

Hudson Institute

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Foreign Policy and
World Affairs:
Senator Chris Coons &
Walter Russell Mead

Event Transcript

Walter Russell Mead, Senator Chris Coons

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Featuring:

- Senator Chris Coons, U.S. Senator (D-DE)
- Walter Russell Mead, Distinguished Fellow, Hudson Institute

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KENNETH R. WEINSTEIN: Ken Weinstein, president and CEO of Hudson Institute. I want to welcome everyone to the Stern Policy Center here at Hudson Institute. We are honored this morning to host Delaware Senator Chris Coons, a prominent voice on national security and international affairs. He'll be offering his perspective on U.S. foreign policy and world affairs in conversation with my colleague Hudson Distinguished Fellow Walter Russell Mead.

The senator was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2010. He serves on the Foreign Relations Committee, particularly on this - on numerous subcommittees, including the Subcommittees for Africa and Global Health Policy, Multilateral Institutions and International Development, and also on the Subcommittee on the State Department and USAID Management. He's also a member of the Appropriations Subcommittee that funds the State Department and foreign aid. In that capacity, he is an advocate for an active U.S. role in the Middle East, policies to counter Russian aggression and subversion in Europe, stronger U.S. partnerships in Africa and global human rights and democracy efforts.

WEINSTEIN: The senator has just returned from an overseas trip with visits to Israel, Jordan, the United Kingdom and Greece. So we look forward to his perspectives on those countries and on the challenges and opportunities ahead for the U.S. and our allies. Please join me in welcoming Senator Coons and Walter Russell Mead.

WALTER RUSSELL MEAD: Well, this conversation that we're having is part of an ongoing series with senior elected officials and policy makers. We will keep you posted about other people who are coming to join us, but it's a big honor to have you here, Senator, and a lot of fun. And I should admit that he and I did actually talk a little bit before this event. So if the questions seem to be leading right into the senator's core interests, that would be because I have a pretty good idea, at this point, of what he has to say that's interesting and useful. So let me just begin. You've come back from this trip. I know some people call these junkets, but I believe they are, in

fact, trips. And I wish more people in the Senate and Congress would take them. I actually think it's important. What did you learn on this latest trip?

CHRIS COONS: Great question. First, thank you. Thanks for the chance to be with you. Thanks to Tom and Ryan and my staff who helped make sure that I'm prepared enough to take up some of your time and some of the space and have a few things to say.

I could not agree more that it's important for members of Congress to travel overseas together on - bipartisan groups. This was seven senators - four Republicans, three Democrats - of a wide range of backgrounds and experience, engaging with elected leaders, with national leaders in four different countries that we have complex and long alliances with and where there are developments and issues that really demand our attention and action. And in some ways, the best and most productive part of the trip was not just that we showed up and gave a bipartisan, positive message to our ambassadors, our career foreign service officers, our development professionals and our allies, but that over breakfast and dinner, at the beginning and end of each of our long days, we debated with each other and said, "What did you think?" "Well, how'd you think Netanyahu seemed today?" "Well, what'd you think of this Avi Gabbay guy?" "Well, do you think Avi Liberman really is in the right?" "Well, what'd you hear in the Golan?" "Well, what do you think is - the king seemed a little - right?" So there were very constructive conversations between the members of the delegation and our staff as we went from country to country to country. Might be a junket, but a 12-hour day, traveling around a country, getting detailed briefings, meeting with foreign heads of state and processing it before and after frankly sounds like wonderful, engaging, challenging work to me.

So, what did we learn? Broadly speaking, we have allies around the world who are wondering where we're going next. There is a lack of clarity about what our strategic objectives really are in Syria. Now that ISIS is - not defeated, but has lost most of the territory under its control, the primary focus of our intervention in Iraq and Syria has waned. And the engagement by Russia, Iran and the Assad regime is a more and more pressing challenge. And so in both Jordan and Syria and in conversations in the U.K. and Greece - what we're really about, what we're going to do with the Kurds in Syria and in the Turkish incursion into the Afrin area, what we're going to do about an Iranian presence that is increasingly aggressive and threatening our vital ally Israel and the whole region with destabilizing influence, and what we're really going to do in the region as a whole, economically as well as militarily, was an active and open question.

At the very beginning, we met with the foreign minister and the national security adviser in London. And their questions of us were more pressing about data. How closely integrated are we going to be on sharing data? Because of a case that was just debated - just heard in the Supreme Court yesterday. I'm happy to get into details if you think that's of interest. But it was about, how close is this closest-of-all relationships? And I hope legislation that Senator Graham and I are co-sponsoring will move forward quickly and demonstrate how much we value the U.S.-U.K. security relationship. In the last place we stopped, Greece, I think all of us were pleasantly

surprised to meet not just a tremendous embassy staff, but a prime minister who is turning the corner and an economy that is stabilizing. But a democracy that has faced some of the biggest challenges of any western democracy in terms of a - frankly, a depression as bad as our own yet sustained over eight years, and where Russian influence and Russian intervention, increasingly Chinese direct investment, and a lack of clarity about where we are with them vis-a-vis Turkey and the region, leaves some important and unanswered questions.

Across these four countries, there was a clear arc. They want us. They want the United States to be present, to be engaged, to be an investor, to be a partner in security and democracy. And they're questioning whether we really have the energy, the engagement, the investment to sustain what has for 70 years in the rules-based liberal world order that the United States built after the Second World War. They're not asking us to deploy troops onto the Golan. They're not asking us to take on and solve all of their problems, but they're asking whether we intend to continue to engage in the way we did over the last seven decades.

MEAD: And I'd like to just follow up with one piece of this. Your last stop in Greece - I think a lot of people have noticed that U.S.-Turkish relations are changing.

COONS: Changing.

MEAD: And that Turkish foreign policy is less steady, less predictable than it used to be. I don't think as many people have realized just what a crisis that is for Greece...

COONS: Yes.

MEAD: ...Where Greek-Turkish relations have been one of the real flashpoints for 200 years.

COONS: At least.

MEAD: Yeah. So how are they thinking in Greece about Erdogan's Turkey and the U.S. relationship?

COONS: Well, first, thank you for the question. One of the challenges is, these are NATO allies. And at a strategic level, one of the most pressing discussions was about an F-16 upgrade package for Greece, which is expensive and complicated because we are selling F-35s to Turkey. And the idea that you've got one NATO ally and another NATO ally worried about each other's jet-fighter sophistication and air superiority should be troubling. Erdogan has, as you all know, taken a quite different direction. Turkey was Israel's first, closest, strongest Muslim ally. Turkey, under Ataturk and for a long time afterwards, was a key bastion of a sort of more moderate or liberalizing influence in the Muslim world. Erdogan, after an attempt at joining the EU and after strengthening, consolidating his power in early years, has really turned fairly hard to the east and become more of an Islamist leader. And after both the conflict with Israel over the blockade of Gaza and then the allegedly Gulenist attempt at a coup last year, it has enraged Erdogan. And he is quite agitated against the United States and against Greece.

And what we heard was reports of very regular interactions - encounters between naval and air forces between the Greeks and the Turks. The flood of refugees and how they've been handled and the navigation around that has created further tension. And just a lack of clarity about the relationship has put some severe pressure on it. Erdogan, though, to be clear, has visited Greece - the first head of Turkey to do so in decades. And the prime minister of Greece indicated an openness to trying to negotiate a way through this. Both parties see, I think, the United States as essential to helping pull them closer together rather than allowing, what may be unintended, accidents between naval forces or conflicts between - between aerial forces to create a flashpoint and drive them apart.

The broader reality is that Greece is looking to be a stronger security partner for Israel, a stronger security partner for the United States, and made clear to us, they know they're in a tough neighborhood. To the north, to the west, to the east, to the south, they've got potentially combative forces. And we shared some pointed conversations about Libya, the consequences of the Libyan adventure and the fall of Gaddafi and then the really destabilizing influence that's having on the whole region.

MEAD: Yeah. You used the term adventure, which...

COONS: Right (laughter).

MEAD: ...Suggests you have some thoughts. We may get into those about Libya later. Yeah. After the - after 1990, with the end of the Cold War, the United States engaged on this kind of global order building project, and to use the four schools, you had a Wilsonian-Hamiltonian coalition to build a world order that would rest on free trade, promotion of liberal democracy and human rights, international law, international institutions. And that was kind of the bipartisan-American coalition that replaced the Cold War as the centerpiece of American foreign policy. What we've been seeing in recent years, a lot of Americans seem to be getting off that bus. And that public opinion is - whether it comes to questions like free trade, or whether it comes to question of promotion of democracy, U.S. involvement - we're hearing from very different voices now, some of them in the White House. What do you think - you know, why did this go wrong? And what does it mean? And what should we do?

COONS: Well, the United States, as you have so ably pointed out, has long had competing schools of thought or pieces to the American mind or the American spirit...

MEAD: Let's resume. We were - you were talking about the crisis of international order-building as American foreign policy.

COONS: If I remember the question correctly before that delightful reminder of the challenges we face at home and in the world, security should ever be at the top of our minds. There was a period in the late '90s where there was an enthusiasm after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union for thinking that we were at the end of history, that democracy had

reigned supreme and that the sort of binary world of the Cold War was an antiquated concept, and that now, inevitably, our former life-and-death rivals, Russia and China, would join the world order, become liberal democracies and that around the world, we would see the victory of the Wilsonian ideal - the United Nations and a global world order was where we were inevitably headed. First - not entirely without precedent to think that a former opponent might end up changing direction and joining the world order. Germany and Japan have been among our most stable, reliable, progressive allies in terms of the global world order after the Second World War.

But I will remind you the extent to which those societies were remade, reshaped after the cauldron of the Second World War, and the - their defeat was near complete, and their rebuilding expensive, complicated, and took a great deal of time - that Russia has instead returned to be a revanchist power that is actively and aggressively challenging us, I think, throughout the world, but particularly in Europe and the Middle East, and that China is now an ascendant global power, and that the two of them are pressing a very different, competing worldview that is authoritarian, and that in every country I've been in, literally, as a senator, you hear that there have been engagements, encounters, particularly with China, but also Russia, where they pointedly say, you can have development without all the messiness, of you, know human rights, and journalists, and opposition, and all those things we don't want. And we're in a very different place. Whether it's regionally - North Korea and Iran - whether it's globally - Russia and China - we're back to a world that is less, maybe, binary than the Cold War, but where it's really clear to the average American that we are not necessarily ascendant, that we are not the dominant world power, and that the arc of history is moving, but not necessarily in our direction.

So I think your question, in part, was, why did the average American, at least taken the voting and the results of the last presidential election, decide they've had it with the pay-any-price, bear-any-burden costs of being the world's policeman? And you asked before we came out, what is it that the average Delawarean asks me about as I get off the train, or as I'm home at events, or on the weekend? And I'll tell you, in my first few years as a senator, the cost of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, their impact on the young men and women who are doing two, and three, and four and five tours was a widespread, shared concern. Positively, the level of respect for our veterans, the level of gratitude for their service and the level of awareness of the ongoing sacrifice exceeds anything during the era of the Vietnam conflict when I was a young person. Negatively, it is a cost that is wearing on the American people. And so I hear pointed questions about, how much do we spend in foreign aid? How much longer are we going to be engaged in these conflicts? How much of a burden is this going to be for our country? It is always easier to ridicule foreign aid, to suggest that the U.N. is a bunch of feckless bureaucrats, to undermine or challenge or marginalize the dreams of the Wilsonian and to point to the hard-eyed reality of the world. That's always easier.

What I think President Trump is discovering now in his year of service is that while it's easy to rile up a crowd by saying you're going to tear up the horrible JCPOA - this Iran deal, the worst deal ever made; I'll tear it up on my first day - this Paris Agreement, shackling American

industry - beautiful clean coal is being held down by these bunch of U.N. pinheads - that's easy to get a crowd excited about. But the reality of governing and of keeping our country secure in a world where you need allies to confront North Korea, you need a coalition in order to fight ISIS, you need partners in order to make our economy more robust and more secure - it's a lot harder. So, I think part of what's going on is an inevitable tension between a bumper sticker-level analysis of our place in the world - it is easy to gin up, for the average American, the idea that you don't want to pay the bill anymore. Do you want your nephew being deployed for the third time? Do you want to pay higher taxes to rebuild a country you can't spell, and haven't heard of and you're not sure where it is? Of course not - but the average American does want, does expect, does need the benefits of global engagement. It helps our economy. Why are we not out of NAFTA yet when this was one of the president's principal promises? Because at the end of the day, our interconnectedness to Canada and Mexico economically is far more complicated than he might've initially appreciated. Why is he not imposing unbelievably tough tariffs to push back on China? Because we need their cooperation if we have any hope of reining in Kim Jong Un and his aggressive nuclear weapons program.

So I think part of what has happened is that America has gotten tired of bearing the burden, of being engaged in the world, as we did after the First World War, and has chosen to look inward. But the messiness, the complexity and the reality of the world, which calls out for American leadership and engagement, is mediating or mitigating some of that impact. I would, if you asked me to, label myself as someone who moves between a Wilsonian and a Jacksonian view, where I think we need a strong defense, we need to be engaged in the world, we need to be able to land a punch every now and then, but where our foreign policy has to be led by principles and values greater than our own immediate, narrow, mercantile self-interest. And one of the things I worry about this period and one of the things I've heard consistently from allies and opponents around the world is a questioning of how deep this Jacksonian retreat to America First really goes, and what does it really mean?

MEAD: Well, this - you know, bringing up the sort of Wilsonian, Jacksonian tension I think is actually a very good one. And you can certainly see it in the administration where on day one, we are talking America First, and day two, we talk about how terrible it is that North Korea helped Syria build chemical weapons and pointing to a U.N. report saying that. So one can see in real life how an administration has to play more than one string of the violin, so to speak. But it does look to me that Wilsonians lost a lot of credibility in the last, you know, 10, 15 years, whether it's a greater Middle East, that's - we're going to solve terrorism by solving the root causes, lack of democracy and economic development.

Then, well, Iraq - well, I guess, it's - I suppose it's a democracy. How happy has that made us? The Arab Spring, Erdogan, the great - that American efforts at democracy promotion seem to actually not work that well. Ask the Egyptians. So there is a cynicism, if not about Wilsonian ideals, about the capacity of Wilsonian foreign policy people - wonks and others - to execute and

to know the difference between what they can do and what they can't do. How do we find our way to - I don't know - a pragmatic Wilsonianism?

COONS: Well, the challenge - exactly the sort of attitude or the line that had the strongest bite in Trump's attacks on the campaign was that elites have sold you out. The critique of engagement with the world that I saw had the most impact on the campaign trail was the idea that these international trade agreements that have been cut by elites like the Clintons have sold you out as the average working man and woman. And if you're wondering why you're losing, and people in New York and in Los Angeles are winning, it's because the elites have sold you out. That's a theme that has emerged at different times throughout our history, and that frankly has some resonance globally. One of the challenges is, these are largely the consequences of globalization, not the consequences of specific trade deals and the provisions of trade deals. And it's pretty easy to conflate the two. And it's pretty easy to get folks who are really mad about the change in their life circumstances to - when you're giving them - right? - you've got to give them a villain? Here's a villain. And folks like - I'll say folks like me - I won't include you in the dyad here.

MEAD: I'm certainly no elite.

COONS: You know, folks who went to Yale are pretty easy to point a finger at and say, how much time did you spend working on the manufacturing line? And while you tell me that we need the United Nations to bring peace and order to the world, I'm still wondering, where is my son going to work when he grows up? So what do we do to bring some sort of balance to our view of engagement with the world? First, to be optimistic for a second, the American people remain astonishingly openhearted, generous, desirous of being admired for doing good things in the world.

One of the hardest decisions that President Obama made was to deploy 3,000 American troops, doctors and nurses into Liberia during Ebola. I went to Liberia during Ebola. Our initial reaction as a country, if you can remember this in the fall of 2014, was to freak out and say, "Keep out of our country anybody who might possibly infect us." But at almost exactly the same time, literally thousands of American volunteers went to West Africa to risk their lives in addressing a potential pandemic. And the boldness of the stroke of deploying an entire division, and all the resources and funding associated with it, and literally turning the tide and saving a nation and a region and, arguably, the world from a pandemic, was huge. The average American can and should look back at that and say, we literally saved a country, arguably saved the world. When I've listened to my parents and grandparents talk about what the Second World War meant to them, what the conflict in Korea meant to them, they were very proud of the fact that they literally saved a world from fascism, from Japanese imperialism, and rebuilt a world that wasn't just good for us but was good for everyone. Finding a way back towards combining the impulses of the average American to say, you know what? If children in Syria have been hit with poison gas, we need to do something about that.

That inspired Trump to act. If there are children starving in refugee camps, we should do something about that. That inspires both Republicans and Democrats with whom I serve to act. But we have to be clearer about our goals, about our costs, about how it benefits the average American. I do an annual conference in Delaware whose purpose is to say, to the folks who hired me, here's what I'm doing - getting on a plane and going to West Africa. Here's how it benefits us in Delaware. If I succeed in opening South Africa's market for our chicken to be exported into that market - may sound a little prosaic, may sound a little parochial, but you know what? When Jim Perdue gets on local TV and says, "I love the fact that this guy went and opened a new market for our poultry," that's pretty fabulous from an electoral perspective. It matters that the average American, who wonders why we're doing all this stuff, get an outcome that they can connect to and they can understand. One of the things that makes us particularly weary is when you ask the question, when will we come home from Afghanistan? When will things in Iraq and Syria settle down? When will it be safe again? The answer isn't just one more year. The answer is maybe another decade or two. And we're having a hard time absorbing that as a nation.

When a generation went off to fight fascism in Western Europe, it was five years. When we took on Japanese imperialism from start to finish, it was roughly five years. Vietnam was unpopular in part because it was, at that point, our longest conflict. And folks kept getting told in the United States one more year, one more year, one more year. And it didn't seem to have an end in sight.

If I were to be negative and suggest something that worries me, it's that the war on terrorism, broadly defined without a clear timeline and outcome, does really put us at risk of being exhausted with having to fight again and again and again around the world. The good news about ISIS is that their brutality, their craziness, their extremism, did mobilize an America that was tired of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. They were so outrageous that they got - first, Barack Obama, and now Donald Trump, and our military, engaged, and so many of our allies. And there is - there does seem to be a close - an end. Raqqa is now peaceful and free of ISIS. But the larger campaign may go on for a long time, and I worry about the sustainability of support for a sort of muscular engagement with the world when the costs and the time horizon go beyond a four-year cycle or 140 characters.

MEAD: And I think you're right, too. There's a temptation to overpromise when people are trying to build a consensus to do something that can come around and bite you later when - you know, this trade agreement that was going to give, you know, \$3,000 of annual benefits to every family in the United States. It's maybe giving a hundred thousand dollars in benefits to some and nothing visible to others or a loss.

COONS: Yeah.

MEAD: Where - you know, there's a lot of talk about the Republican Party splintering in terms of foreign policy these days. And certainly any party that's got Rand Paul and John McCain in it has a wide variety of viewpoints. But I think Democrats are also - there are a lot of different sort

of movements and currents in the Democratic Party. Where do you think that party is going on foreign policy?

COONS: Well, that's a challenge for my party that I'm excited to be engaged in. I think that we can reclaim a legacy, a history that runs from FDR to Truman to Kennedy, where Democrats have been proud of the strength of our military, the capability of our diplomats and our development professionals, have seen a balance to the need for soft power and hard power and recognize that if we can't occasionally send in the Marines or throw a punch or assert ourselves, then all the principles in the world will not have the impact we hoped for. But we marry that with an aspirational view of the world - not a fear-based view of the world - with a hope for improvement in the condition of people around the world, and improvement in terms of how they're governed and how they see us.

I've spent an awful lot of time in Africa. And so perhaps that conditions my views of the world. I've been to 27 countries on the continent in my time as a senator. There is no continent on the planet where the United States is more positively viewed than the continent of Africa. There is no continent on the planet that faces bigger opportunities and bigger challenges in terms of demographic changes, natural resources, development and governance, and where the contest of ideas of systems between China and the United States is so daily, widely evident. The force of China's engagement with Africa is like a tidal hole. Everywhere I've been, from remote villages to capitals, the Chinese are present. They're engaged, and they're providing a powerful counter example of how you could organize society. Young Africans are finding themselves with the opportunity to go to China and come to the United States. And it's not exactly clear which will end up being the ascendant alignment. My hope for Africa is that Africa will be able to choose its own pathway and its own future, that it will be one economically free of constraints of extraction of value from China, and that will allow them to choose systems that allow individuals the chance to be free.

I spent a fair amount of time also with John McCain travelling around the world. Last year, I was blessed to have a chance to go with him to Halifax to a regional security conference, to Singapore to a regional security conference, and to Vietnam, and to revisit places where he served as a prisoner of war and to see some of the consequences and the impact, both on him and on the country.

So perhaps within the Democratic Party, I tend to skew a little more towards the value of hard power because of what I've heard from our allies in the North Atlantic, in the Indo-Pacific, in those regional security conferences. Yes, they want us because of our values. Yes, they want us because of our history. But they also want us because they want a powerful nation that is willing to support their independence and their ability to choose a path forward. And they are very concerned about Russian interference and Russian intrusion and Chinese engagement and Chinese intrusion. That does not always lead to the sorts of societies that we would value around the world.

MEAD: This Russia-Chinese challenge - and, of course, the Russians and the Chinese don't agree about everything and have a lot of different interests, but a sort of a common challenge to the Western system is probably the greatest challenge that we face internationally today - how does America respond to this challenge?

COONS: First and most simply - because I like to criticize myself and the Congress, it's a delightful habit - the simplest way to push back on what is being argued is for us to do our job. If Congress got along, if Congress actually solved the real problems facing average Americans, it would make two things change. The average American would be much less cynical about the possibility of politics producing any result of being heard. An awful lot of what happened with the election of Donald Trump was that millions of Americans felt like whatever the hell is going on here has nothing to do with them, and disrespects and disregards their needs and concerns. So a less partisan, less divided, more functional, more productive Congress would do two things at the same time - first, say to millions of Americans, "we hear you;" second, demonstrate to the developing world democracy actually works. It solves big problems well. When they see the government of the United States shut down for 17 days over a partisan fight about a health care program, the rest of the world scratches their head and says, "What? You did what? You shut down your entire government."

That doesn't happen in other systems. So we are weakening ourselves through our own partisan division. And I have to own my role in that. But the first thing I did today was to spend time talking with 10 other senators in the gym. You can tell I should be exercising more and chatting less, but, you know, the sacrifices I make. It's only by listening to each other and respecting each other as senators who represent states with different values and different ideas than we have any hope of showing that democracy can work - first. Second - bluntly to now immediately take a partisan point - nothing is more reckless than the idea of slashing the budget of the Department of State and USAID by 25 or 30 percent. I just cannot get my head around the idea that we would dramatically increase our investment in the United States military, because we are overextended, we've got conflicts in a great number of places and we have challenges, and not at the same time invest in the State Department and in foreign assistance. That the administration felt compelled to make those deep cuts at least in the budget reflects what was a hangover from the election.

If you gin up a whole lot of crowd saying foreign aid is a waste and we don't need a bunch of pinheads at the U.N., you propose a budget that gets rid of the foreign aid and the pinheads at the U.N. But the reality is that on a bipartisan basis, Republican and Democratic senators and congressmen have rejected these cuts, last year and this year, and will continue to do so. And privately, we've heard both from allies overseas and from folks inside the administration, "Please don't slash this funding, because the absence of America diplomatically would mean what are the odds we're actually going to get to Geneva and get a negotiated resolution of the Syrian conflict? What are the odds we're actually going to engage North Korea through working with our South Korean and Japanese and Chinese partners in this effort?" You need diplomats if you're going to

solve these problems. So how do we confront China and Russia? First, by being a better example of democracy, by working, by listening to each other - it beats the alternative.

Remember, we have a deeply divided country that has a whole lot of weapons. And one of the best ways to resolve challenging conflicts is through democracy, through hearing each other, through the messiness of legislation. But second, by having a robust economy, the most important thing we can have is a successful, robust economy that has world-class universities, inventors and entrepreneurs, solutions to the health and technology and resource challenges that face the world, and then to share them in a way that inspires the world to model - to copy our model rather than a competing model.

Last, about Russia - we've got to be clear-eyed about how significant a challenge this really is. You're seeing a level of aggression and intrusion that crosses previous boundaries. One of the things that was remarked on in Israel was that Iran, by sending a stealth drone directly into Israeli airspace, was more directly confronting and challenging Israel than has been the case before when attacks have been by proxies and in other geographies. Russia attacked our election. It is indisputable. In a hearing in front of the House Intelligence Committee, President Trump's director of national intelligence, head of the CIA, and head of the FBI all said it is indisputable that Russia intentionally engaged in a campaign to interfere in our election, and will do so again because they haven't paid any significant price. That is a stunning failure to act in defense of what defines us as a nation.

On a bipartisan basis, it is up to Congress to insist on funding the stabilization and security of our next election - I've just joined Senator Lankford in a bipartisan bill to do that - and in funding that response, which on my Appropriations Subcommittee I will be fighting for literally later today. But we need a president who stands up to this threat, who sees it for what it is and says, "I'm not saying anything about my election. I'm just talking about our next election." We need to defend ourselves, or our allies throughout the world will say, as I heard from leaders in Ukraine and in the Czech Republic and in Estonia last August, "If you won't even defend your own election, why should we count on you to come and help defend our democracy?" It is an existential moment for us, showing that the Jacksonian bluster can actually be matched by some decisive action.

MEAD: What - which worries you more, Russia or China?

COONS: I guess I can't have door number three, can I? (Laughter). Look, Vladimir Putin has done a remarkable job of playing a weak hand very well. He is agile. He is aggressive. He is broad spectrum. Long term, I'd rather have China's hand than Russia's hand in terms of resources, demographics, regional stability. China faces significant internal challenges as well. But just the sheer size and capabilities of the Chinese people, its regional placement, its history and its future path, I worry more about China. I think it is entirely possible - I insist it is possible, even likely, that if we conduct ourselves in the right way, with that combination of optimism and

rules and strong defense and capability, that we can end up being really positive partners with China, that we can find areas of the world where we can work together and where we can persuade them that we are not determined to make them fail. If you look at the run-up to the Second World War and the messages sent by the United States to Japan, implicitly and explicitly, that we would not allow Japan to succeed - was how it was interpreted - conflict became inevitable. I don't think conflict, military conflict, between the United States and China is inevitable. But I do think there are a lot of potential flashpoints, and there's a lot of areas where we need to be firm, forceful, engaged, and clear. My hunch is that in Beijing, they find President Trump utterly confounding. As candidate Trump, he said, "I intend to be unpredictable," and I think he has outperformed in this category.

(LAUGHTER)

COONS: The question is, can he stick the landing after a fairly complicated gymnastic exercise? And in a world where the whole culture and practice of diplomacy is to send messages carefully between well-armed adversaries, he's upended a lot of that. One of the things I worry about is that increasingly what I hear at home and abroad is, "Ignore his tweets. That's not real American policy." That's a bad idea. You cannot have the president of a superpower firing off tweets at all hours of the morning and night that are at times treated as actual government policy and at times treated as tabloid trash. That's bad for us, for our opponents, and for our allies because it confounds them, confuses them and makes it hard to read what is our actual intention. Short term - I'm much more worried about Russia. Long term - I'm much more worried about China. In both cases, the best answer is for America to be America again.

MEAD: We have a few more minutes, and you are one of the kind of leading experts in the Congress and even in American public life on Africa and African issues. What would you say are the most important - and we don't have a lot of time - but the most important opportunities and the most important challenges for the U.S. in Africa?

COONS: The most important challenge, first, is to just show up - to show up, to pay attention and to be engaged. We have a remarkable African diaspora community in the United States that is in every state, that is in every sector. The Nigerian-American community, for example, is the most educated diasporic community of any type in the United States. And I've had the good opportunity in my career in manufacturing and in local government to have lots of close relationships, friendships, working partnerships, with engineers and professors and physicians who happen to be members of the African diaspora. We should take greater advantage of that. There is not a comparable diaspora in Russia, in Brazil, in Iran, in China. There is in the United States - first. Second - we've got the potential to be the most important partner for a continent that has huge potential. It'll be the biggest growth market of this century. It has the most untapped natural and human resources of any continent in the world. And you are going to see astonishing growth.

When I was working for a global company and we were doing strategic planning - this is literally 20 years ago - Japan was clearly the most important economy and partner in the Asia-Pacific. And China was looking promising, but who knew where it was going to end up. If you go to the Asia-Pacific today, the difference in priority and order is dramatic. That same level of change will happen with Africa over the next 20 years. We've got American companies where in the C-suite they're trying to figure out, "Where's the next China?" China has figured it out. It's Africa. And we've got wonderful implicit advantages in terms of political, economic, cultural engagement with Africa. We should take advantage of it. Right now, we're missing the window, and we're missing the opportunity. And by 10 or 20 years from now, that opportunity will have been taken and cemented by a new partner from Asia. The United States needs to invest time and attention and effort in order to get this right.

MEAD: Any particular country you think we should focus on most?

COONS: Out of 54.

MEAD: Yeah, I know.

COONS: Nigeria - I mean, this is simplistic, but Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa are absolutely crucial regional hubs. As they go, they will drive in many ways complex regions that have lots of other histories, languages, issues. But if we don't get the U.S.-Nigeria strategic relationship right and if they aren't on a good path, it affects that whole region.

MEAD: Almost 1 in 4 sub-Saharan Africans lives in Nigeria.

COONS: That's right, and a Muslim population larger - soon larger- than Egypt, and with dynamics and complexities that are important.

MEAD: Simultaneously you have a Christian population larger than France's, I think.

COONS: And in South Africa, we have a new moment of opportunity for a democracy to show that it respects rule of law, that it can heal itself after a period of spectacular corruption, and that in both Zimbabwe and South Africa we might see a trend line back towards an open market and free society. And in Kenya, I'll remind you, in the recent election, the Supreme Court showed some pluckiness and some insistence in a way that I think was unexpected. And I think there is real potential for the whole of East Africa to continue to move in the direction of being robust democracies. It is a halting progress at times, uneven. But again, all of these are countries where the U.S. relationship is important, is interesting, is something they put a great value on, but where the Chinese are present constantly. And so we have tools in the United States in development finance and through the Millennium Challenge Corporation, through our private sector, through our universities, through the diaspora community, that we should be engaging and deploying. We are missing an enormous opportunity.

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