Dialogues on American Foreign Policy and World Affairs: A Conversation with U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy

Discussion

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TRANSCRIPT

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WALTER RUSSELL MEAD: Hi. Good morning, everyone. And, uh, uh, good morning, too, to all the people that are watching us over, uh, uh, C-SPAN and other, um, electronic means of communication. Very, very happy on behalf of Hudson Institute to welcome Senator Chris Murphy from Connecticut, uh, to join us in a series of dialogues that we’ve been having here at Hudson over the last few years with a range of policymakers, um, uh, and important contributors to the American foreign policy debate from both parties, from many different points of view. Um, this is partly out of Hudson’s commitment to serious intellectual engagement over serious questions. It also reflects my own view as an analyst of American foreign policy that, um, that if you look at the history of American foreign policy, often our policy works best when you have many voices with different points of view. And out of that sometimes contentious series of exchanges, emerges ideas, compromises, directions that no single American school of thought might have come up with on its own. Um, if you think about it, that’s a little bit the way our constitution worked. Jefferson hated the constitution. Hamilton thought there were terrible compromises. Franklin wasn’t all that pleased with it. The Constitution, as it came out, was maybe a bit better than any of the Founding Father-- than it would’ve done if any of the Founding Fathers had been able just to write was in their own head. So in that spirit, I hope we’re going to have an interesting, uh, conversation today. What I plan to do is to begin by, uh, exploring with Senator Murphy's, uh, series of ideas. A lot of them are related to a very interesting article he has recently published in The Atlantic magazine. And I want to look at some i-- areas where I think his thoughts and those of a lot of people around Hudson might overlap, some places where I think there's some tension between the ideas that he was expressing and things that you might hear around here, and then some places where I just want to press him a little bit further and find out a bit more clearly what he really thinks. Beyond that, uh, we will-- he's very, uh, graciously agreed to accept questions from the audience. We're going to do that in the form of asking you to write a question down. Our staff will then collate them and try to put them together. Our goal here is to make sure that the audience time, uh, is used in the most efficient way possible, reflecting the, the questions that, that seem to have the widest interest among you. So with no further ado, we'll get started. And, uh, it's wonderful to be here and to be with you, Senator.

SEN. MURPHY: Thank you very much for having me. I'm looking forward to it.

MEAD: Okay, well, um, as I read your article and looked at some other things that you have been talking about over the, over the years, um, one thing that really struck me was that you seem to have a sense of concern both about a new authoritarianism and maybe about China and Russia's role in promoting this that has begun, I think, in both parties, and both on the left and the right, to have, uh, more salience in American foreign policy conversations. Um, how do you see this new authoritarianism as a challenge to the United States or to our values and security?

SEN. MURPHY: Well, uh, thank you very much again for having me here. Really look forward to the conversation, uh, and, um, I'd maybe refer back to your opening remarks in which you referenced the founding of our nation. I, I still believe that this is an experiment. I still think that the whole concept of democracy as a means by which to run a country is unnatural, in the sense that we don't really run anything else that's important to us in our lives through democratic vote, right, whether it be our family or our workplace. Um, we tend to think there are other governance structures that make more sense for other things that are critical to us. And
so I, um, I think we have to a sense of that fragility and understand where the threats, uh, to our experiment come. And in, uh, so far as, uh, Vladimir Putin has sort of made his model of governance more attractive to those around his periphery, has made people from Erdoğan to Orban start to think about sort of slow, sly ways to transition, uh, democracies, uh, to something that looks more, more like autocracy. Or China's a-ability now to export the tools of autocratic rule, um, many of them technological tools to others who may want to pick them up. Um, I think we've got to see these threats as very, very real. I think we also have to accept that, um, the more democracies there are around the world, the safer American interests probably are. It's a little bit harder for democracies to go to war with each other, dragging the United States in. Harder for terrorists to organize, uh, in a democracy. And so we should be in the business of protecting ourselves, um, from tools and models that may ultimately find, um, refuge on American soil. But we should also just recognize that the, uh, advancement of democratic interests, uh, also tends to avoid the United States having to be embroiled in controversies and conflicts overseas. And, uh, so my, you know, point in The Atlantic piece is that "Well, you know, you are certainly going to get a democratic president who is going to be, you know, skeptical about, um, large-scale military operations overseas. I don't want [laughter], um, my party, and I don't want m-my party's, um, foreign policy platform in 2020, uh, to be about retreat from the global stage. I want us to be involved in the conversation, engaged in the conversation about, um, how to see the threats, how to see-- how to see how different they are than what they might've been 50 years ago, um, but still have a strategy to confront them, uh, outside of the confines of the United States.

MEAD: Well, this struck me, uh, as one of the real points of-- difference in American politics as a whole and maybe points of similarity that is a bit more bipartisan than people understand is that, uh, there's probab-- in the public-at-large, there's a certain sense that maybe there's less reason to-- for the United States to be globally engaged than in the past. But on the other hand, many people in the world of foreign policy-- looking, I think, specifically at China and Russia, uh, worry that there may, in fact, be more dangers to American interests and security than in the very recent past. Um, and so you're getting this debate in both parties to some degree, and a very strong and, and lively debate, over whether the-- America is-- gets-- is safer by pulling back or by staying engaged and maybe, in some cases, even deepening that engagement. How do you think about this?

SEN. MURPHY: I think we have no choice but to be deeply engaged. Uh, I mean, it's, it's, it's so trite to say it today, but [laughter] the, the world doesn't stop at our borders any longer. Our economic interests, uh, clearly, are now global. The ability to-- uh, for information to flow across borders and for, uh, other nations to use fairly low-cost mechanisms to try to mess with us here in the United States—

MEAD: Mm-hmm.

SEN. MURPHY: --outside of the projection of military forces, um, more menacing than ever before. Uh, and so I, I, I think if we are serious about protecting America, uh, uh, uh, then we have to be globally engaged. Now that doesn't mean that you, um, that, that your endgame here is to, um, is to defeat [laughter] your adversaries or, or your contestants abroad. I mean, ultimately, I, I do think that if we can project and portray strength to, uh, both Russia and China, then it may be that there's a better chance that they will decide to amend their either political or economic behaviors to a standard that is much more in-line with American interests. But, uh, we simply don't have the capacities to meet them where they are today. And this is what I write about in my piece, whether it be the way in which China is, um, mid-wifing, uh, transformative
technologies and delivering them to the world or the way that Russia is using corruption and bribery and information propaganda, uh, to try to influence its neighborhood. Um, today, we simply aren’t really having any, even, meaningful conversation in Congress about how to create capacities in our foreign policy toolkit that would be able to at least countenance what they’re doing, never mind actually best them in the spheres that, right now, they are operating without much significant pushback from the United States.

MEAD: This in, in some ways, uh, points, I think-- you know, gets at something a lot of observers talk about, which is that, uh, Congress seems to have-- you know, of, of the three branches of government, Congress is the one that seems to have the hardest time shaping policy, and that’s regardless of party, I think. But in, in-- with the relative weakness of Congress, you know, in a sense, by default, both the executive and the judicial branches have become much more important in the country so that, for many-- I think, you know, you’ve got a lot of people in this country now who think that the-- a Congressional election’s important because it affects the Supreme Court.

SEN. MURPHY: Right.

MEAD: Um, and that’s, uh-- how does Congress recapture its momentum in foreign policy? Is it the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that needs to step up? Does Congress need institutional resources? A rethink? What’s-- what, what can be done?

SEN. MURPHY: Well, I mean, the fir-- uh, the first thing that Congress can do is get serious about, perhaps, our most sacred responsibility within the foreign policy, and that’s the declaration of war, um, something we just don’t do any longer. And, yeah, to some extent, it’s understandable why we don’t do it. You know, it’s not the same as it was 75 years ago. There aren’t armies marching against each other. There aren’t peace treaties that [inaudible]-- that, that neatly wrap-up the end of hostilities. War is messy, and your enemy is, um, shadowy and undefined, but that doesn’t obviate Congress with the responsibility to s-- to still set the parameters of, um, of war-making. A-a-and so I think the first thing Congress can do is get back in that game. Now it probably means that we need to think a little bit more creatively about how we write these authorizations. We probably have to sunset them and revisit them every few years to make sure we’re getting definitions right.Um, but the biggest grant of authority to the executive that we’ve given is in our inability to, uh, authorize war. But the point I make-- back to this piece is that, you know, so much of I think what ails American foreign policy today is the lack of, of, of capabilities. We say Russia acts—

MEAD: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

SEN. MURPHY: --asymmetrically because we don't have anything to meet what they're doing to use their energy resources to bully neighbors or run RT 24 hours in, uh, uh, countries around the world. So Congress could just decide to create new capacities. Now we wouldn't manage those new capacities, but if we gave them to the executive, it would be better than what we have today. We did this, for instance, in a very small way a few years ago when Senator Rob Portman and I wrote a piece of legislation establishing a new counter-propaganda operation at the State Department. Now it's relatively meager in scope and size. It's $60 million. But for the first time, the State Department had to sort of think about, you know, what they would do if they really wanted to be present in fighting the information wars, um, in and around Russia. And they stood up capacities to do that. And, and so Congress could, could do that, right? We, we, we've got legislation now pending to stand up a $1 billion energy independence fund, um, which could
actually get our government in the business of spending money to help countries become energy-independent, uh, of places like Russia, rather than just giving advice on how to do it. So Congress could actually create that new toolkit that I've been talking about for years.

MEAD: How much money are we talking?

SEN. MURPHY: Well, I mean, right now, we don't bat an eyelash when we, um, plus-up the Department of Defense by $50 to $70 billion a year. Um, that amount of money represents the entirety of the non-defense, non-intel foreign policy budget. And so I've put a plan on the table to double the size of the State Department in the USAID, which sort of sounds revolutionary, u-u-until you realize that that's what we give DoD on a one-year basis, um, in increased funding. And, and I would argue that they are having a little bit of a hard time figuring out how to spend all of the money that we are giving them, effectively, today. Um, so I-- and I've put it on the table. I've got another document, uh, called, "Rethinking the Battlefield," which is a pretty detailed plan, um, by which you would, over the course of five years, double the size of the State Department and the USAID and not do it mindlessly but to specifically create these kind of capacities that would m-m-meet these new threats.

MEAD: Uh, I think, uh, I think this issue of the institutional reforms needed to adapt American foreign policy capabilities in the 21st century is really a very solid concept, and I'm glad to see you—

SEN. MURPHY: And, and it is—

MEAD: --[working at it].

SEN. MURPHY: --yeah, and it is-- and it is about-- it's about adapting to these new realities and, and really answering, um-- what the Department of Defense has been very good at is being adaptable, right? It can move into places very, very quickly. If you want it to, you know, try to give advice to farmers in Herat Province in Afghanistan, it'll find a way to tell you that it's doing it. It's generally not doing it very effectively, but it'll find a way to say yes. The State Department's not in the business of saying yes. The State Department is largely in the business of saying no. It has money that is sort of criminally siloed that can't be moved from place to place. Uh, and so you've got to create, not just additional money and authorities. You've got to create additional flexibilities outside of the Department of Defense. My critique on Syria is that, um, you know, 2,000 marines, uh, or soldiers really weren't going to do the trick in a place that needed diplomats and political help to try to figure out how to create a governance structure in Northeast Syria that the Arabs and the Kurds and the Turks could all live with. And so you've got to create the ability for, for diplomats to get to places that they didn't use to get to before. So it's about flexibility, it's about new capabilities, it's about new funding.

MEAD: You know, one, uh, thing on the State Department capability that I've noticed because, over the years, I've done a lot of, of visits and lectures. Uh, so I've visited a lot of, uh, embassies and consulates and so on in, in some very, um, interesting places. I've noticed that, that where we need the diplomats most, they only stay for a year.

SEN. MURPHY: Yeah.

MEAD: You know, that in the, in the sort of dangerous hot spots, um, American diplomats are usually stationed for just one year rather than the normal three-year tour. And because people
are getting on leave and they don't all come in and come out at the same time, there's such churn, it's very hard to function. Is there a way to fix that?

SEN. MURPHY: Well-

MEAD: Could Congress do something?

SEN. MURPHY: Yeah, of course, there's a way to-- a way to fix that. It's not an easy assignment to go to a place—

MEAD: No.

SEN. MURPHY: --that's incredibly difficult, but nobody signs up for these jobs understanding that it's going to be easy. I mean, the structure our-- of our assignments for the State Department, um, you know, ha-- frankly, has not changed in decades. And, you know, when it was a bi-polar world in which you just sort of had to understand the basics of, you know, how you argued against Soviet expansion and for American expansion. Um, you were dealing with all sorts of contestants that were vying for space. Um, maybe short-term deployments made, uh, more sense. Um, but today, you know, by the time you learn, uh, the Afghanistan beat, you know, you're 10 months into a one-year, uh, turn-turnaround time. And, again, once again, very quietly, the Department of Defense has started to think about how to, um, how to deal with that. So, yes, you know, the young soldiers go into these places and come back out in about a year, but special operators don't, right? Special operators are ins-- uh, have, have, uh, expertise in parts of the world and they stick around, um, below the radar screen, but long enough so that they develop contacts and, um, and an-- and an ability to, to understand the nuances of places. The State Department needs to catch up.

MEAD: I think you're right. Every, uh, pres-- US president since Bill Clinton, I think, has tried to build a constructive relationship with Vladimir Putin [laughter]. You know, we've had resets. We've looked into his eyes and seen his soul [laughter]. Uh, we've done all kinds of things, but we seem to end up with the same relationship, uh, hostile relationship. Are we just-- is, is, is that just it? He's not gonna say yes, and we have to kind of take no for an answer here or is there a way to rethink US-Russian relations?

SEN. MURPHY: Yeah, I, I, I mean, I think at some point, you have to learn the lessons that are in front of you. Um, and, you know, there is a-- there is a psychology to Russia that does not lend itself to cooperation with, uh, the major power, uh, that helps to organize the rest of the world. And I think you have to understand that about, um, the very foundations of, uh, Russia psyche. But you also have to understand that Vladimir Putin has done nothing to suggest that he's interested in anything other than using the United States, uh, as a political fulcrum, uh, to be able to, um, control his own-- his own population. That being said, I don't mean to keep sort of beating a dead horse here [laughter], but, um, you know, w-w-we simply, um, put him in a position to win [laughter], um, when we continued to drive our spending towards aircraft carriers and drones instead of figuring out that, um, really what would make him most service is to have countries around his edges who don't need his oil and his gas. And today, you know, all we're left to do is kind of bully countries into not building a Russian pipeline instead of actually going with hard dollars to help them build, you know, any suite of domestic energy sources whether they be nuclear or solar or wind or interconnections to other places. We spend $4 billion every year on the European Reassurance Initiative. And I don't think that's money badly spent, but query whether, uh, Putin would, um, worry more if we spent $4 billion, um, trying to ween
countries around him off of his, um, revenue-making product, rather than on brigades deployed in NATO countries that he's not likely going to invade with his-- uh, with, with his conventional army any time soon.

MEAD: So you're saying that, kind of, if Poland had gone into fracking, it might be better off. And Russian money actually went in to, to trying to prevent that.

SEN. MURPHY: Yeah. I mean, fracking is not a terribly popular, uh, uh, practice in Europe these days. But, um, but that should be-- again, I, I think we should be spe-- if you really think about how you would, you know, spend anew, 600, 700 billion dollars a year to make our country safer and to give those who wish us ill a little bit harder time. I don't think you choose to spend zero on—

MEAD: Right.

SEN. MURPHY: --making other countries independent of the main revenue source of one of your primary adversaries.

MEAD: Another, I think, point where there seems to be some interesting left/right consensus is on this question of kleptocracy, money laundering, dark money. I was struck with a kleptocracy initiative here at Hudson—

SEN. MURPHY: Yep.

MEAD: And I was struck with how much importance you gave that issue.

SEN. MURPHY: Uh, yeah, I mean, it's the most s-- it's, it's, it's, um, it's the most old-fashioned means of trying to project your influence is to just buy it, um, and to use old-fashioned intimidation and bribery and graft to try to win people to, uh, your side. Um, and, in a world in which it is very easy to sort of cloud the truth to create a, a narrative in which no one believes any narratives, um, that provides cover for this kind of-- uh, this kind of old-fashioned corruption. And yet again, we are very badly-resourced to meet that threat overseas. Um, if you go into any of these embassies, uh, today, you are going to find, you know, a handful of political officers who are charged with doing a whole ton of things; one of which is running anti-corruption programming. A-and so why not recognize that this is a, you know, real-life daily tool of, you know, all sorts of, uh, countries, not just the Russians and create a classification of foreign policy officers dedicated only to corruption? Why not spend more money on funding anti-corruption projects? Some of the stuff we've done in Ukraine where we've spent direct dollars on anti-corruption efforts like our effort to, um, professionalize the, uh, municipal police forces of Kyiv have been really successful. But we spend that money in dribs and drabs; $5 million here, $10 million there. If you really spent money on building anti-corruption initiatives with countries that want to engage with you and putting officers all across the world to sort of highlight and fight corruption, you do a much better than what we're currently doing today, which is largely just complaining about it.

MEAD: Now I think the other side of this is how easy it is for corrupt dictators overseas to move money into the West, including into the United States. How do we effectively limit-- and I, I wo-- I mean, you know, corruption everywhere is bad, but I worry particularly, say, in the Russian and Chinese case where this money isn't so much freelance rich people just trying to get their money safe as it is often connected to state power and, and moved around for political purposes. How do we address this problem?
SEN. MURPHY: So we have become pretty adept over the years at tracking terrorist financing and finding it where it exists and closing the town the shelters that harbor it. Uh, you can certainly choose to use those same tools to, uh, track the illicit gains of oligarchs and, uh, and government, uh, and government officials. Now, admittedly, it is a little bit harder, right, because these are often countries in which we, um, still need to maintain [laughter] a relationship—

MEAD: Yeah.

SEN. MURPHY: --uh, with that executive who's either putting the money into his own accounts or handing it out to others who are putting in their accounts. When you're going after terrorist financing, you know, you don't have any legitimate interests with those organizations [laughter] that you're—

MEAD: Right.

SEN. MURPHY: --that you're trying to protect. Um, but, uh, but again, you know, I don't think we've really begun the work of even trying to find a middle ground with which to use those same tools, um, to go after some of these, uh, corrupt folks that surround, uh, these autocrats or would-be autocrats or developing autocrats.

MEAD: Well, this has been really great. I'd now like to turn to some, uh, areas where some folks at Hudson might have-- tell-- have some questions about some of the points you've raised. I think here, one of them would be the question of the relationship of sort of geopolitics and-- I don't know-- values, um, where you say in the article that, um, uh, we shouldn't extend security guarantees to countries that, for example, dismember journalists. Now, speaking as a journalist, let me say [laughter] I'm entirely in agreement with a policy that seeks to discourage the heinous, heinous behavior. Um, but I do know that the US-- the US/Saudi relationship began in the 1940s when slavery was still legal in Saudi Arabia, and it was not a very pretty place.

SEN. MURPHY: Mm-hmm.

MEAD: And then Franklin Roosevelt, who might've been the most progressive president the United States has ever had in terms of real accomplishments, made an alliance with the worst mass murderer of the 20th century to-- up to that point, Stalin because he really felt he had no choice. How-- so clearly, at one end of, of this geo-- geopolitical necessity can overcome even the horror of Stalin camps. On the other, you don't want to just simply, you know, raise the white flag and say, "Well, morals are for other people." How do we balance this?

SEN. MURPHY: S-so I, I, I guess I-- you know, I try to, um, answer that very simply in that I don't necessarily buy that we should create two different categories; one in which there are US interests, and the other in which there are US values.

MEAD: Mm-hmm.

SEN. MURPHY: I think we should think of values like democracy promotion and human rights as interests. Uh, and I think that it was easy to sort of sort them into different, um, uh, buckets when you believed that the world was just on this inexorable march towards everyone having access to democracy—

MEAD: Right.

SEN. MURPHY: --and full civil liberties
MEAD: “We’re in the 1990s. Everything is good.”

SEN. MURPHY: Right, exactly.

MEAD: “We’re winning”

SEN. MURPHY: So we’re having sort of-- I think we’re seeing things swing back around the other way, and thus, we have to see democracy promotion or the advancement of human rights as a, as a critical US interest today because, I believe, as, um, dictators get more nimble and stronger overseas, it may ultimately, um, give more ideas to folks in the United States who might want to go about the process of converting, um, our government into something that looks very different than what we have today. Um, so I would simply put, um, those conversations all together. And that doesn't necessarily mean that you write-off every country, um, that has a less than stellar human rights, uh, record. Um, you just don't see them as, um, as, as two separate conversations. I think Saudi is just an example of a country that has crossed that line. I think they have crossed the line to which, um, our, our signal in continuing a fairly no-questions-asked alliance is an invitation, um, to, to other nations to engage in that similar behavior, which I think, ultimately, is a risk to-- is a risk to us. I also make the specific argument with Saudi Arabia that even if you sort of want to look at this merely through the question of non-human rights, non-democracy-connected national security interests, the way in which the Saudis, historically, have funneled money to the brand of Islam that forms the building blocks of Sunni extremism, uh, is an argument to, uh, to treat them more like an adversary rather than as a friend. Um, uh, so on Saudi, I think I can argue both the sort of strict national security case and the human rights and democracy promotion case.

MEAD: Well, I'm, I'm certainly not trying to make a case for MBS, but my understanding is that, actually, he, he has been giving us more satisfaction on stopping the flow of funds to terrorist organizations and less on other issues so that, in some ways, he's an improvement from that security point of view, even if in other's, he's a-- he's a disappointment and, and sometimes a bit rash.

SEN. MURPHY: I think the jury's still out. Uh, there is clearly much less, um, complaints about funding moving directly from the Royal Treasury into political organizations abroad that we would disagree with. I don't know that we've seen the kind of progress that he claims when it comes to money that is indirectly routed, uh, through philanthropic organizations—

MEAD: Right.

SEN. MURPHY: --uh, and clerics, uh, to conservative, uh, Wahhabee-connected, uh, mosques and preachers, uh, overseas. And I just know as a student of the Balkans, having gone there almost every year, um, there-- you know, there are still in those-- in, in lots of places, more and more people every year who are being paid, uh, to practice a version of, of Islam, uh, that they didn't use to practice 10 years ago, and that money's coming from somewhere.

MEAD: Yep. Uh, no, that is definitely the case, but if the Saudis were to, uh, be more cooperative on that front, do you think that would change the balance, in your mind?

SEN. MURPHY: I think-- and I guess that's my point; I think it would. I think if you view them all together, right?

MEAD: Yep.
SEN. MURPHY: If you view your-- if you view your, um, your concerns about human rights and democracy promotion together with your concerns about other more conventional security interests, then you can balance one against the-- one against the other. So I don't think that progressives should adopt, uh, a framework in which we say to countries, um, that, that, that don't share our values, um, on democracy and human rights that "You're never gonna be a partner with the United States." I think we just, maybe, have a higher bar for your behaviors—

MEAD: Mm-hmm.

SEN. MURPHY: --um, in, uh, in other contexts if you're not m-m-meeting our asks, uh, on those other issues.

MEAD: [inaudible]. Uh, in, uh, in Asia, I think we're going to see more of this because if I think of-- try to think about, "How do you balance Chinese power?" it's without, without the countries of countries like Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand. It's, it's very hard to do that. None of those would be a stellar example of democracy at the moment.

SEN. MURPHY: Uh, that's, you know, that's exactly right. Um, and, and, you know, again, I think you've got to find ways to challenge them to step up to the plate on other US security interests. One of my critiques of the democratic party is, uh, that we have been, particularly in Asia, too reflexively antithetical to trade agreements. Um, I, I don't think that you can get in the game in Asia unless you have a trade framework by which you can sit across from even countries that have bad records on human rights and democracy promotion and ask something- - uh, ask them to give something economically, uh, to the United States. We just don't have a framework through which we can do that. So, you know, I would argue for, you know, the next democratic president to, um, get back into the game on an Asian trade deal. Maybe it doesn't look exactly like [inaudible]—

MEAD: Mm-hmm.

SEN. MURPHY: --in fact, it won't look like what TPP did—

MEAD: Right.

SEN. MURPHY: --but it would give you the platform to have those discussions where you could make non-human rights and non-democracy asks of countries and see how they respond.

MEAD: Right. No, I think the, the trade points that you make are very interesting. I don't know how you square the circle of a trade agreement that the labor unions will like, that the green movement will like, that American exporters, generically will like, and that other countries will like. Uh, is there a sweet spot in there, and how do we go about looking for it? Because I'd agree with you that it's important.

SEN. MURPHY: Yeah. And, and I-- and I guess my, you know, uh, my belief is that we should try to find, uh, that sweet spot that you might not be able to get an agreement that all democratic constituencies would sign onto. But, again, I'm not sure how you protect our interests in that part of the world if you aren't willing to try. I, I think our idea-- our criticism has been that the sort of starting point for these trade agreements in the past has been to smooth out as many corporate complaints as possible, and then on the backend try to figure out ways to get the labor unions on board. And I think if you're approaching these agreements sort of first through a worker's lens, um, and trying to get as many of the corporate complaints [laughter] satisfied as you can,
you can probably get to something that a lot of folks in Congress on both sides of the aisle can support.

MEAD: Okay. So you hope to see a revival of the trade agenda?

SEN. MURPHY: I would-- I, I would. And I-- that may not, you know, make me super popular amongst, you know, all of my progressive, uh, friends, but, uh, I think there's a, a way to do better on behalf of core democratic constituencies, uh, in a-- in a new framework.

MEAD: I did want to ask you a bit about, uh, climate diplomacy because you, certainly, list climate change as one of the, the big, new issues. Although it's interesting, you include it in a very long list. While I think some Democrats would put it at the top of a much shorter list. Uh, so that's a-- an interesting difference in emphasis, clearly going back to the Paris Climate Accords, even from the standpoint of most people in the Green Movement, would only be a first step. What do you think American climate policy should look like?

SEN. MURPHY: So I, I think that is my worry, that I think there's a lot of folks that will cheerlead when we sort of sign back up for Paris and not realize that [laughter] that still is a non-binding commitment on nations. We are not alone amongst the nations—

MEAD: Right.

SEN. MURPHY: --that signed it [laughter] that aren't following, uh, through on it.

MEAD: I, I, I-- how many are?

SEN. MURPHY: Right [laughter].

MEAD: It's, it's, it's a very small number.

SEN. MURPHY: Yeah, it's very-- uh, it's very small numbers. Um, so, uh, yeah, I mean, this is a much bigger, longer discussion. I, I think President Obama had it right, which was that he was elevating this issue in all of our bilateral conversations. Uh, and, and I think a, a democratic president is clearly going to have to sort of put this at the top of the list anytime you're sitting down with the Indians, uh, or with the Chinese. I, I think it's very hard for us to win any of those arguments if we're not gonna pass a piece of legislation domestically which reprices carbon. And so I, I don't know that we will ever be successful in international diplomacy, um, so long as, as everyone perceives us, uh, as talking a talk that we're not willing to walk, uh, at, at home. So whether it be a carbon tax or renewed effort at, um, a carbon cap, um, I just am not sure any of those bilateral wins are possible unless we, um, engage in some domestic legislation that shows that we're willing to lead by example.

MEAD: I think, maybe, the most fundamental question, uh, at least as I look at American foreign policy, is that during the Cold War and for some years after, we had, essentially, an Atlantic foreign policy where the Europeans were our, our primary partners. And in a sense, Europe was the primary theory-- or theater of operations, especially during the Cold War. And in that case, what the Americans had to offer our allies was sort of ideological solidarity; European and American values, while different in some respects, are pretty much aligned in many ways. And if you go to an Indo-Pacific foreign policy-- standard foreign policy, which we seem to be forced towards, um, that ideology is, is, is-- ideology is less attractive. And you can go-- I was-- I, I've been speaking to people in India, and, you know, their goal is not to Westernize India but actually, to do-- you know, to promote Hinduism-- Hin-Hin-Hindutva. Uh, other countries in Asia
would, would recoil from an American foreign policy that was seen as trying to impose Western, in their mind, colonial values. How do we-- uh, in some ways, that seemed like a harder transition for the democratic party to make than for the republican party to make, even though I would say both parties face real challenges in this-- how do you think we manage this or is the problem as, as bad as I think it is?

SEN. MURPHY: Well, I mean, I think you have-- I mean, you have stalwarts of democracy promotion and human rights promotion in both parties. Uh, and so—

MEAD: Yeah.

SEN. MURPHY: --I don't think this is—

MEAD: Exactly.

SEN. MURPHY: --a-- yeah, I don't this is a conversation that's exclusive to one party, um, uh, one party or, uh, or the other. Um, but, uh, no, again, I, I, I just think, you know, t-t-today, we, we don't necessarily even have the tools with which to make these, uh, to make these arguments abroad. We don't have the dollars to spend on democracy promotion. Um, part of the complaint I have, uh, with our inability to meet propaganda coming out of China or other nations—

MEAD: Mm-hmm.

SEN. MURPHY: --is that, um, they, essentially exist in a v-vacuum making their arguments without, uh, the kind of, um, counter-narrative from the United States that we, uh, used to make. And Russia's periphery that we maybe should be trying to make in China's periphery, uh, today. So I would stand up, you know, additional capabilities, uh, that we simply, uh, that, that we simply don't, uh, don't have today. I get it. I don't disagree with you that, you know, it is unrealistic for us to think that we are going to, uh, sort of replace, um, uh, [ethoses?] that existed in places like China and India with ours. Um, but our ability to at least put forth a different narrative, I, I think, uh, helps rather than hurts.

MEAD: That makes sense. Um, you-- there were two words that you didn't mention in the piece that I thought were, in some ways, striking. One was the word, "Israel," doesn't appear in your article. Wh-- how do you see-- we may be having-- looking at a post-Netanyahu Israel or, or not. One still can't tell. Uh, where do you see US-Israel relations going in a new administration?

SEN. MURPHY: So we were talking about this a little bit on the way in. Um, you know, my, my piece is not-- i-i-i-- right, not intended to be a comprehensive narrative—

MEAD: That was not a criticism, by the way.

SEN. MURPHY: Yeah.

MEAD: It was an observation. You, you—

SEN. MURPHY: Yeah. Not, not intended to be a compre-- a comprehensive narrative of what progressives or Democrats should be talking about with respect to, uh, foreign policy. Um, no, I think as the region gets messier and messier, we need to be, uh, as hyper-concerned as ever about Israel's, uh, security. Um, and my worry is that, uh, an issue that was not seen as political or, at least, sort of, uh, available to be politicized, today is. Um, a-a-and so I don't think that Democrats or Republicans care more than one another about Israel's security. But what I do
know is that, historically, when we have been able to make steps forward, uh, on progress for peace in and around Israel, it's been the United States who's acted as a broker between the Israelis and the Palestinians. And in order to be a broker, um, you have to be perceived as, um, delivering tough messages, uh, to both sides. That is not a position that we are in today. Um, the Trump administration is effectively a political arm of the Netanyahu government. That means that we have no ability to honestly broker discussions and negotiations between both sides, and there's no one else that can really fulfill that word, uh, except for the United States. Um, my great worry is that Netanyahu and Trump together have taken steps that have potentially made a two-state solution almost impossible. And having been there recently, it is remarkable how that is the narrative on the ground today—

MEAD: Hmm.

SEN. MURPHY: --that people are almost moving beyond that conversation to just trying to manage, uh, an apartheid state that will exist for the next 50 to 100 years. And I think the question that will greet the next democratic president is whether it is too late, right? Whether there are things that you can do, perhaps, in conjunction with an Israeli government that's more willing to try to get back to a two-state reality, um, that, uh, that make that future, uh, that make that future possible.

MEAD: By the way, again, when I-- I was-- it was in no way trying to criticize the senator for not including Israel. As, as someone who writes short pieces for periodicals [laughter], I find the most irritating criticism is when people tell you, "Why didn't you write about X?"

SEN. MURPHY: Right.

MEAD: Because you know if you had, you wouldn't have written about Y, and then someone else would be saying, "Why didn't you write about Y?" So I don't mean this, in any way, as a criticism. I'm just trying to, to elucidate some, uh, some more ideas. The other word that surprised me in a way that I didn't see-- again, not a criticism-- was Japan.

SEN. MURPHY: Hmm.

MEAD: That when, when I think of democratic countries in Asia who are great powers and who are going to be vitally important in America's future; Japan, obv-- Japan, Australia in its way, a few others leap to mind. What place do you see-- how do you see the US/Japan relationship, and where do you-- what should we be doing to develop it?

SEN. MURPHY: Well, one of the-- one of the reasons why I've been, you know, so concerned about this administration's policy towards North Korea, uh, is that the only means by w-which you are able to, A, either mount an effort to convince North Korea to think differently about their nuclear weapons program or, B, uh, create a system of, um, protection and deterrence should we be unsuccessful in convincing North Korea to change their mind, um, is to have a policy by which the United States, Japan, uh, and South Korea, um, are aligned, um, when it comes to foreign policy priorities. And, uh, we are not aligned with Japan today. The two leaders may have a close personal relationship, but our inability to bring-- to bring Japan into the trade negotiations that we're having, uh, with China make those negotiations harder and leave Japan on the sideline, and our unwillingness to coordinate with anybody when it comes to North Korea diplomacy, um, has left Japan often surprised, and ultimately, in the long run, um, makes
containment, which may end up being our policy— uh, and frankly, is our policy today
[crosstalk]—

MEAD: And has been for maybe 20 years.

SEN. MURPHY: Has been for maybe 20 years and will likely be our official policy, you know, a
decade from now, containment is made much harder, um, if you aren't showing up every day
trying to keep Japan, the United States, and South Korea, um, together; something this
administration has not done as its sought to get this bilateral deal with very little help from other
partners.

MEAD: Well, this makes a perfect segue into the first question from the audience, which is
about the North Korea talks. Uh, and they're asking, "What is the prospect for US, uh, North
Korea denuclearization talks to resume and what kind of progress do you think is possible?"

SEN. MURPHY: Uh, s-so I, I think that Kim has gotten a lot out of this relationship, uh, thus far.
He gets, um, a almost complete pass on the treatment of his, uh, own people and the projection
of cyber warfare, um, uh, onto US shores, um, by this focus on showy photo op after showy, uh,
photo op. Um, it is maybe gotten us less testing activity over the course of the last two-and-a-
half years then we've gotten in the past, but there's all sorts of other evidence to suggest he
continues to move forward with the development, uh, of his program. Um, and our hyper-focus
on this trade deal with China, um, has let the China off the hook. Everybody's known forever
that the only way you're going to convince North Korea to do anything differently with respect to
its nuclear program is to get China to deliver a very heavy message to them; something that
they've never been interested in doing, and certainly, aren't even being pressed in a meaningful
form to do it today given our sort of myopic trade-focused bilateral relationship with China. So in
this administration, I think there's no hope for any meaningful, uh, nuclear deal with North
Korea. And it would cause, um— and, and I think, you know, to— in, in the Obama presidency,
Obama, as we discussed had to decided to elevate climate change as sort of a primary
conversation with China, which made it hard for him to bring them to the table on, uh, on North
Korea. And so if you're— if you're not going to sort of make your number one issue with China;
North Korea— and I'm not sure any president is going to—

MEAD: Or could, really.

SEN. MURPHY: Or could, um— or could given, you know, I mean, the—

MEAD: There's so many other—

SEN. MURPHY: So many other— right, so many other concerns, um, then, again, you may be in
a world in which you have to, um, you know, be looking towards containment as not your
unofficial policy but your official policy moving forward.

MEAD: And I guess a, a, a question that flows from that would be, when South Korea and
Japan are not aligned, when general South Korea's preferring a rather dovish approach to North
Korea while Japan is more hawkish, how would a democratic administration work with that
additional wrinkle?

SEN. MURPHY: Uh, yeah, I, I don't-- I don't know that there's any— you know, that there's any
good answer to that, other than trying, you know, harder to create a multi-lateral framework as
we've had in the past where, at least, the nations that are party to these talks would sort of have
to hash those out. Again, right now, it's easy for Japan and South Korea to be on different pages because we have basically, um, asked them to, you know, by and large, stand aside on North Korea diplomacy while we take care of it ourselves. In the past when we've set up structures by which they had to be at the same table, uh, we at least had mechanisms to try to, um, smooth out some of those disagreements.

MEAD: We have another question here on-- from the audience on, uh, on China, uh, noting that the Senate will be voting soon on the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, but also wondering where we have American companies, whether it's the NBA with its approach to China or Hollywood movie companies sort of downplaying messages that China might not like, how do we deal with this?

SEN. MURPHY: I think it-- I think in the current context, it's really hard for the American government to be telling private companies that they should be stand up more strongly for human rights in Hong Kong or in China when, reportedly, the president of the United States told the Chinese government that he would shut up about what was going on in Hong Kong, pending the trade negotiations, uh, culmination. So I, I think it's-- as, as much distaste as I may have for, um, the decisions that companies like the NBA have made, I think until we decide to make it more of a domestic priority, uh, from our own, um, from our own government, it's hard to tell private companies, uh, how to act towards, uh, towards China.

MEAD: How would you handle that balance? Um, suppose, hypothetically, the United States was engaged in trade negotiations with China that were important and politically important, and at the same time, something like the Hong Kong situation arose, how would-- what kind-- you know, how do you balance these things? It seems-- I know President Clinton when he first came in said we needed to prioritize human rights over trade, and then gave up on that.

SEN. MURPHY: Right. Yeah, I guess it depends on the consequence of the economic negotiation. Again, what I'm arguing for is, um, is, is not a construct in which these two are mutually exclusive—

MEAD: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

SEN. MURPHY: --that you have to walk away from non-human rights and non-democracy-related issues if you're unsatisfied in the asks you're making in those two categories. So, uh, you know, if you ask somebody sort of how they balance something to you on their finger, they probably can't explain it to you. They just do it. Um, ultimately, if you are actually elevating the human rights and democracy, uh, conversations, it would depend on how heavy the considerations you're being offered are on the other end. To me, it doesn't sound like China is willing to give us anything so significant, in the context of our trade negotiations, that you wouldn't give them, at least, a slightly harder time, uh, than we are today with respect to what's happening today in Hong Kong.

MEAD: Now the audience is, I think, implicitly criticizing me for leaving, uh, something out in our conversation. They're asking about the Western Hemisphere and, you know, what, uh, it's really seeing from Ecuador and Chile to Venezuela-- I think I could add Mexico. We're actually seeing a kind of crisis, uh, developing-- unfolding in our own hemisphere. Uh, how does the Un-- how should the United States be addressing this?
SEN. MURPHY: Well, I mean, first and foremost we can spend some money. I mean, when I think about, uh, how we would allocate, uh, dollars under a doubling of the State Department USAID, there are some projects that you could pick back up from the Obama administration in the Northern Triangle, um, that they were-- uh, that, that, that they were running with fairly meager resources that, with additional resources, could actually get you some real security gains. And so if, you know, migration, uh, continues to be something that both parties are going to care deeply about-- and we should-- then we should be spending real money to help some of our poorer partners in the hemisphere try to stand up security apparatuses in which less families feel the need to run the United States. On Venezuela, I've been one of the few willing to be pretty critical of the president's, um, uh, strategy there. I'm very worried about Venezuela just becoming the next Cuba in which we apply sanctions perpetually that ultimately get us nowhere because we sort of don't understand the domestic political, uh, arguments, um, that are being-- well, we don't understand domestic political alignments in which way too many people are getting way too much from the current regime to, uh, turn, uh-- to turn a cheek. Um, and I think, specifically, the president just mismanaged the crisis by playing all his cards on the first day like a nervous teenager. I mean, had we sort of held back recognition of Guaidó to the-- so that we could try to do it alongside other countries that were similarly reticent to take that step at the, at the, at the moment, uh, or use a little bit of time to talk to the Chinese or the Russians, um, uh, then I think we might be in a different place than we are today. But, uh, today, we are recognizing a government that is not really the government and is not likely to be the government, uh, any time, uh, any time soon.

MEAD: So would you support withdrawing recognition of that government or what, what do you think we should do?

SEN. MURPHY: Right, it's so hard. I mean, it's so hard right now to withdraw recognition. So I haven't proposed withdrawing recognition. I've just pointed out so as to, you know, think about how to learn lessons for future, for future crises like this that you don't need to, um, you don't need to recognize, uh, a contestant government on day one. Uh, you can use it as, as leverage to try to manage a situation. And, of course, our inability to have any dialogue with, with Cuba does not help here. Had we, had we spent the last two-and-a-half years continuing to try, uh, to work out a new diplomatic arrangement with Cuba, maybe, maybe we, we would have been able to manage this crisis—

MEAD: I think [inaudible] wanted to be one of the US diplomats sent to Cuba with what happened to the last ones with those mysterious brain injuries. But here's my-- same reason I don't want to go into the Saudi consulate in [laughter] Istanbul. Um, but maybe I take all these things too personally.

SEN. MURPHY: Yeah. I-- hey, listen, I, I think there are all sorts of reasons why, even with two-and-a-half more years of diplomatic, um, thawing, the Cubans still would've had lots of reasons to continue their investment in Maduro, but we just don't know the answer to that because instead of trying to get to a point where we could work with Cuba on things like Venezuela, we, once again, got back to the business of shutting them out.

MEAD: Okay. Um, another member of the audience would like to know, uh, what you think of the state of our relationships with some key US allies. They specify Canada, the UK, and the EU. Where are we in those relationships, and what should we be doing?
SEN. MURPHY: Well, I, I, I certainly don't think we should have cheer-led Britain out of the European Union. I, I, I think the European Union and NATO are these key post-World War II constructs that have, um, I think accrued to the great benefit of the United States. Um, more democracies, the better. More trading partners, uh, the better. Uh, and, um, you know, I'm very sad that, uh, we have a president who has, uh, helped weaken, uh, an already very weak European, uh, Union. I think, in the long run, Britain will be much worse off because of their departure, but I think the United States will be, uh, as, uh, as well. And I am equally sick about our decision to, um, sort of view Canada as an economic irritant. We have legitimate economic issues with them that often force us to, um, to take some tough actions, but, um, you know, they still are our most important trading partner. They can be a much better security partner than they are-- uh, than they are today. And we've managed, somehow, to get that relationship, uh, wrong.

MEAD: Um, I guess, uh, you're kind of a Balkan hand in some ways and, uh, uh, know the, the area pretty well. What do you think are the implications of the French decision to block the accession talks for North Macedonia and Albania? And is there a role for the US in this? And what, what can be done? What needs to happen now?

SEN. MURPHY: Yeah, I mean, listen, you-- whether or not the EU has officially been closed or not, um, they've been closed for, uh, the last half-a-decade, um, as they've been managing through sort of existential crisis—

MEAD: Right.

SEN. MURPHY: --after existential crisis. And, you know, th-that comes at, at, at great cost to stability in the Balkans. You know, I, um, remember parachuting into, uh, Belgrade, um, the very night that a drone parachuted into a football match between Albania and Serbia with a map of Greater Albania on it [laughter]. Um, and, and, you can't imagine anything worse than to get under the skin of, um, of, of then Prime Minister Vučić than a map of Greater Albania on all of his constituents TV screens. So the, the, the historic meeting between Edi Rama and Vučić gets canceled, um, and then very quickly, gets put back together because they all say that, um, they need to keep their European aspirations on track, and they can't let these petty historical grievances get in the way of their focus on joining Europe. Um, and so a situation that could've gotten really, really messy, um, instead got patched together largely because of their belief that Europe was in their future. And as a European future gets further and further away from countries in the Balkan regions, um, those historic grievances and those rivalries, uh, that still exist, still sit as a tinder box, um, could actually explode. Um, and I think that's-- that-- again, that is my-- that is my deep worry about, uh, our inability to see the importance of a stable and growing EU to US national security interests because if hostilities did ever break out again in Balkans, we now have NATO countries that are there, right?

MEAD: Yep.

SEN. MURPHY: We have a-- we have a treaty obligation to defend those countries. Um, and, and so their ability to see a future in Europe is dependent on our ability to stay out of, um, Balkan conflicts in the future.

MEAD: Um, and Germany's role in Europe, is there a way-- I mean, I think many people feel that Germany has got a kind of a-- almost strategic paralysis, um, not able to pony-up for NATO,
not able to really make a, you know, clear understanding of its energy policy or a vision for Europe. Am I wrong about that or--?

SEN. MURPHY: Yeah, it matters-- I mean, paralysis may be too strong a word, but to the extent that their internal politics and, and, and the growth of the right-wing has made it much harder for Germany to lead, we have facilitated that growing dysfunction in Germany. I mean, we sent Steve Bannon over to Europe to help mid-wife nationalist parties. Richard Grenell, our ambassador—

MEAD: Mm-hmm

SEN. MURPHY: --to, um, uh, to Berlin, um, made amongst his first official, initiatives, uh, the display of his enthusiasm for, um, for right-wing movements in political parties. And so, you know, it should worry us all that, you know, that the alternative for Germany party just scored about a quarter of the vote, admittedly in a series of eastern provinces that, um, uh, that, that, uh, are going to be sort of less friendly to European integration. But that's a big number, uh, for a party that hearkens back to the Nazi [area?]-- era. Uh, and, again, they're modeling behavior in the United States. Uh, we should be fighting those political movements, rather than having an administration who is lending fuel to the fire.

MEAD: Great. Well, listen, thank you. The Senator has been very generous with his time. So please stay seated while he makes his way out to get onto his next appointment. But I would, uh, also like us to show our appreciation for a really interesting interview. Thank you.

[applause]

SEN. MURPHY: Mm-hmm

MEAD: Really good.

SEN. MURPHY: Thank you.