



CARNEGIE-TSINGHUA
CENTER FOR GLOBAL POLICY

Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **William J. Burns**

Episode 108: Paul Haenle and William J. Burns on
a World in Transition

June 6, 2018

Haenle: I recently had the pleasure to sit down with the Carnegie Endowment's president Ambassador Bill Burns, who joined me on the China in the World podcast for the first time. Bill joined the Carnegie Endowment in February 2015 after a remarkable 33-year diplomatic career including posts as U.S. Ambassador to Russia, U.S. Ambassador to Jordan, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, and finally as Deputy Secretary of State, only the second serving career ambassador to serve in that role. Given his leadership and diplomatic experience, I can think of no one better to lead the world's oldest foreign policy think tank at this tenuous moment in global affairs. During our podcast, Ambassador Burns gave his thoughts on the future of U.S. diplomacy, the summit with Kim Jong Un, and the rise of China. I hope you enjoy our discussion.

Bill, it's a pleasure to have you on the China in the World podcast. Thank you for joining us.

Burns: It's great to be with you, Paul, and wonderful to be back at Carnegie-Tsinghua.

Haenle: Bill, before you took the helm at the Carnegie Endowment, you had over three decades of experience in the foreign service serving at the highest levels under 10 Secretaries of State. You now have left government. We find ourselves in what some people describe as a world in disarray. And I wanted to just start with my first question, and I know it's not a simple one by any stretch of the imagination, but over your time looking at these issues, how have you seen the global order evolve over the course of your career, leading to what we see today as what many describe as a very uncertain world. And who and where can we look to today for leadership to get us through this very difficult period?

Burns: Well, you know over the course of my career, Paul, which spanned almost three and a half decades, I lived through and served through three pretty distinct eras. First was the bipolar era of the Cold War of the United States and the Soviet Union, which seems neater in retrospect than it did at the time, then for the 15 or 20 years or so after the end of the Cold War, a period which many people have called the "unipolar American moment," a period when —I don't mean this as a statement of American arrogance — but America was the dominant player in our international system. But, you know, over the course of the last seven or eight years that I was in government, we had clearly entered into a different phase, a period in which there were a number of power centers in the world — rising powers, China most obviously, India in a longer-term trajectory, the resurgence of Russia, challenges to regional order in some important parts of the world, most vividly and most violently in the Middle East. And then, you know, a lot of big overarching trends, the revolution in technology, and the way in which that's, you know, changing the international landscape and reshaping the global economy. And so, this is a moment of considerable uncertainty, but also a moment of transition, I think, in the international system, and one of the big questions on people's minds, of course, is how is the United States going to step up to this moment — the United States the principle creator, shaper, defender of the international order over the 70 years after the end of the second world war? And now, you know, creating a lot of uncertainty, I think, about we're going to handle this new era.

Haenle: Absolutely. So in an uncertain environment, you see real uncertainty about America's role, and about the future of American diplomacy — something which you've worked on for a long period of time. This is not a new phenomenon, but certainly, it seems as late at least under the Trump administration to have reached kind of a peak — a high new level — and since we're moving into this sort of shifting international landscape, I wanted to see what you think about American diplomacy, and how do we need to adapt, and what do we need to do in this time as you describe of transition?

Burns: Yeah, we're at a moment of transition when the institutions and the alliances that were created, you know, 70 years ago, need to be updated to reflect new power realities. That's a moment when diplomacy matters more than ever. And what is most troubling, I think, about the performance so far of the new American administration is what has in general been an attitude of dismissiveness toward diplomacy and its value. Not only the kind of institutional gutting at the State Department through most of the Trump administration's tenure, but also the President's own attitude. You know, when he was asked a year ago about whether he was concerned about the huge number of senior-level vacancies in the State Department, he said that he was the only person who matters. And so, you know, that just adds to the uncertainty on the international landscape, as does an attitude of what I would judge to be pretty reckless detachment, you know, pulling out of not only the Paris climate treaty, the Transpacific Partnership, and most recently the Iran nuclear deal.

Haenle: So this uncertainty about America's leadership and, as you've described, almost a pulling back of America's leadership, comes at a time where China's rise is before us in more prominent ways than we've ever seen. And President Xi Jinping at the 19th Party Congress talked very clearly about China taking on a greater role on a number of international issues, whether it's climate change, or being a champion on international trade and the economic system, China coming to sort of the center of the great powers in the world. How, then, as we look at what's going on with America's diplomacy and the uncertainty there and the role that America will play going forward and China's rise, how do you see that playing out over time?

Burns: Well, just as you said, Paul, I mean the single most consequential phenomenon on the international landscape today is China's rise, as you know, history's four collisions between rising powers like China and established powers like the United States. I think if we're honest with ourselves, there is that risk. I don't, however, think it's fore-ordained; I don't think it's inevitable. So the challenge for statecraft, for diplomacy, is how do you build a stable mix of competition and cooperation in relations between the U.S. and China? Because both of those elements are going to apply, and that means everything from engaging in an honest conversation about the structural challenges in our economic relationship, through finding ways in which we can work together on crucial geopolitical issues like North Korea's nuclear missile program, through managing some very real differences whether it's over Taiwan or the South China Sea...that is a very significant task and factors none more significantly on the international stage today.

Haenle: And that, those challenges between the United States and China, we're dealing with those at a time where there seems to be in the United States, a recalibration of our approach to China, reconsideration. You know, some have contended that our policy previous to this time was based on a belief that as we engage China through engagement, constructive engagement, China would begin to look more like the United States, either whether we're talking about its economic system or its political system — you lived through that period in your time as a diplomat. Is that the right narrative? Did we really, I mean were those hopes there — did we get this wrong? And what aspects of our China policy if needed to be recalibrated now, what aspects do you think need to be recalibrated?

Burns: Well first, I mean, I've never assumed that China was going to develop and emerge to be just like the United States. China, as you well know, is a huge, proud, you know, millennia-old society and so, I think, what did surprise a lot of people including me was the pace with which China developed its economy and developed its geopolitical weight over the last 25 or 30 years. But having said that, the challenge before us today is how best do you adapt to that rise; in a sense, how best do you help shape it? It's not about containing China, and I think what that means is, you know, an honest conversation between the United States and China, but not only between the United States and China with lots of other players like the European Union and Japan who share some of the same concerns about access to different sectors of the Chinese economy, about the ways in which China in its own long-term self-interest ought to adjust. It's no longer a developing country; it's become, you know, one of the most significant economies on the globe today. And so, having that kind of an honest conversation, I think, is going to be crucially important right now. And for the United States also to recognize in its China policy that we have significant strikes on which to draw. There are lots of other countries who share a concern about some aspects of Chinese behavior, whether it's on trade and investment, where we ought to be making common cause with the European Union, rather than engaging what in effect is a second-front trade war over stealing aluminum. There are lots of countries across Asia and the Pacific who share some concerns not so much about China's rise but about how it may throw its weight around. The United States has alliances, it has coalitions that it can draw upon, which can in a sense help shape China's rise so that its rise benefits the security and prosperity not just of China itself but of the United States and, you know, significant players across Asia and the Pacific. That's a formidable task; I don't underestimate it, but I think we — at our own peril — underestimate the strengths that we can bring to bear first and foremost alliances and partners with whom we can make common cause on a lot of these issues even as we try to build the kind of honest, respectful dialogue with China that's important to both of us.

Haenle: Well, from the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center, looking at these issues with respect to the U.S.-China trade and economic challenges, I think, you know, this is something that I think your point is very, very important that this is an area we should be working with like-minded countries who have the same concerns and are bringing those to the table. But the approach, you know, that

seems to be penalizing everyone in the world including America's friends and allies, takes away from that, and I think in some ways, you know, it plays right into China's hands. I think we have an opportunity to address these issues if we go about it in the right way.

Burns: I do, too. I think we have legitimate concerns about different aspects of China's trade and investment policy. And to be fair, China has some concerns, too. I mean, we've got to adapt international financial institutions to reflect new economic power realities. The U.S. Congress spent way too many years kind of grudgingly agreeing to, you know, increasing China's quota, and the IMF for its voting quotient.

Haenle: And our reaction, of course, to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Burns: Yeah, which I think was short-sighted on the part of the United States. Our answer it seems to me should have been, "Yes, but..." "Yes, of course there's room for new infrastructure investment and for a new institution to help deal with that across Asia and Eurasia." But, you know, it needs to apply high-level international standards as well. Because that's in everybody's interests. I think had we taken that approach, we would have had a lot more success than by trying to be dismissive of it as well.

Haenle: Absolutely. I want to come back to one of the issues that you said is central right now in the U.S.-China relationship and, of course, that's North Korea. You led the secret negotiations that ultimately led to the Iran nuclear agreement, and so I wanted to sort of get your perspective on the lessons maybe that are applicable from your experience with regard to North Korea. And of course, I have to ask: Trump administration walking away from the JCPOA, you know, what impact do you think that has, if any, on this particular North Korea issue?

Burns: Well, the first lesson is, I think it was a huge blunder to walk away from the JCPOA, from the comprehensive Iran nuclear agreement. I think that we're hemorrhaging trust in the world today, and I think that undercut not only our relations with our partners — because this was not a U.S.-Iran bilateral deal, this was one which involved, you know, sort of in principle, international players — and we've created huge mistrust now in our relations with Europeans in particular, but also, you know, with the other partners to that deal, with China and Russia. So, but I think if you take a step back, I think there are a number of things that you can learn from that experience. The first is that you have to be very clear-eyed about your goal. In the case of Iran, it was to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, but you have to be flexible and realistic in your tactics. In the course of the Iran negotiations, we determined early on that we were going to have to phase this approach to an interim agreement and then ultimately a comprehensive agreement, and I would be willing to bet a lot that in the North Korean negotiations, that's where we're going to end up as well, with a kind of phased approach.

Haenle: And is that mostly based on lack of trust that you need to build up over time?

Burns: Yeah, and just to build up the experience, even if trust may be an overused term in this case. But you've got to build up an experience where each side can deliver on its commitments. Second, I think, verification is hugely important, you know, despite President Trump's antipathy to the Iran nuclear deal, the truth is that the verification and the intrusive inspection procedures in that deal were unprecedented, and I think we'd all be lucky if we could produce the same kind of verification inspection procedures in a nuclear missile deal with North Korea. I think another lesson was that our leverage stemmed in very large part from the coalition of countries that we helped put together and invested, and we managed over a period of years to isolate Iran. Now I think we've isolated ourselves by walking away from that deal. But I think the same is true with regard to North Korea, working very closely with our treaty allies in South Korea and Japan, working very closely with China, which still brings to bear more leverage than any other player does on this issue is going to be crucially important. And so I think, you know, all of those lessons apply in different ways in the case of the North Korean talks. And last but not least, I'd say preparation. These are enormously complicated issues. In many respects, the North Korean nuclear missile challenge is even more complicated than the Iranian nuclear deal. And so, doing enough preparation so that we can be clear with one another about what the desired goal or goals of this process are, and one of the concerns I have now is that I think we have still a pretty significant gap in terms of what we in the U.S. think of denuclearization and what the North Korean leadership thinks of that, too. None of that is an argument against beginning a diplomatic process. None of it is an argument against beginning at the summit level, even if that's a little bit unusual. But it is an argument for being very careful about preparations, about making sure we're clear about goals and realistic about tactics.

Haenle: You talked about the importance of the coalition bringing countries together to address the issue, of course. When I served at the six-party talks, there were five other countries in addition, outside of North Korea, working fairly closely together on the issue of denuclearization. It seems now we've entered a period where there doesn't seem to be a lot of working together on this issue. In fact, President Trump recently decided he might not do the summit, didn't bother to tell the allies or China for that matter. There seems to be a lot of countries surprising each other during this time period. And I wonder why you think that is at this particular point in time — why aren't countries able to come together more to address the North Korea now that it looks we have an opportunity to really make some progress?

Burns: Part of it, I think, is the president's mindset. He tends to take a very narrow transactional approach to a lot of these issues with a clear preference for dealing with them bilaterally as opposed to multilaterally with, you know, a wider number of international partners. It's not his first instinct to invest in those kinds of alliances and partnerships. And I think that's unfortunate because, you know, what sets the United States apart from lonelier major partners like China and Russia is precisely our alliances and our ability to invest in partners. And so I think that's crucially important as we move ahead in the North Korea negotiations, and I hope this summit is a success,

and I hope it, you know, provides a broad framework for negotiations, which I think are going to stretch out for quite a while. But it's going to be really important recognizing that this is likely to be a long game, that we're very careful in terms of investing in our allies, but also in, you know, players like China, which are going to be hugely consequential to whether these negotiations produce agreements in the end or not. Because China's leverage, given the nature of its economic relationship with North Korea, is hugely important. And there's no way in which the United States is going to be able to re-animate maximum pressure against North Korea unless we're doing it in close coordination with China.

Haenle: The one country we haven't talked about in this context is one in which you served as ambassador. And that's Russia. I wonder if you could just say a little about Russia's role in all of this. How do you see that?

Burns: Well, as you know, Paul, from your own experience in the six-party talks, I mean, Russia was an active member and participant in those talks. Russia has a border, physically, with North Korea. It's obviously got its own very practical concerns about the dangers of nuclear fallout from tests or, God forbid, you know, some kind of a conflict — Russia's still a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. So, you know, it's going to have influence to bring to bear, so Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, has just been in Pyongyang to consult with the North Korean leadership. So, you know, Russia is not going to be nearly as significant a player as China or South Korea or Japan, but it's a player with whom, despite all the other differences in U.S.-Russian relations today, you know, we ought to consult and stay in touch.

Haenle: Given the difficulty between U.S. and Russia right now, do you see any desire by Russia to play somewhat of a spoiler role, or do you think because of their concerns on the dangers of North Korea's nuclear program that they're more willing to play a constructive role?

Burns: I think there are Russians classically have tried to position themselves so they benefit no matter which way this process goes, so in other words if a negotiating process gets off the ground, you know, they're positioning themselves to be benefit whether it's in terms of rail links across, you know, North Korea to South Korea, potential economic benefits over time. But if that process breaks down, they're also trying to, you know, position themselves as well so that they benefit. So pretty cold-eyed approach, but it's, you know, an understandable one.

Haenle: Lastly, I guess, given all your experience as a diplomat, I'll ask you to pull your crystal ball out and ask you whether or not you think the summit will actually take place on June 12, and if so, why? And if not, why not?

Burns: Well my powers of prediction have been pretty limited over the course of my career, but my guess today is that the summit is going to take place. I hope very much that it's a success, that it produces some kind of a broad framework which lays out principles that would guide what is

likely to be a very protracted and intensive negotiating process after that. I think we have to be realistic about what we're aiming for, because the issues are incredibly complicated as you know very well, and it makes sense for us and for all the other interests involved to do this with our eyes wide open and step by step. But you know, I do believe the summit's going to take place, and I hope very much that it produces enough of a broad framework which provides some momentum for negotiating process. But I hope also we're realistic about what that's going to involve — the difficulty of the negotiations, the complicated trade-offs involved, and especially the importance of us continuing to invest in our allies and partners.

Haenle: Well, Bill, it's been a pleasure to talk you on our China in the World podcast. We hope to have you come back and invite you at some point as the world will continue to bring issues forward that are worth discussing. So thank you so much for joining us.

Burns: My pleasure, it's great to be with you, Paul, as always.

Haenle: Thank you.

That's it for this edition of the Carnegie-Tsinghua China in the World podcast. I encourage you to explore our site and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Thank you for listening; be sure to tune in next time.