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WEBINAR

STRONGER: ADAPTING AMERICA'S CHINA STRATEGY
IN AN AGE OF COMPETITIVE INTERDEPENDENCE

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Keynote Conversation:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. LI: Good afternoon. My name is Cheng Li, and I'm the director of Brookings China Center. It's my pleasure to welcome you to today's book launch event featuring the latest work by my good friend, colleague, and Brookings Senior Fellow Ryan Hass.

Ryan's book, "Stronger: Adapting America's Strategy in Age of Competitive Interdependence," comes at the critical time in U.S.-China relations, arguably, the greatest inflection point since the establishment of a diplomatic relationship four decades ago.

For the United States, this is a time when the foreign policy community, both inside and outside the beltway, and including academia, think tanks, and government agencies is searching for a sound, long-term strategy to address a global China.

In my humble view, formulating an effective grand strategy in any contentious relationship between major power is not easy and it can comprise four components. Number one, developing an accurate understanding of your competition neither falling into the trap of sensationalism by overstating the challenge or threat, nor becoming complacent by underestimating your competitor's age.

Number two, clarifying your objectives and the ways, and the means to reach these objectives. Number three, generating domestic consensus in building international alliances by acting together more than acting alone. And, finally, number four, being skeptical about the total victory and cooperating with the competitor when interests overlap always keeping diplomatic mechanism open to avoid catastrophic scenarios.

Ryan's book, more than anything else, provide a reason and the comprehensive U.S. grand strategy for China by some fully addressing, assessing U.S. strengths and the challenges in regarding to China. Ryan argued that the more the United States can restore confidence and regenerate its competitiveness that the better it will be able to focus attention where it matters most, not on slowing China down, but on advancing itself.

Ambassador Hoffman wrote insightfully on the back cover of the book that, I quote, "What

gives the book 'Stronger' such value, Ryan Hass' unique insights borne of his seed of inference as a respected practitioner." I want to add, this book will grant Ryan a reputation as one of America's most respected strategy thinkers.

I am also profoundly pleased that the two other respected and inferential party intellectuals, CNN National Security Correspondent Kylie Atwood, and New Yorker Staff Writer Evan Osnos, join us to speak with Ryan about this very important and timely book.

I'm pretty sure that my spouse, who is a big fan of all of you, would take a photo in which I appear alongside the three of you to show off to our friends. These three speakers today represent the next generation of leading foreign policy experts in the United States.

Evan will introduce Ryan and Kylie, and the three of them will engage a thought provoking conversation. I am now honored to briefly introduce Evan. It is actually a bit difficult to pin down Evan. He's a journalist and writer, but he also frequents the think tank circuit and the college sectors.

He is a China expert, who live in China for almost a decade, and has written on various subjects about that rapidly changing country. But his recent best-selling book on Joe Biden has turned him into a popular commentator on American politics.

If I could use one line to highlight my friend, Evan, I will say this, he is a nonresident senior fellow in our Brookings China Center, a title he was granted even before he was nominated for and later received the prestigious National Book Award in 2014, for his first book, "Age of Ambition." Evan, over to you.

MR. OSNOS: Thanks, Cheng, that is a great pleasure to be here with you, even virtually. I'm sorry we're not doing it in-person, but thank you for very kind words. I have to say, you have framed today's conversation in the context of the extraordinary stakes of this moment. And I think I had the privilege of reading this book, the book we're talking about today, "Stronger." I had the privilege of reading it when it was still in manuscript and it is just a remarkably clear-eyed approach to the challenges.

And I will say as an aside that it is an approach that Cheng Li has taken at Brookings to

the work at the China Center, and I think you see it reflected in this text that Ryan has given us.

We have a lot of ground to cover and so I want to get right into it by introducing my two colleagues a little bit more fully. Kylie Atwood, as many of you know, is a national security correspondent for CNN.

She has covered the last three secretaries of state and has broken news on a number of foreign policy fronts including North Korea and she keeps a close eye on China. And she spent six years at CBS before she was at CNN and she covered domestic politics and she knows the State Department inside and out.

And, of course, we have Ryan Hass, who is the author of "Stronger," which is the basis for our conversation. Ryan is a senior fellow and the Michael Armacost chair in Foreign Policy Studies at Brookings.

And prior to joining Brookings, I think, as many people on this call know, part of the reason why we have such an extraordinary turnout today is that Ryan is a practitioner of the highest order. He served at the White House at the National Security Council during the Obama administration, as China director, from 2013 to 2017, and he also served as a diplomat in the U.S. embassy in Beijing.

So, at the outset, I'd like to pose a question to both of you, if I could, about something that is, after all, right on our minds right now which is the scene we saw last week in Anchorage.

March 19th, as you remember, of course, senior members of the Obama -- sorry -- the Biden administration, I should say, were having their first face-to-face, their first sit down with senior Chinese officials and it was quite tense. It was actually much more, I think, tempestuous than people in the public might have expected. And we can go into the question of whether or not that was a surprise to the participants.

But just to remind you of a couple of the key features, afterwards the Chinese side described the American approach as condescending; the Americans described their counterparts as having grandstanded. This was quite turbulent by the standards of the usual diplomacy.

And I wonder, Ryan, if you would start us off by giving us a sense of what you saw.

When you looked at the tussling in that room, you know what's going on there, how much of that is theatrical, how much of that is substantive, and what does it tell us about, as Cheng put it, the inflection point where we are in this relationship?

MR. HASS: Well, Evan, first of all, it's really an honor for me to be with you and Kylie today, and I'm looking forward to our conversation. I think that what happened in Alaska is a sign of the new normal that we live in.

And what I mean by that is that a lot of the tussling that previously has taken place behind closed doors in the past has now just burst into the open. I don't think anyone who has spent time in a room with Yang Jiechi was surprised by the tenor or sharpness of his comments in Alaska.

What was notable is that they were made in front of the press in a pretty sharp exchange between the American and Chinese delegations. But if you take a step back and think about it, it's sort of an extension of the reality that we have been living in for recent years where the United States has taken actions, China has taken reactions, or vice versa, and there is just a mood that's set in in the relationship that neither side is going to take a punch from the other.

And so if one side feels that its dignity is being challenged, it's going to respond forcefully, and I think that that's what we saw in Alaska. We can talk about whether or not this was unofficial or avoidable, but I think the reality is that both sides took a few punches in front of the press and then they got down to work and the press left the room.

And we saw over the course of eight plus hours of exchange between them that they rolled up their sleeves and dealt with some serious issues that are affecting both the United States and China. And in a sense, it reflects a theme that I try to draw out in the book which is that the relationship is fundamentally competitive.

It's sharply competitive in many areas, yet we're bound together. Whether we like each other or not, there is an interdependence between the United States and China. What happens in Iran affects both of us; what happens in Afghanistan impacts both of us; what happens on global markets affects both of us.

And so we don't necessarily need to be brought together by amity or goodwill, our interests are going to intersect and we are going to have to find ways to deal with other and I think that those two twin dynamics were very much on display in Alaska.

MR. OSNOS: Kylie, what did you make of it? You have looked at this relationship through the eyes partly of the administration. You have thought about how the State Department is looking at it. What did you make of it And do you have a sense of to what degree the Biden administration was surprised by what unfolded, or did they more or less expect this to happen?

MS. ATWOOD: Well, they knew that it wasn't going to be an easy meeting and they said that on the record multiple times leading up to the meeting. You know, they essentially warned everyone who was going to be watching that this is going to get hot, this isn't going to be easy, this is going to be hard, right, so the basic expectation was there.

However, watching it unfold the way that it did, you know, I was in my office and I, you know, watching the camera go in and out of the room and, you know, watching Blinken pull the reporters back in, I mean, it was dramatic. And I don't think that you can ignore that that is the foundation for the Biden administration and the China relationship right now.

So that is the backdrop. Now I don't think that that was all together shocking, but it does demonstrate that this is going to be a turbulent, as you said, Evan, relationship, right. And so there is going to be a tremendous amount of jabs that are traded back and forth.

And, as you guys said, we're going to see that more in the public. What I think is interesting, however, is how we, as those who are studying this relationship, trying to see where it goes, what competition looks like, how we determine if this ideological struggle between the two countries, that competition is inherently going to impact the competition on technology, and economics and human rights, and all of that, or if it's sort of a separate thing.

And I'd be interested to see what you guys thought about -- you know, Ryan makes the point in his book that the U.S. and China are not in an ideological battle with one another right now. But the Chinese officials sure seem to sit at that table pretty confidently about saying that the U.S. doesn't

represent values of the world and really going after the United States.

So it complicated things right out of the gates, you know. And I'm curious what you guys made of, you know, the ideological battle versus the kind of nuts and bolts of the competition: economics, and technology, and that front.

MR. OSNOS: If I can, Ryan, you know, there is a point that in some ways this was the setting of the tape, right. I mean this is the event where you have the two sides, they have to have a first meeting somewhere.

You could have a first meeting in Washington; you could have it in Mar-a-Lago in the last administration; and this one, of course, we had it in Anchorage and there is an element of the soft tissue of diplomacy going on there.

But I want to put it in the words for a moment of Secretary Blinken. Because he has said, he has summed up the relationship and the approach by saying that our relationship with China will be, as he says, competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.

How that sound to you, Ryan? After thinking about how to go about this relationship, how does it track with the vision that you have put forward in "Stronger?"

MR. HASS: Well, it's a great question. I will offer a couple of thoughts on that. But if I could just first build on something that Kylie said because there is so much to work with here. I think that what we're going to see going forward is a parallelism or a mirroring. We are already beginning to see this.

Both sides returned to their capitals. The Chinese hosted the Russian foreign minister. Our secretary of state traveled to Brussels. We are finding our friends as a bulwark against the competition than the other, both of us.

There are reports that the Chinese foreign minister is going to travel to Iran later this week which is, again, fitting of the pattern. Yesterday, there were sanctions announced, a series of sanctions related to Xinjiang. China responded immediately with countersanctions against European officials.

And so this mirroring is just, it's moving forward more and more rapidly at an accelerating pace. The geography of the meeting, I think, Evan is fascinating. Because, you know, 24 hours before the meeting Secretary Blinken was an hour away from Beijing; he was in Seoul.

But instead of traveling that extra hour, he returns to Anchorage where his plane needed to refuel anyways on its return route to Washington. They decided not to hold the meeting in Hawaii which is, you know, a warm, tropical, friendly vacationing spot, instead, in sort of the cool confines of Alaska.

And I don't think that, you know, this was all accidental. I think that there is a lot of symbolism embedded in these decisions. On Secretary Blinken's formulation about competition cooperation and adversarial dynamics, I actually am uncomfortable with that framing.

I think it's helpful for a couple of reasons, the first of which is that it identifies that we, the United States, don't view the relationship through a monochromatic lens. In other words, the relationship can be highly competitive but still contain other elements.

It preserves space for cooperation and there are issues where we are going to have fundamental disagreements, we're going to need to manage those disagreements. So I think it's a reflection of reality.

I think it also reflects that there is a maturity to the relationship that it's okay to cooperate with competitors. We did it during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. We're capable, in theory, of doing it again with the Chinese.

And I think it also is helpful for closing some of the gaps between the United States' allies and the way that they think about and talk about China. There is a three-part framing from Secretary Blinken, you know, if there is a pretty strong resemblance as to how the Europeans talk about the Chinese, as well as the Japanese and others. And so any time that we can shrink the gap between us and our allies for dealing with China, I think it's a step in the right direction.

MR. OSNOS: Kylie, you have been there, you know, virtually the same questions, but you have now been there from covering the end of a previous administration and now the arrival of the

Biden administration, how much of what Ryan just described, but I think kind of helping us conceptualize the Biden approach, how much is that similar or different from what was happening before when it came to China?

In some ways, I think people are really trying to understand. Because they will hear the Biden administration sometimes say, look, we want to borrow elements of the -- they won't say it quite explicitly -- but we want to borrow elements of things that were leftover when it's useful to us. But then, of course, we have a fundamentally sort of philosophical difference with it.

Where do you see points of things carrying over, and where do you see the break?

MS. ATWOOD: You know, if you look at those three phrases that the secretary used: competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, adversarial where it must be, I would say it's two-thirds similar to what the Trump folks were using. You know, they were adversarial and they were competitive. That was the fundamental kind of where they landed, I guess, at the end of their administration when it came to their framing on China.

We're going to take them on. We can't afford to work with them on anything. We're going to use all of the rhetoric we have to make them look like the bad guys on the world stage, right.

The third that's the different part here which is extremely noteworthy is the collaborative part and that's going to be really interesting. Because I think we have already seen that it's adversarial. We have already heard them talk about competitive. We haven't seen any collaboration yet.

And, you know, realistically in Washington the Biden administration knows that they have a tremendous amount of pressure on them to keep up the pressure on China and to not, you know, start being too collaborative right out of the gates because then they're going to have folks on both sides of the aisle where, you know, China hawks have really emerged, come after them really hard core.

And so I just find it kind of interesting that, you know, out of those Alaska meetings last week the Republicans didn't go crazy. They were kind of quiet, you know, even folks like Senator Cotton, and, you know, Josh Holly. I mean they sent a tweet here and there, but there weren't extensive, you know, statements from them going after the Biden folks.

They were, you know, quietly pleased with what they saw, And it's going to be interesting to see when the Biden administration feels like they can actually move on the collaborative front of this.

And, obviously, you know, I think the first time that we're going to see that is this April 22nd Climate Initiative that they're working on. Because I have heard that China will be invited to that and I think it's going to be interesting to see how that starts to play out.

MR. OSNOS: You know, you got to something important which I think both of you guys are in a good position to help us understand which is the domestic political scene on each side matters and I think we often sort of underplay it.

You know, there is a way to read what happened last week, as each side essentially doing what they needed to do to still some of the waters at home, right. As you described, Kylie, a moment ago, they were able to do it in a way that kind of in effect diffused what would have an opportunistic criticism from opponents who would say that the Biden administration was going to be too friendly to China.

And, of course, there is an argument that one could make that there were Chinese elements that are quite similar in that sense, that there are people in China and Beijing who would have been eager to criticize any portrait, any presentation that was not vigorous enough.

Ryan, what do you make of how important are the political factors on each side? What should we understand, and what matters when it comes to this, to the relationship?

MR. HASS: Well, it's a great question. And I think it's important, just as a starting point, to acknowledge your question but there are politics on both sides. I mean sometimes in the United States, we develop this perception that only American has politics to contend with and the Chinese are all united in a common purpose toward a unitary goal.

You know, Evan, you and I have lived there, it's a messy place. There are a lot of views competing for influence and attention inside China as well. I think that politics are placing a constraint on both countries at the moment. The first is that both countries hold a narrative that the other is to blame for the downturn in relations.

In the United States, we often hear the recitation of, you know, Chinese misdeeds whether it's Xinjiang in Tibet, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South China seas, cyber issues, stalled economic reform. These are serious real acute problems, many of which the Chinese have singled they're unwilling to work on with us because they view them as internal matters and basically have told the United States to butt out.

On the Chinese side, there is a narrative that has been echoed in a series of speeches by senior Chinese officials that it was all the Trump administration's fault that everything that's wrong with the relationship owes to the hostile zero sum mentality of President Trump and his subordinates.

And the implication is that the Biden administration needs to unwind the attitude and actions of the Trump administration in order to allow for a permissive environment for the relationship to develop. Neither one of those are even chance purchase with the other and so we are sort of stuck at a stalemate.

And then I think also, you know, there is another factor which is that the politics of both countries will not allow for any perception of accommodation. As Kylie was just talking about a moment ago, you know, President Biden and his team would have been really roundly critiqued if they had appeared to be soft towards China in Alaska.

It's also worth to bear in mind that President Xi is, you know, competing for a third term. He is in his primary season right now and he is hoping next fall to be anointed, you know, the core of the Communist Party for another five years.

And during that period, I think there is a very low likelihood that he is going to want to do anything that will dim the image that he has worked so hard to build over the past nine years, I mean, bold, assertive, unyielding, and tough. He is not going to want to be outflanked.

And so I think at least through next fall we're going to be in a period where there is pretty tight parameters on both sides around how much political space is available for significant alterations to be part of this relationship.

MR. OSNOS: Can I follow up with you on something, Ryan, there? Because I think

people are trying to understand how much latitude in confidence seeking they have, right.

Because we have been told, on the one hand, he's got the procedural arrangements now if he wants them to stay in office as long as he chooses. He, in theory, could be president for life; this is the sort of usual description.

And at the same time, China is preparing for a series of public threshold moments beginning with the Olympics in 2022 that also might be a constraint on the degree to which they would be willing to court confrontation with the United States and other powers.

So help us understand both, one, is he in fact -- you mentioned that he's campaigning for a third term. Why? How? And, two, to what degree do these other factors figure in to his options in that view?

MR. HASS: First of all, I would be surprised is Xi Jinping did not become leader for five more years. I think that things are trending pretty much in that direction right now. But the manner by which he is anointed for another five years is still appears to be a subject of debate.

In other words, is Xi Jinping going to become a Li Kwan Yu, a minister mentor, that over time, you know, steps back from the frontlines but provides guidance, counsel, and leadership to the next generation, or is he going to become Vladimir Putin, who tightly controls the levers of power and refuses to let go lest he become imperiled with the process.

And I think that the answer to that question is still unknown, so there are a range of scenarios. Next fall, he could be anointed as the leader for another five years with no successor identified. He could be anointed for another five years with a successor identified or with a group of people in the next generation that are elevated, one of which will emerge as his eventual successor.

So I think that there are enough variables that are still outstanding to keep Xi Jinping out of his bench. But to your latter point, I do think that the calendar matters significantly for the Chinese. They have their 100 year anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party this July, and they have the Olympics, the Winter Olympics next February.

They're not going to want a big dust-up with the United States or others to overshadow

their preferred narrative which has a heavy domestic focus on showing that China is respected, admired, and welcome on the world stage.

MR. OSNOS: You know, Kylie, I wonder if you can bring us into a piece of this that is playing out on the U.S. side which is, you know, I think it's important for us to mark this moment here. We are talking in the, you know, the last week of March here, and there has been a state of anti-Asian violence in the United States, and I want to mark a distinction.

There is a geopolitical conversation that we could have about U.S.-China relations, and there is also a conversation to be had about hatred towards Asians. And I think there is -- but there is linkage here, we just have to acknowledge that the politics in this country has been focused over the last few months, before the administration obviously took over, talking about the virus as the China virus, and so on.

Can you talk to us a bit about this moment? How do you think that is being felt in Washington? Do you think there is a sense that these are related and that there are things that policymakers and that lawmakers should be doing to try to blunt this very worrying trend?

MS. ATWOOD: I think that they are undeniably related, and I think that that is hitting Washington like a pile of bricks. Because traditionally there is political rhetoric in Washington that doesn't always ripple out.

And you see tough language, you see folks say things, and you think it kind of lives in this little bubble, right, and it doesn't have an impact anywhere. And guess what, it does, the language is incredibly important.

And I think it's been, you know, refreshing to see lawmakers acknowledge that's what's happened over the last year with the COVID and the language that the former president was using to demonize Chinese people over that virus was really, really, really detrimental.

So I don't think that you could say that they're not related. I do think that there are things that can be done. And I think there are news outlets that are working on these things right now, CNN being one of them.

Visibility of Asian-Americans who are, you know, highly successful in a number of different areas is really important. Because what people see is what they believe, right, and we are humans. What's before our eyes, we don't always challenge.

And so I think you're seeing Asian-Americans being, you know, wonderfully effective and contributing citizens of America is certainly important and that is happening in a number of spaces right now. But I do think that it's something that, you know, folks in Washington are going to have to grapple with. Because as the Biden administration moves forth to try to compete with China, there is a difference between competition and fearmongering.

And you've got to be really careful with that language. Because, you know, we have seen that it has detrimental effects. I mean if you look back at U.S.-Japan relations, the competition that emerged between the U.S. and Japan a few decades ago, also created some racist sentiments in the United States towards Asians.

And so we have seen this happen before and it's something that they are going to need to be highly cognizant of. Certainly, the president, President Biden has already, you know, spoken out on this front and I think that that's really important.

MS. OSNOS: And, Kylie, just to drill -- oh, go ahead, Ryan, jump in.

MR. HASS: Please go ahead. I was just going to add on to what Kylie said, but I'm happy to follow her.

MR. OSNOS: Well, I was just going to ask, you know, and you make the right point that the Biden administration has come out and said this is, you know, this is grotesque. We're not going to allow this to go on.

Are the folks who have been using that kind of language talking about the Wuhan virus and the China virus? Do you see that they have been chastened at all by this? Are they dialing it back, or are you not seeing that yet, either one of you?

MS. ATWOOD: I would say those folks don't have the platform that they once did. Certainly, President Trump isn't on Twitter anymore, isn't on Facebook. I mean it's kind of hard to tell,

quite frankly. So I don't think we have, you know, fair measuring sticks for what they used to be saying versus what they are saying now.

But I do think that there are, you know, as I said, folks in Washington who recognize that this had an impact. And it's going to be up to leadership in Washington now, the Biden administration, to really kind of change things.

MR. OSNOS: Ryan, over to you, sorry, I cut you off.

MR. HASS: Yeah, I'm really glad that you raised this because I think it's such a critical issue and we're at a really delicate moment right now.

And one of the things that I hoped that we wall collectively could do is to try to raise a bit of awareness about the historical patterns that are repeating themselves so that we don't get stuck in the same cycle again because we've this movie before.

We know that when there is geopolitical tumult and inflamed nationalism, racism often follows. We saw this with the Germans, with the Soviets, with the Japanese. With the Muslims after 9/11, and I would love for us to try to break this cycle now. But it's really important for people I think to understand the gravity of the moment that we're in.

The second and final thought that I would add is that I think that anyone who traffics in race baiting relinquishes their role as having any serious voice on matters relating to competition with China because those actions do more to destroy America's image and undercut our competitiveness than anything that they have to offer.

MR. OSNON: Yeah, here, here, and I think what you have done here is help us draw a bright line between the idea that there is anything that can pass as analytic or national strategic counsel to be demonizing a group of people as in this country or in our relationships, it just has no place.

And I'm glad to hear that we, you know, have had a chance to talk about it today. And it actually does relate, Ryan, directly to what you have written about in this book which is our perception of ourselves, and our perception of our counterpart.

And, you know, in a sense, that is very much in play right now because in one of the

themes that you identified in here it goes all of the way back to the Cold War, and it's called the "10-foot-tall syndrome."

I wonder if you could help us understand what's going on, and where does that idea originate, and why does it matter beyond the fact that, you know, it might distort some of the conversation in Washington? What is it, and why does it matter?

MR. HASS: So, 10-foot-tall syndrome traces back to secretary of defense during the Cold War, Schlesinger, who observed that we, the United States, tended to view and treat our Soviet counterparts as figures of towering strength and immense knowledge, you know, that they could see the future and move mountains; whereas, we were just mere mortals struggling to get by.

And I worry that we're at risk of repeating that again. And it's not just sort of an academic observation, I think it matters a lot. Because the more that we fall under 10-foot-tall syndrome, the more we advertise our insecurities. It leads us to travel around the world warning countries that the Chinese are coming and beware of their perfidious ways.

You know, countries like Vietnam, they have been dealing with the Chinese for thousands of years. They don't need us telling them what they're doing and what they know. But when we do that, when we send our secretaries of state and national security advisors out on these, you know, these alarmists tours it does a couple of things.

One, it sort of focuses on us playing defense against every Chinese action everywhere in the world, when what we really need to be doing is playing offense and having the Chinese responding to us. It causes our allies to lose confidence in us. We begin to wonder if we know something about China and how we stack up against them that they don't; that maybe they should hedge a little bit against our own uncertainties about ourselves

But it also just, you know, it radiates anxiety and insecurity and those aren't attractive traits in human relations any more than they are in state-to-state relations. And so part of what I am trying to do in this book is to provide a reminder that the United States still is the stronger power in this relationship. We have abundant and enduring strengths that China frankly can't take away from us, and

we need to act like it.

MR. OSNOS: You know, it's interesting, two datapoints come to mind that I think are relevant. And I'll use the moderator's prerogative just to mention these because I do think they reflect on us.

One is, on January 6, I was down at the Capitol reporting on what was happening there and I had this moment that drove home for me the way in which the China question has been, in a sense, sort of polluted into this broader political distress we have in this country which is that people there on the ground, these people who were storming the Capitol in this insurrection, they mentioned China's "infiltration of United States government," as a reason for their concern.

And that is just a demonstration of the degree to which this issue has sort of escaped the boundaries of serious rational discussion and has become a political point of toxicity rather than an informed point.

One other thing I'll mention is that a couple of years ago, when I was in -- I went to North Korea to report on the nuclear crisis and the North Koreans -- Ryan, to your point, the North Koreans said -- you know, we think of ourselves and the United States as being in this kind of mortal conflict with the North Koreans.

But they said, look, we have one war with you, we've had hundreds of wars with China over the centuries. And I mention that not to say that we're going to wake up tomorrow as friends with North Korea, but that we sometimes underestimate that the ways in which China's actions are perceived around the world and that that in fact is an element of its position today.

So we may feel as if we're in this very intense one-on-one confrontation, but in fact China is in a very set of complicated relationships, some of them very tense with other places around the world.

And so, you know, I think that that's our tendency in the U.S., of course, is to narrow it through our own lens. I wonder if we could -- Kylie, if you could help us put the China issue in context with other national security questions. Because, you know, I think all of us who do China, we tend to think, well, this is the most important issue in the world.

And I think there are others who will say, well, maybe, but maybe not. Help us situate it. Is, in fact, where does China sort of rank in the list of priorities for national security decision-makers in the administration and in Congress?

MS. ATWOOD: Not to, you know, hoot your own horn, but I do think that China is at the top of the list. There is no one that you talk to in the national security space who doesn't mention China when you ask them which country is the greatest threat to the U.S. national security -- China, China, China.

I mean it's, you know, they're growing their military. They're competing with us economically; technologically they're taking us on. Ideologically, as I said, they're taking us on.

So we are engaged in a competition with them on so many fronts. And then the Biden administration has to deal with the day-to-day grind of other challenges, right. So you can't take Iran off the table; you can't take Russia off the table; you can't take North Korea off the table.

But, interestingly, China is increasingly tied to all of those other foreign policy issue areas that the United States has keyed in on. And I think, you know, one of you guys mentioned that, you know, the Russians are visiting China. They were just visiting China after there was this U.S.-China meeting. They may be dissing Iran. They're getting involved with our adversaries which is creating an interesting dynamic.

I do think that the Biden administration is playing the long game with China. You know, they came out of this Alaska meeting -- well, they went into it saying they weren't going to have any deliverables and they didn't. They clearly wanted to ideate and really create a national security strategy.

Because, as Ryan points out in his book, you know, the national security strategy of the United States did a complete 180 on China, you know, from 2012 to 2018, and so they're trying to kind of get it into a place of balance once again to where they can compete and where they can also work with China on a few things. So I don't think you're wrong to say China is at the top of the list.

MR. OSNOS: Ryan, what do you make of that?

MR. HASS: I agree with Kylie. I think that any ranking of nation state challenges, China

is the stiffest test facing the United States and will be well into the future. But one of the things that I think -- and we'll see over time if this proves accurate.

But I think that the Biden administration differentiates a little bit from the Trump administration in seeing China as embedded in a whole host of issues rather than the single burning issue that eclipses all other challenges.

And I just, you know, harken back to a speech that Secretary Blinken gave at the State Department earlier this month where he listed eight foreign policy priorities for the United States. And it was things, like, democracy promotion, COVID, economic recovery, technology leadership, renewing democracy, and China.

And what that told me is that China certainly is going to remain at the top tier of priorities and concerns, but it's not going to be allowed to dominate America's agenda, nor should it because, you know, we are a global power. We have global interests, and we can't get fixated and look at the world through a straw with China at the other end.

So there are going to be opportunities to work with China when our interests and their interests align, you know, but there also are going to be moments where our interests are just fundamentally at odds and we're going to have to manage that competition.

And that's what I hope that we move more toward is just sort of a mature dispassionate dealing of two major powers who have global interests, have major militaries, who have huge economies, and who have significant populations. We're the only two countries in the world that carry all of those attributes.

And so, you know, we have sort of a generational challenge in front of us. Are we going to be able to co-exist and compete with these people are not? And I hope the answer is yes.

MS. OSNOS: One the things that --

MS. ATWOOD: Could I just --

MR. OSNOS: Please, go ahead, Kylie, yes.

MS. ATWOOD: Sorry. Could I just ask Ryan one thing on that? Because I think, you

know, one argument that you make in your book is that there needs to be sustained and direct dialogue between the U.S. and China to identify those areas where the two can work together.

And you list a few areas, you know, COVID relief, climate change, healthcare, AI. I'm thinking about this, you know, through the eyes of the China hawks, who would say, why on earth would we want to work with China on things that we should be developing our own capabilities on alongside our traditional allies, you know, in the areas of disaster response relief?

Why don't we just work with Japan and South Korea on that AI? Why don't we just work with our allies on that? Why are those areas that you think it would be beneficial for the U.S. to have sustained direct dialogues with China on?

MR. HASS: Well, I would answer it a couple of ways. The first is that I still am a believer in the virtue of diplomacy, that there is value in trying to influence the choices and path forward for our other side.

I have seen it over and over again, firsthand, whether it was on Ebola, whether it was Iran, whether it was on North Korea, the returning of a unmanned underwater vehicle that the Chinese had seized, they brought it back to us. We are capable of solving problems when we provide persistence to those efforts and deal with them in a serious manner.

Secondly, and this is a bit counterintuitive, but demonstrating a willingness to work with China constructively and to explore whether or not there is space for collaboration opens up opportunities for other allies and partners to feel more comfortable working with us. Because they don't feel like doing so is part of joining the anti-China coalition or bloc.

MS. ATWOOD: Right.

MR. HASS: They see the United States as not seeking to tilt the relationship into sort of unmitigated hostility. And so if we make a good faith effort and it leads nowhere, fine, but the world will know where the obstruction is and it's not with us.

So I don't have, you know, a rose-tinted optimism about, you know, that a few good words will make all of the problems of the U.S.-China relationship go away, but I do think that there is

benefit to the United States being seen as acting reasonably in the conduct of the relationship.

MR. OSNOS: You know, in just a minute, we're going to turn to the questions that we have that are coming in from the audience. But before we do, I want to return to a point you just mentioned, Ryan, which is that, you know, part of this project, part of what you have undertaken here is an attempt to make a clear-eyed assessment of where are we strong, where are we weak?

Let's sort of rack and stack our relative strengths and weaknesses. Because in the absence of that analysis, we end of elevating our counterparts into the 10-foot-tall problem, and so on, so help us.

For people who say they look at our domestic scene right now, and they say, we look to be hobbled by our own internal divisions, and so on, put that into some context with China's condition. How do you come to the conclusion that your book on the U.S.-China relationship is called, "Stronger?"

MR. HASS: Well, one of the things that I have noticed is that authoritarian systems are very good at advertising their strengths and concealing their weaknesses, and democratic systems are the exact inverse.

You know, we are a walking advertisement of our own problems because we talk about them all of the time and it's not really couth for us to go around banging our chest about our strengths. But if you sort of take a step back and look at where we are and where the Chinese are, I think that there is solid grounds for optimism about our ability to compete with China.

We all know China strengths, they're in the newspaper every day. But let's look at some of their vulnerabilities, their geography, they are surrounded by 14 countries. They have territorial disputes with five countries, four of those have nuclear weapons. It's the most complicated geography of any power in the world.

Food and energy security. They don't have the natural resources to grow their own food or to fuel their own economy; they rely upon external inputs. They don't have a Navy yet that's capable of protecting the sea lines of communication, a huge vulnerability.

National cohesion. If you look around the rim of China, pretty much in any direction that

you look, you see problems: Hong Kong; very tense fraught situation in Tibet; challenging situation in Xinjiang, and I think that they're buying future trouble; inner Mongolia, I think challenge is there.

If you look at their political system, this is a system that was once known for, you know, its technocratic capacity and it's increasingly being viewed for its Leninist rigidity, power is being concentrated in the center, local experimentation is drying up, people are waiting for instructions from the top rather than providing solutions to the top.

And then, in terms of their economy, they have real challenges. They are in a demographic downslope that's going to grow steeper in the coming years. In terms of capital, their debt load is ballooning. It's doubled over the past decade and they're really having a hard time generating total factor relativity growth.

So on the three legs of the economic stool, capital labor and productivity, they're facing stress on all three. So I think that there are real reasons to interrogate any assumption that China will continue to travel on the linear line in the direction of its aspirations indefinitely into the future.

On the other hand, if you look at the United States, you know, our geography is pretty good. We have two oceans in the east and the west and friendly countries in the north and the south. Our political system is resilient. It's capable of self-correction. It has weathered the storm of the past four years and I think pretty much intact.

Our economic weight remains strong. We're seven trillion dollars larger than China's economy. The share of America's global GDP has remained relatively constant over the past 20 plus years. China's rise and share of global GDP has come at the expense of Japan and Europe's declining share not from America's share.

We have an economy that a sponge for the best ideas and brightest minds from around the world. We have abundant natural resources. We are the leading exporter of oil. So I think that we stand okay. And if we are able to live up to our values and perform up to our potential, we will be just fine in our competition with China.

And I guess where I would leave things is that the real strengths that the United States

have its differentiating factors from China. It's global prestige. It's alliance network which is unmatched historically. And, you know, we have allies all over the world. China has one with an asterisk and that's North Korea.

In our domestic dynamism, we are capable of, you know, experiencing hardship and recovering from it. And we have done this over and over again. We have had declines six times in the past 70 years. And in the past five, we have climbed out of them in a stronger position than we were before. This book is a bet on the proposition that we will do so again, but we'll find out.

MR. OSNOS: Well, and I think it's worth telling people that one of the points you make here with a nod to George Cannon is that we are only as strong abroad as we are at home and we have a lot of hard work to do on that maintenance.

I want to turn now to the questions we have coming in because there are a lot of them. This is something actually, it's a question that relates to what Kylie mentioned before.

This comes to us from Tom DeHudy from Brandywine Global, who asks: Given what appears to be a tougher and internally consistent China policy, a tough on China policy from the Biden administration, why should we expect that it's possible to have cooperation on the issues like climate change at the same time?

You know, to either of you, if this of interest, Kylie, by all means. But that I think is an interesting question. Is it, in fact, that the overall tension is such that it makes it impossible to find those areas for cooperation?

MS. ATWOOD: I would punt that to Ryan, because I think he has a more in-depth view on this than I do. I will say that one thing that the Biden team has going for them on this front is some very dedicated folks who want to work on actually joint efforts, right.

So they have Kerry, who is working on climate. And, you know, he knows his success in that role is going to be inherently tied to how successful he is in getting, you know, China to work onboard. That's going to be complicated, as I said, in Washington. But I do think that it matters to have leadership in these areas where they want to work with China. But then I'd give it to Ryan.

MR. HASS: Yeah, and I think that we are in a different space than we were, say, four years ago or eight years ago. There was a view in the past that we should look for that balance between cooperation and competition. I don't hear much of that discussion anymore.

There has been talk in the past of using cooperation as a cushion against competition. I don't hear much of that either. What I do hear and what I would support is a view that when it serves our interests and when it serves China's interests to work together, we should do so.

That's what mature powers do. The United States and Soviet Union eradicated smallpox together at the height of the Cold War not because we liked each other but because it served each of our interests.

And so, for example, when we encounter the need to build a global health surveillance network around the world, looking out at the horizon so that we can rapidly detect viruses when they emerge before they spread and mutate.

I think that would serve both American and Chinese interests. I don't think that America is going to want to build that on its own. China is not capable of doing it on its own. It's going to be very difficult for the United States and China to do that on a bilateral basis.

But maybe under the umbrella of a multilateral or multinational grouping it would be possible for the United States and China to each contribute their areas of expertise and the world will be a better place for it.

Now do I think that's going to happen? I don't know. But I think that we should keep open mentally the idea or the possibility of doing so.

MR. OSNOS: We have multiple questions on that score actually about the possibility for collaboration in space actually. I mean we have a question from Michael Smith from the Marshall Space Flight Center, who is interested on the possibility of collaboration in space. And if you think about during the Cold War, we did have the Apollo and the Soyuz missions, and so on.

Is NASA open to that, as far as you know, Ryan? Is there any sense that that's an area for potential collaboration, or has that become sort of encompassed into the military realm more than in

the realm of potential cooperation, do you happen to have a thought on that?

MR. HASS: Well, Congressman Wolf has put pretty tight parameters around the ability of the United States and China to cooperate in space, and I don't expect that those parameters will be loosened any time soon. Congress keeps a keen eye on those issues I think just to try to protect America's national security.

But, more broadly, as a society, I think that we need to grapple with this question because it's a provocative one. Is exploration in space something that is a source of national security competition between the United States and China, or is it a common pursuit of humanity to accelerate to the maximum extent possible our ability to get to Mars or to whatever the milestone is?

And depending upon where you come out on that question I think informs how you think about a U.S.-China cooperation in space?

Because what we know, what I think we can safely predict is that if the United States walls off a willingness to work with China in space it's not going to limit China's ambitions, it's just going to lead them to pursue parallel efforts. And the United States and China will both pursue these efforts somewhat inefficiently and duplicatively, but we will both do it and we will be slowed down in the process.

MR. OSNOS: You know, we have a question here from Si Yang, who is a reporter for the Mandarin Service of Voice of America. And Si Yang asks about the U.S.-China Alaska meeting with the follow up that, as you remember, Yang Jiechi, at one point, rebuked, in a sense, Secretary Blinken for talking in public about the U.S. concern for serious issues of American interests, Chinese behavior towards Taiwan in Hong Kong, in Xinjiang, and towards U.S. allies. And Yang Jiechi said that this was, as he put it, not the right way to deal with the Chinese people.

I wonder if you think that that -- does that have an effect on the U.S. approach? Does that mean that the U.S. will, in fact, dial back its attention on those issues, or are those baked in and the Chinese side should expect that to be a part of our approach going forward?

MR. HASS: Well, I'll offer a quick thought, and I hope Kylie will add on to it. I don't think that the Biden administration is going to take its cues on what's appropriate or inappropriate to raise from

Mr. Yang.

I understand Yang Jiechi's desire to see those issues dealt with behind closed doors. But he's been around the United States long enough to know that that's not really how we roll. You know, we're sort of loud and repetitive and persistent about the things that we view as our values and we're going to continue to be.

So I don't get the sense from the Biden administration we feel chastened by the experience in China. I would be surprised if they pulled back as a result of Mr. Yang's rebuke.

MR. OSNOS: Kylie, you did an important piece recently on somebody, the family members of somebody who has been in a camp in Xinjiang and you brought attention to that issue. Do you get the sense that is going away any time soon in American politics, or is that going to be a more prominent issue in the future?

MS. ATWOOD: I do, and I think that that is, you know, clear. Just this week, we have seen these Xinjiang sanctions that came out from the EU, the U.S., the U.K., Canada. And I was talking to someone this morning who was in the Trump administration working on China.

And they said, you know, we tried to do that for a long time and we couldn't pull it off. They were impressed that the Biden folks were able to do this so quickly. It does demonstrate that this is something that they are keyed in on and focused on.

And I think, you know, the other thing to note about if the Biden administration plans to change its tone on any of those issues just compare and contrast what Secretary Blinken said before those meetings in Alaska and what he said after.

In his opening statements, he pointed to Xinjiang; he pointed to Taiwan, Hong Kong, all of those areas of concern for the U.S. And at the conclusion of the meetings in the closing remarks that he and National Security Advisor Sullivan made, he mentioned them again. And so I think that that's significant and tells you everything that you need to know about the fact that they're going to keep raising them.

MR. OSNOS: We have a question here from an audience member in Toronto, who asks

about the detention of Canada's two Michaels, you know, Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig. And the question is, you know, was that inevitable in a sense? Was that an outgrowth of a deteriorating Chinese relationship?

But I think actually the second question gives us more of an opportunity for discussion which is, how effective will an international united front be for Canada and the United States, as a leader, if it applies some of its diplomatic capital to that question?

Do you see, Ryan, that the case of the two Michaels, as they're known, will get more attention in the U.S.?

MR. HASS: I think that the fact that President Biden has spoken about the two Michaels, about how a human shouldn't be used as bartering chips is significant. It suggests to me that this is an issue that is being thought of at the highest levels of our government and is a priority for our government, as it should be.

You know, this is personal for me because I do know Michael Kovrig and care deeply about his welfare. But we also I think all three sides need to recognize that no one is profiting from this.

All three sides are losing from the current stalemate that we're in. And I do think that Canada's efforts to build a norm around -- against the idea of arbitrary detention is important and I'm glad that it has America's support and I hope that more countries sign on.

MR. OSNOS: We are here down to just the last couple of minutes, but I want to squeeze in one more question. We have a lot of people watching from a lot of different places. And one of the questions is, comes from a diplomat, who is a member of the delegation of the EU to the United States.

And the question is, what is the role for allies in U.S.-China policy? How do they fit into it, and how does their behavior, do you think, effect some of our decision-making?

We'll make that our last question. Ryan, take it away, if you would, please.

MR. HASS: Well, it's a huge question. It deserves its own hour of conversation. It's very important. The Biden administration talks often about building situations of strength which, in its most basic terms, means aggregating the voices of America and its allies to deal with China from a position of

strength.

And there will be an ever-shifting geometry to which countries have overlapping interests and want to work together to impress China. It will vary by issue. There will not be an anti-China bloc that forms, as there was in the Cold War.

But the more that the United States is able to demonstrate cohesion with allies, I think the more that we're going to be able to exceed Beijing's expectations because they have set expectations low of our ability to coordinate international efforts.

MR. OSNOS: Well, it is in the spirit of that, of your book, Ryan, that the arguments for coming at this relationship from a position of strength and confidence. I am infuriated that we have run out of time. We could talk for another hour.

But I want to encourage everybody out there who is watching, who has benefitted from this, to take a look at Ryan's book. It is, just to remind you, it's called, "Stronger: Adapting America's China Strategy in an Age of Competitive Interdependence."

And I just can't recommend it highly enough. In a moment of complexity, he has given us a really clear roadmap to think about the present and the future. And I want to thank Kylie Atwood for joining us today, and, of course, to Ryan for bringing us this book and bringing us this conversation.

And to all of you who tuned in, thank you for joining this virtual Brookings event and we hope to see you another time soon, be well.

MS. ATWOOD: Thanks, Evan.

MR. OSNOS: Thanks, buy the book.

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