, the joint staff, and in the chief of Naval operations strategic advisory unit. Recently, Dr. Campbell coauthored a foreign affairs essay entitled, Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist with China. With the former national security advisor to vice president Biden, Jake Sullivan, who I should also note is an alum of this series. In 2016, Dr. Campbell authored the book, The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia. He will of course be speaking with my Hudson colleague, Walter Russell Mead, who pends a must read weekly global view column in the Wall Street Journal on U.S. foreign policy. Please give a warm welcome to Dr. Campbell as I turn things over to Walter.

Walter Russell Mead:

Kurt, Thank you so much for coming. And again just to reiterate, this is a place where we really are interested in many different points of view, find points of conflict, points of consensus, points of enlightenment, which is sometimes the most interesting. And I am not really here to do a typical press, got you kind of interview. This is a conversation and really what we're interested in is finding out what you think, Kurt.

Kurt Campbell:

Great. Thank you.

Walter Russell Mead:

So I had a list of questions, but in the green room beforehand we were talking and I realized I should ask you about the Coronavirus.

Kurt Campbell:
Yeah.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

How serious is this Coronavirus and what kind of threat does it pose and how do we tell whether it's going to be a super event or just a passing?

**Kurt Campbell:**

Great. Well Walter, thank you very much and thanks to the folks here at Hudson. It's just, I haven't been here in a while. Just lovely facilities and really appreciate it. They have a really cool refrigerator in there. Any possible drink that you would want, they got. So appreciate the opportunity to be here. So as a firm that focuses most of our attention outward on Asia. We have been struggling with and engaging on the Coronavirus now at an in depth level for a couple of months. And I think the first thing that we have to say honestly is we don't know. There's so much that we do not know about the virus. We do not know fundamentally about its characteristics, how it's communicated, its lethality rate, its transmission rates.

Some of the things that we'll have to understand before we're able to fully comprehend its magnitude, we do not know. There are some indicators that should concern us. I don't think we've tested very effectively in the United States. We were given some time by the unbelievably draconian steps that the Chinese have taken. Walter, I'm not sure we used that time effectively. I think every day we're kind of uncertain about what to expect in terms of how it's spread in the United States, whether we're seeing community outbreaks and intense hives of activity. It's very clear that places like nursing homes will be at enormous risk in the period ahead. I personally believe that in all likelihood the next several months will lead to a fundamental slow down in the global economy.

That some of the linkages that a lot of the last couple of months has been about the nature of whether we would distance ourselves economically and politically from China. We're going to see shortages in a lot of areas, a lot of drugs, a lot of medical equipment that is manufactured in China. We'll see shortages, but not just from China and other parts of Asia more directly. So supply chains, people to people, communications back and forth. Those will be affected. In many respects, we were just saying, I think that what concerns me or what worries me is since the end of the cold war, we've had three big crises. We've had the 9/11 fundamental reorienting. We've had the global financial crisis in 2007, 2008, 2009, and I think this could be the third one.

But the truth though is that the political atmosphere right now is more like the 1930s in a divisive nationalistic. And it is causing countries to separate rather than basically working together. I think there are elements of this disease that require more coordination, financial coordination between global bankers and financial players, global health experts and more leadership on the part of the United States. I think the tendency among many of the major countries including China, Japan, the United States, South Korea, others is to hunker down right now and to try to manage this almost unilaterally and domestically. And I think that we will find that those approaches will be lacking.
Walter Russell Mead:

By the way, we will be taking questions at the end. Dr. Campbell has very kindly agreed to do that.

Kurt Campbell:

Just Kurt, if it's all right.

Walter Russell Mead:

Fine. I'm always so impressed when somebody actually went to grad school. But in any case, what you should do is email them to events@hudson.org, events@hudson.org and the folks here will look at the questions and figure out sort of what the audience as a whole really wants to know. And then we'll have a chance to go over that. So events@hudson.org. One of the things that strikes me is that some of the political separation between the U.S. and China that's been going on, has been associated really with the rise of Xi Jinping, to a kind of political position and power that we haven't seen anybody hold in China maybe since the death of Mao Zedong.

Kurt Campbell:

Yeah. Walter, it's a very good point. And when I was in government, I had the opportunity when vice president Biden invited then vice president Xi to come as a visitor to the United States. I went with him around the United States and got to see him up close for several days. And I remember at the time, there's a lot of hope that he would be... We tend to project on Chinese leaders at least in the last 20 or 30 years that they were going to be open and open minded. What are they going to do for market reforms? And I remember struck by several things. We had at that time, the two leaders of China Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao were both elderly and both had health issues and you could see it in the interactions with them.

I was very struck by how dynamic and vital Xi Jinping was. He stayed up late. We were at the hotel. He'd want to go to the bar for a couple of beers. He really felt extraordinarily confident in his perspectives, very clear about what he believed, did not listen very much to some of his aides, and was impatient. And in you will notice it's not very common with Chinese friends to describe them. I mean impatience is not a characteristic that you would normally attribute with a senior Chinese leader. A true believer, really believed in the communist party, in the role that the communist party would play. Deeply interested in infrastructure, would focus a lot when we were in airports and things didn't work.

If you want to get a sense, go to an American airport in the winter in the Midwest if you want to find carousels that don't quite work appropriately. So he was very focused on infrastructure, but as well when we had briefings on the economy, not as interested, not as focused easily, sort of a little bit distracted. But also if you watch the interaction of the people around him, a real sense that this guy was going to be in charge. And so even from that early period, I think we got an indication. And if you look at what he has done, Walter, one of the great, two of the great achievements of China over the last 30 years. One is the unbelievable, remarkable economic and commercial performance, lifting people out of poverty, dramatic innovation and production capabilities.
But also since you mentioned Mao Zedong, the Chinese leadership has taken pains to create inner lab, inner weaving and overlapping institutions that require leaders to consult, right? Working groups and leading groups and infrastructures within the standing committee and the politburo, and essentially what president Xi has done is disassembled all of those over the period of just several years, just remarkably. And so almost every major decision in China is taken by him and that is a major... Now, I think if you'd go back and ask Chinese interlocutors, would you prefer that? They would say no. But he has been very effective at doing that.

Walter Russell Mead:

Do you think this is an aberration that China is on this longterm, this kind of liberalizing opening path that we hoped it would take and that Xi Jinping for various reasons has temporarily reversed the movement? Or do you think that this represents a real potential that China for a very long time could move in this more authoritarian path?

Kurt Campbell:

I would probably say that those two extremes mask more complex realities. I think a better way to describe it is I'm more confident talking about its external behavior than I am about how the domestic society will evolve. I do believe that no matter who rules China as China's power grows, there will be a greater tendency to believe we matter. That's the thing about tributary kind of relationships and rebuilding the kind of respect and sorts of relationship China had with smaller States for most of the time. Right? I will say what president Xi and China has had done with societal controls, technology is unbelievable and remarkable. And what's also happened, you're asking about the Coronavirus. So like the saying in any challenge there is opportunity. Now, on the one hand, president Xi has put himself squarely in control, right? He said, I'm responsible, I'm doing this, which is risky.

But at the same time he's also taken steps to further centralize authorities and further take steps on surveillance alike and human control and movements in a way that's dramatic. I'm troubled by some of those developments, and right now it's hard to imagine those being reversed. I had this experience and I'll just say it. We all have friends that we've known a long time in various countries. I have a particular friend that I've known for about 40 years in China and we were having a walk outside a couple of months ago and I asked him a couple of questions and he said, Kurt, I can't talk about those issues anymore. We can't venture into those areas. And so much of the intelligency and the people that we normally interact with, their lives have changed fundamentally in terms of the kind of research and thinking that they can do. And I don't think they feel very much like that's going to change in the future.

Walter Russell Mead:

Does that point to a more difficult U.S. China political relationship?

Kurt Campbell:

Yes. I think, look, I think anyone who believes that we're going to be able to return to a kind of relationship in which a degree of competition and friction is absent, it is just not paying attention. So they're going to be extremely difficult. Even on things that we agree upon. Finding consensus or ways to go forward is going to be difficult. And I think sometimes I don't think
political leadership and senior advisers in foreign policy had been as accepting of friction as was going to be necessary. And it is always striking to me. Chinese interlocutors, very comfortable, often with friction where a lot of times in our interactions wanting very much to find areas of consensus and working together in harmony. And I'm afraid in some context, Chinese friends often would mistake that for weakness. And I think part of going forward is going to be degree of firmness and clarity about American strategic purposes and things that are important to us. Values, allies and alike.

Walter Russell Mead:

Which brings us to the question of how the American system is going to be able to manage what could be a kind of a longterm competition with China, and there's so many problems. We could become indifferent and not pay enough attention. We could become sort of in a way kind of hyper engaged in an ultra hawkish, ultra hostile fashion. Keeping the balance is very hard in a democracy like ours. But also in both parties now, I think one can see problems in wrapping their heads around what's going on in Asia and coming up with good policy alternatives.

Kurt Campbell:

I can't disagree, Walter. As you look at the period ahead, you're struck by a number of things. I think there probably is a wariness and a weariness about global engagement. And I think you see that on both sides of the political spectrum. And I think one of the great things that president Trump has been quite effective at is saying, we're going to get out of Afghanistan and a lot of the places in the Middle East, that's just sand and death and you wouldn't have thought that anyone could say that and kind of get away with it. But it's been, I think almost revelatory, how much that's been accepted by a certain group and it's, I think probably across the political spectrum. So I think part of this is some degree of let's attend to some issues closer to home. I think at the same time for us to be effective in Asia, it's much more than how many ships that you have and your military presence.

We do have a strong military set of capabilities. I think we're going to have to diversify and rethink our strategy, but to be effective in Asia is much more multifaceted, and it's all of society. It means a more capable diplomatic engagement. It means the hardest thing for both Democrats and Republicans is the dreaded T word, trade. We have to think about an outward open trade set of arrangements and agreements that are politically saleable in the United States, which I'm not clear that can happen within either party right now. There's clearly an elite in both parties that support certain aspects of trade, but the rank and file now in both the Republican and Democratic parties are questioning many elements of that. And I think the other thing that's clear about this period is that we are probably, and Walter, no one has written and thought about this better than or more than you have. We're probably in the middle of some sort of fundamental party reformations. Right?

And so the biggest debates about Asia policy right now are really not between the parties, but within them, right? They're engagers. They are people that you know that are very wary of trade agreements that think Asia has taken advantage of us. We've got to pull back. But I will say for us to be effective in Asia, the magnitude of the challenge commercially, economically, the nuance of diplomacy and the need to understand history is going to put an unbelievable set of burdens on the United States at a time that most of our training over the last 30 years and diplomacy has been either in the Middle East or the cold war in Europe. We've got more people
that could tell you how to drill a well in Helmand Province. It could tell you how to function effectively in Asia.

**Walter Russell Mead:**
Yeah.

**Kurt Campbell:**
Now people are rushing to try to think and understand Asia, but maybe with not as much historical knowledge and experience and bringing with them analogies from Syria that may not be as effective in understanding how Asia functions. So I think the challenge is going to be enormous. And I think the worry is that that one of the ways is that you rally around the idea that the next great challenge to the United States comes from China, right? And it's a strategic and it's a military challenge. I'm not sure that... I think there are going to be elements in both parties right now that will resist that. I think some will resist it for commercial purposes, because the enormous potentials, others will resist it for fear that using that as a convening principle will have terrible consequences for other bigger issues like climate change.

**Walter Russell Mead:**
Right.

**Kurt Campbell:**
Or maybe even things associated with their own domestic liberties.

**Walter Russell Mead:**
Well, it's interesting when you think about the kinds of things America or different Americans might want from China. It's actually a very long list. Human rights, climate change.

**Kurt Campbell:**
It really is everything actually.

**Walter Russell Mead:**
Yeah, trade.

**Kurt Campbell:**
Iran, North Korea, proliferation.

**Walter Russell Mead:**
We have a long shopping list.

**Kurt Campbell:**
On North Korea proliferation.
Walter Russell Mead:

Right. So we have a long shopping list and I'm not quite sure what we have on the offer list. What are we prepared to... If China were to adopt a climate policy that people liked more, does that mean you would overlook their human rights violations or how does that work?

Kurt Campbell:

But Walter, I would also say that I like the way you put it, we have long shopping list, but that hearkens back to a period where there was an enormous power disparity between the United States and China and the United States would go to China and say, “These are all the issues I want you... hierarchy, you going to work on this issue, this issue, this issue.” I think over time the Chinese are going to be like, "Thank you for your issues, but we're not interested. We have our own set of concerns about you." And so I think that interplay is likely to be narrower and much more challenging going forward.

And I also think that probably the thing about my... When you work in government you have experiences. There are always some things that come through that are almost crystalline for me after you know, decades of experience working on diplomacy with Chinese interlocutors. It was always surprising to me the level of distrust fundamentally not, not professed distrust but real distrust of our motives and our goals and ambitions, right? And probably there are reasons in certain... But there are other times where the United States is trying to find areas of common ground. But I believe that those layers of distress have always been there and for them the last four or five years had been deeply clarifying, right?

Walter Russell Mead:

Yeah. I think there is a sense in which American society, whatever individual Americans may be, is fundamentally liberal. It looks toward win-win. And you kind of progress in American society in a career by figuring out how to have a relationship with someone who is different from you and looking for common ground and building coalitions. And I think maybe Russia and China culture may be more realist in some ways that there's less of a confidence, there is a win-win solution where that people function that way. This was Kennan's construct for why US negotiators were having such a hard time with the Russians. He said basically the problem is not that these people are communists, it is that they are Russian and they approach the world in a very different way.

Kurt Campbell:

I'm not sure. It's an interesting theory. It's hard to measure. I actually think that communist training in ideology is frankly more important than we realize that the correlation of forces and winners and losers is actually something that is common. I tend to disagree with too many comparisons between Russia and China and try not to too big, basically put them in the same basket because they're so different. But at the same time, I find that most discussions with Chinese interlocutors come down to very complex negotiations where there's almost an instantaneous search on both sides for leverage.
Walter Russell Mead:

If president Trump is reelected, what do you think American policy in Asia would look like in a second Trump term?

Kurt Campbell:

Well, I respectfully... I'm not sure there is such a thing as Trump policy, because. No, no because what is most important is to be able on a moment's notice to make a decision based on whatever you feel like. And so it policy in some ways removes your maneuver room and you want to be able to at a moment's notice, do whatever you need to do with North Korea. And so you don't really want those encumbering policy positions or paid [inaudible 00:00:25:39].

Walter Russell Mead:

And you don't want to be predictable.

Kurt Campbell:

I think that's probably right. I would say my larger worry... I believe that the traditional Republican establishment, these guys are like [Ronan 00:04:57], right? Highly skilled, committed to certain international principles. Alliances, partnerships, human rights, values. And I think a group of people have worked unbelievably effectively behind the scenes to position the president in a number of ways, to basically not abandon our allies. To try to find some arenas of common pursued. But I think if he's reelected, it's not impossible. We'll find a situation where the president will feel like his true views can come out and that he can basically finally take steps that he would want to take.

Walter Russell Mead:

And in Asia policy, what do you think those might mean?

Kurt Campbell:

I would say that the greatest achievement of American foreign policy has been in Asia for the last 50 years. Now there are some that will say, "No Europe." But I would say what we've accomplished in terms of prosperity, spread of democracy, taking people out of poverty, you go down the list and the American strategic position in Asia. If you look carefully at what the president has said and what the ads he's taken out in the newspapers, what he's tweeted over a 40 year period, he has a very different view of Asian.

He would basically argue that most of these countries have taken advantage of the United States and that our alliances are burdensome and that we need much tougher trade arrangements and the like. And so my concern would be that we're going to have very difficult hosting support negotiations with both Japan and South Korea and the positions that we've taken at least publicly put these democratic states and the leaders of them in a very difficult set of positions. And I think for the president it might be win-win if it's, "Yes, we're going to pay these absorbent rates." Great, but if not we're going to pull our forces out. And he's threatened about it and talked about it. I don't think these are idle threats. I think that is where he really believes he is.
I think he might want to try some stuff with North Korea. I think the big mystery, the interesting thing really, Walter is on China and on the one hand he has a deeply abiding respect for president Xi, but probably for the wrong reasons because he's extraordinarily effective autocrat, right? And how he treats press and his political adversaries and for remarkable economic performance and stuff. I think he envies some of that, but at the same time, the real deep state in the US government is not these guys at the CDC who are, whatever about saying, "Mr. President, we should do this differently." There is a very substantial effort now in the US government that really believes that China is the next threat. And I think they are wary of the president. They're uncertain where he really aligns. Like, "Is he going to back Taiwan?"

Occasionally, when the president just speaks and he starts talking about Hong Kong sounds a little bit more like a Chinese leader than an American one. And so I think they are wary of that, but that group at the National Security Council, the Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense has grown stronger over time. And so I'm not really sure how that will play out, but I do believe some of our alliances will be under greater stress and strain. And here you've really got to hand the leader that has really figured out how to manage the unpredictability of President Trump has been Prime Minister [inaudible 00:29:55] very effectively managing them.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Well. I should ask you a question that would be of interest maybe to some people around here. What advice would you have for new American ambassador to Japan? What would you suggest that he say and do?

**Kurt Campbell:**

So look guys, the truth is there are a number of elements that president Trump had brought that I am very impressed by. So what I really like is deep personal engagement with the leaders. I've been struck with the all the presidents that I've worked with, Republican and Democrat, like you'd get maybe an hour meeting and maybe a quick lunch, and maybe a call occasionally and you'd be thankful. You'd think your White House overseers for the blessed opportunity, right? And the president has these long leisurely engagements with leaders and it's deeply important to show these leaders respect and it's not just [inaudible 00:30:57], many leaders mostly in Asia, less in Europe.

But I think I would like very much to see whoever's elected, if there will be I hope a president at some point that will follow president Trump. My expectation will be-

**Walter Russell Mead:**

That'd be the fourth or fifth?

**Kurt Campbell:**

... oh, I don't know. My expectation will be that we're going to have to have a much deeper engaged diplomacy with Asia. One of the things that almost all... I talked to my friend Mike Green and we would compare notes. We would always get nervous right before big visits of American leaders to Asia because they're these long flights and brutal time changes. And invariably as you'd be in these meetings, you need to be preparing and you'd be working for
months in advance. You'd set these meetings in the White House and then a White House advisor would say, "Look, you know, we're going to advise the president, we should cancel this because of X or Y. There's going to be this vote." And you would have to really take a breath and try to restrain yourself from leaping across the table and saying, "You can't do this, it'll undermine everything we... kind of calmly explain.

Usually, the judgment about going would prevail. Walter, we just do not really understand what's going to be required. A much more intense diplomacy, much greater focus and the administration has done some really important stuff on infrastructure. I commend them on that. If I were the ambassador to Japan, I would try... To be honest, I would try to continue about everything else that's been started. So the US-Japan relationship is in a better place today than at any other period over the last 30 years. And so I would just basically say keep it going. Japan is a critical ally. I'd like to see more educational exchange. More people to people, more diet members, all of that stuff. But overall at a strategic level of alignment, India, Japan, Australia, Vietnam, these are countries that we are in closer alignment with working more carefully with.

Walter Russell Mead:

You talked a little bit about some of the views of President Trump that might complicate a second Trump term. I look at Asia sometimes and I do wonder as we were talking before, this looks like a hard problem for a lot of Democrats to work with compared to say the cold war. Not that I'm suggesting we're in cold war, but in Europe you were talking about by and large a coalition of democracies, you were talking about building institutions, you were using human rights and other things as court [inaudible 00:34:00] and that was an easy set of alliances. Eleanor Roosevelt could sign on to that approach, although she had her qualms. Asia, when you look at a coalition that's going to include, yes, Australia, Japan, but, but also Vietnam and you have to think about Thailand and Myanmar and other countries, Philippines. How does the Democratic party prepare itself or carry out the kind of longterm sustained engagement in Asia that may force people to do some uncomfortable things?

Kurt Campbell:

So I look Walter, it's a very good question and you see very general bromide like statements about we're going to work with our allies and American values are important and we want American economic engagement but not use the word trade. I think what you will see is that there appear to be on the surface some areas of country convergence for Democrats and Republicans. Tougher policy on China, probably agreement on more military focus. I think taking a hard line on certain aspects of technology like Huawei. I think you're going to find some areas of overlap, but then deeper than that, what fundamentally technology policy be? How should we work with our allies more generally? What should our strategy be militarily?

Someone argued that military primacy in Asia is essential and others would say, "No frankly deterns." And the ability to exact devastating damage on the conflict is enough. Those are two very different perspectives. And I think many of the foundational questions have not been debated, but largely it's because our politics are so disoriented. Like these are third and fourth order questions because mostly people are struggling with what's the role of the free press, what's the nature of healthcare? Some basic issues that are more central to have Democrats think about themselves.
Walter Russell Mead:

Yeah. So to some degree, yes I think in both parties a lot of Americans are tired of the world and would like to think less about it and think more about the US.

Kurt Campbell:

It's not so much that they're tired of the world, but they're tired of certain thinking about Afghanistan and Syria and Iraq. They're interested in certain aspects of the world that, Asia, fantastic culture, really interesting areas of innovation. I don't think people are tired of that, but the kinds of investments that people worry are not giving us a return and are causing us to be tied down and no real clear sense of exit strategies. I think that's what people are anxious about.

Walter Russell Mead:

In a few minutes, I'm going to open this to questions from the floor through our email moderators, but I...

Kurt Campbell:

There's a group of people outside quickly going through them.

Walter Russell Mead:

What they do is they check... Right. They check your social credit score and that determines the ranking of your question. Just so you'll know, but remember it's events@hudson.org if you'd like to register a question. Moving over to India, I mean, this is a country, if you think at all about Asia, the Indo-Pacific. India clearly looms as a country that could have nuclear power that will soon have a population larger than China's. It seems to be moving toward a closer alignment with the US but somehow none of that looks. The more you know about India, the less simple at all looks.

Kurt Campbell:

Yeah, very good point, Walter. Look, first of all, I do not think there's a relationship that's more important for the United States to invest in over the course of the next 10 to 15 years than India. Unbelievably important, it's going to be much more important for our domestic politics too and extraordinarily complex. So if you look carefully, who are the leaders that if you asked president Obama and president Trump, he'd like to be best. What leaders are in that category? Only one I think Prime Minister Modi. Prime Minister Modi had fantastic engagements with President Obama and equally interesting close partnership with president Trump.

I think that's an indication of how effective ODI is as a leader and his desire position strategically the United States in India more closely going forward. But the impediments to deeper fundamental co-operation are there. India's relationship with Russia, its relationship with Iran, its differences of view, not with the Trump administration but with others on climate change. It wants a nuanced set of policies from the United States on China. It wants us to be very clear about the challenges that China presents, but not as overt and unsettled about it as sometimes Americans are.
So they're expecting a lot from us in terms of how we would present ourselves and how we would conduct, but they also want to be treated, I think at the core, again, this is something that we need to respect. The core of what India wants is to be treated as a great nation. Not as an exception, not as like we're going to let you have nuclear weapons. But as one of the things that Scooter helped do when he was at the White House is helping guide this relationship as a strategic relationship.

And president Trump has done that. He's treated... As I think president Obama did as well, but I think president Trump really understands India as a great nation, as a profoundly impressive civilization. And I think deep down I experienced a sense sometimes when I sat with Indian interlocutors that they were somewhat jealous of the treatment that American senior interlocutors gave Chinese leaders and wondered, "Why aren't we getting the same kind of treatment?" And I think over time, that gap, that difference has disappeared and we're going to see a much more fulsome embrace between the United States and India. And I think that will go a long way in helping ease some of these other difficulties, intentions.

Walter Russell Mead:

But on the other side, some of things like the citizenship law in India and some elements of the Hindu nationalist program, there've been a lot of repression of Christians and in parts of India could cause real... Could make that state to state relationship more complicated. It that something that worries you?

Kurt Campbell:

I mean the values proposition is going to be critical going forward. And I think both countries need to understand that at the core of how we engage one another is respect for minorities, institutions, free press, all of those things are going to be critical. And I do worry sometimes that some of those issues are lost on both sides.

Walter Russell Mead:

Now, I haven't asked you what I personally think is the hardest question in Asia policy, where there are a lot of hard questions, and that is North Korea. I mean, just from where I look at it, it looks to me there's no way that North Korea is ever going to give up its nuclear weapons. But it seems very hard to imagine how do we all live with that? Am I right about this? What's the path forward on this North Korea issue that just never goes away?

Kurt Campbell:

Walter, with respect, I have a slightly different view.

Walter Russell Mead:

I hope it's more hopeful.

Kurt Campbell:

So, first of all, I mean, I would say, having worked on North Korea, had some secret engagements, others with them for about 25 years. I have, and this is not an exaggeration, I
have an unerring record, literally, unblemished record of complete failure in predicting what's going to happen next or how things are going to play out with North Korea. I mean it is literally a shocking testament to incompetence, like to be able to-

**Walter Russell Mead:**
Well, consistency is hard to achieve.

**Kurt Campbell:**
I know it's hard in this world. So when I thought certain things would work, they didn't and vice-versa and what they would do. I mean, at the core I worked with a group of people in the State Department had quietly believed that embedding North Korea in a series of intricate, like you do these two small things and we'll do those small things really was the best way forward, right?

**Walter Russell Mead:**
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Kurt Campbell:**
I don't think any fundamentally believed that the North Koreans would give up nuclear weapons. But while they were busy doing these things and we were providing food assistance and the like, they were not doing other things, right?

I was probably of the view that certain aspects of our North Korean strategy, like how you measure the success of your North Korean strategy matters. Were we able to work closely with Japan and South Korea on certain things? Did we close down certain elements of sanctions on North Korea? Did we limit certain aspects of their engagement globally? All those answers I would say, generally yes. But ultimately, North Korea has been able to develop nuclear capabilities and delivery mechanisms that are considered to be threatening more generally.

Now how profoundly threatening they are and whether that ultimately leads to a profoundly different kind of relationship, whether has North Korea established a deterrent relationship with the United States. I would say that because North Korea has tens of thousands, probably hundreds of thousands of artillery troops just across the border and there are tens of thousands of Americans that live in Seoul, we are already in a situation that could best be described as deterrent.

I think, again, the achievement of what President Trump has managed to do is, Walter, create the precedent of the two leaders sitting down together. I think Democrats really thought about that at certain times, but would never do so, for fear that the Republican would attack anyone who decided. And now, that's part of what we're doing more generally.

I think the key is, the most difficult thing is if you're doing Asia policy, you cannot let the issue overwhelm you. And what's happened for decades in the position that I held, the Assistant Secretary, is that the person who held that position had difficulty developing a regional strategy, because he or she, he, they're all he, were consumed by specific issues. They were consumed by North Korea policy. They were consumed earlier by Cambodia or Indonesia, very singular issues. When at the core, to be effective in Asia, you've got to have a multifaceted strategy, as
many components to it, and you cannot let yourself be completely, to become the Assistant Secretary of North Korea.

I realize, as I look back, that's not a very good answer. It's not a very good answer to your question. But the truth is, I remember, I said this once, I never get credit for it, but really, North Korea is the land of lousy options. And that's all true.

Walter Russell Mead:

Yep. Yep. No, that ... I think it's not just you that has an unbroken record of failure. I'm not sure the American policy has a lot to point to.

Kurt Campbell:

Yeah, there's a great story. When President Trump had his meeting in Vietnam, half the team, the pilots and others were in frolicking, playing Marco Polo in the pool and having a great time, relaxing in the sun in Hanoi. And literally the call came, "We're leaving in two hours," had to get out, get packed and just rush to the airport, deeply unpredictable in terms of what played out.

I think the ability to do that made sense, but the lack of planning that went into it, that is worrisome. It's not clear we're going to have those opportunities in the future. But if we do, we're going to have to do it in a way that we have much more groundwork.

Walter Russell Mead:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, let's shift to audience questions. We've got a couple that I think we can group here on economic engagement and TPP. Do you think a democratic administration would consider rejoining? Is there any hope for TPP? Is there any substitute for TPP? Where are we?

Kurt Campbell:

It's a great question. My sense is that it would be very difficult. So I think there's a small group of people at the top of the Democratic Party that would say, "Let's try this again." Right? But I think we would be in a just a profound minority. That would be my sense.

And I remember. In 2016, I remember someone called me and said, "Look, there's going to be a platform meeting." Someone very senior said, "Can you go and talk about the importance of TPP?" I thought, "God, what an honor. What a great thing to do." And I go there. And as I'm walking in the room, people are yelling and screaming. And I'm thinking, "What are they yelling and screaming about it?" I realize it's me and literally someone threw a shoe. This is the sense of what goes on in the rank-and-file in the Democratic Party about trade.

So I think it would be difficult, Walter.

Walter Russell Mead:

If they're throwing shoes, that's usually-
Yeah, I mean, but that's the party kind of developing and hearing and stuff like that. But I do not think we have enough understanding and rank-and-file support. So I think it would be difficult.

There has been talk about resurrecting some elements of that and technology or online stuff. I think that in all likelihood that would be challenging. Japan clearly hopes. They've kept it alive. It's like an ember of fire burning, just kind of fanning that little flame in the hope that we'll come back at the last minute. And I believe it would send a profound message, a very deep message and engagement and purpose. But I think it would be hard politically. And I think many political leaders on the Democratic Party side would say no.

But again, this is something where I think that whoever, if the next president, taking clear steps and not calculating in the wind and stuff. We could've had TPP if we'd moved earlier and not wait until the very last.

Walter Russell Mead:

What do you think the US and the free world can and should do to stop China's Muslim persecution and collective incarceration?

Kurt Campbell:

Well, first I will say, I do believe some of the statements that Secretary Pompeo has made. He's been courageous. He's spoken clearly about these issues. He's tried. The key will be Walter, is that it can't be seen as simply an element of American counterstrategy. It has to be part of a larger.

So the fact that we talk about it here but not in other places is problematic. The contrast between China and Saudi Arabia could not be clearer. So I worry a little bit about that. Ultimately for it to be effective, it has to be taken up by a larger group of nations, and it has to be a subject of dialogue with Chinese interlocutors, and it has to include states from the Middle East who've been remarkably reluctant to comment on this in any way or in any fashion. And that's problematic. Well, it's problematic.

Walter Russell Mead:

Here's a question saying that with the Coronavirus outbreak, there's been some criticism inside China of Xi Jinping and of the, certainly the early responses and maybe some of the others. Is Xi Jinping in trouble because of this? Do you think there could be political consequences in China of the epidemic?

Kurt Campbell:

There have been some areas of speculation that the economic performance for the first quarter will be down dramatically. Already the figures from the fourth quarter are worrisome and there are likely to be major consequences in China. So those are derivative, Walter, of the Coronavirus set of circumstances.

But right now we see no real sign of political opposition to Xi Jinping. There are some that say, "No, no, there are people that he's got to maneuver within the Standing Committee." I don't personally see any signs of that. I think he is a person clearly in control. However, in China the
risk is always when you're completely in control that you're responsible, sort of a letter to Vice President Pence. So he's taken the mantle on that I've got this and this is, this, I'm going to grind this down no matter what.

I do think the global economic consequences of the Coronavirus are probably deeper and more profound than we realize. Our steps to date, like the fact that the Fed voted, took these steps this morning, I think probably necessary, but at the same time that is not going to cover up for inadequate public health response. And if you said nice things. If you were going to write a playbook about how not to manage this crisis today, probably the Trump Administration has followed it pretty carefully.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Do you think that the information that we're getting from China about the Coronavirus is reasonably accurate or dead on accurate? Or do you think we just don't know?

**Kurt Campbell:**

I think the truth is we don't know. But it's troubling, our initial steps on both sides. You would want much more scientific exchange, not just with the WHO, but with American scientists. And a lot of those exchanges have been restricted.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Right.

**Kurt Campbell:**

And so the true answer is we do not know. And I'm not sure the Chinese know either. But clearly secrecy in an attempt to block certain kinds of information from being presented to the United States, and I'm afraid indicating that the worst is over. I do not think we know that is the case in China. And I think sending people back to work too early in situations where there's a lot of community interaction, I think that's problematic. And that's what we're seeing in China. And I think that could be rushed and we could see a second wave.

So there's this constant discussion about have we reached peak and on the down slope? And I don't think we know. We just, we don't have enough information.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

And I suppose it would be, if there were a second wave and it was seen that somehow the government had made the call that created the second wave, that would be a damaging ...

**Kurt Campbell:**

Yeah.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Thing. As a main architect of what people call the Pivot to Asia, which changed its name a number of times.
Kurt Campbell:
People hate that name.

Walter Russell Mead:
I know. I've never quite understood why, but they do.

Kurt Campbell:
It's visceral.

Walter Russell Mead:
How do you compare what Obama did and what Trump is doing in Asia, China, and what are the key aspects that you are most unsatisfied with how Trump's handling China?

Kurt Campbell:
So I got to tell you. This is a funny story. So the bitter fights over ... When you're in government, you cannot believe how much time you spend on really these little petty fights. And then you leave it and you're like, "God, what was I doing?" But the positioning. So Clinton and our team, we like the word pivot, and I think President Obama and his team or the people around liked the term rebalance. And I actually think rebalance is probably a better ... I think it suggests a more careful apportion of your attentions in time.

I think the way we had thought about the world was like a basketball player that could move his foot. You'd have one stable foot that would kind of move between regions more generally. But most of the time in government when you roll out a major policy, 99 times out of 100, you present it, it fails and disappears, and you're trying to point people to it and they don't even know what you're talking to them.

But one time that you do something and it's huge, then usually the things that you did not anticipate or didn't think of in advance. So when we thought of this concept of the pivot, it took off. And then the things that we did not think more carefully about what, like explaining the whole goal is to work with Europeans on Asia more, not to leave Europe and that ... And I've got to blame myself for not being as ...

Walter Russell Mead:
They have, I think, over learned that lesson.

Kurt Campbell:
Yeah. But I just ... So I don't think that the presentation of it, the diploma was very effective, but the critique I would say is, I think much of what we tried to lay out was aspirational. But this is not going to be one administration. It's going to be many administrations that are going to have to focus on this.

My biggest critique of the Trump Administration is that I believe administrations are strongest when they acknowledge that they're building on the successes and recovering from the failures
of previous administrations, and that realizing that this endeavor is primarily, primarily bipartisan. There's been huge bitter controversies in other parts of the world, but not as much in Asia, and that we have largely been able to talk about working together.

Some of my closest friends are people that I respect the most, that have worked in other administrations and that we've been able to say, look, we're strengthening alliances, figuring out how to engage with China, finding areas of common purpose, supporting aid, investment, all those things, trade, you name it. I think what is troubling when I sit down with senior leaders in the administration is the visceral hatred they have of what's come before them. And it's not just ... It's primarily Obama, but it's also President Bush as well sometimes.

And I think castigating that bilateral experience is a problem. And I would recommend against it. And I know that's hard and I recognize the President's proclivities, but in fact the greatest strength of America in Asia is that despite the changes, it has been relatively consistent over a 60 year period. And I would like to see that the case. And in fact, much of what President Trump has done in Asia, much in terms of the Indo-Pacific strategy is very similar to what previous administrations have done, despite protestations, "No, no. We've completely remade the wheel."

Walter Russell Mead:

All right, well listen, on that note, I think we'll close. Kurt has been very generous with his time. He does have another meeting he needs to get to, so he will not be able to stay after.

Kurt Campbell:

Thank you all very much.

Walter Russell Mead:

I'd appreciate it if you could let me make sure he gets out. Thank you, Kurt. I hope to see you again.

Kurt Campbell:

It was so nice. Thank you Walter.