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CENTER FOR GLOBAL POLICY

Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **Michael Green**

Episode 81: Trump's First Test in Asia, Part I
March 24, 2017

Haenle: You're listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China's foreign policy, international role, and China's relations with the world, brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center located here in Beijing. Today I'm delighted to be with a former colleague and a friend, Dr. Michael J. Green, who is the senior vice president for Asia and the Japan Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He's also the Chair of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Politics and Foreign Policy at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. It's been my pleasure this week to host Mike as part of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Distinguished Speakers program. It's a program we launched in 2010 aiming to provide opportunities for senior policy scholars and practitioners to engage with leading Chinese experts. As part of this week's distinguished speaker program, Mike is taking part in a weeklong program of activities that allow him and the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center to engage with key stakeholders in China's business, academic, and diplomatic community.

Mike previously served on the staff of the National Security Council from 2001-2005, first as director for Asian affairs with direct responsibility for Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and North Korea, and then as special assistant to the president for national security affairs and senior director for Asia with responsibility for East Asia and South Asia. I've had the honor of serving with Mike on the NSC. I joined in the spring of 2004 and worked with Mike until he left in 2005. Mike has had a number of previous other important positions, including senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, assistant professor at the Paul Nietzsche School of Advanced International Studies at John Hopkins University. He also worked as a senior adviser on Asia in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Trained as a historian, Mike's newest book just out last week called *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia-Pacific Since 1783* was released this past week and examines the development of U.S. strategy and policy toward the Asia-Pacific to better understand the roots of U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific.

We're fortunate to be speaking here now with Mike on our podcast. This is the second time, Mike—this past fall, you and I spoke and you gave us your reflections as President Obama was getting ready to leave on what legacy he would leave with respect to Asia. Today we're going to shift our focus from the past, looking at the past record of President Obama, to the future, to the current, present and the future, to learn about some of the key takeaways from your discussions in Beijing this week and to look specifically at the Trump administration and its policy with respect to the Asia-Pacific. So welcome back to our podcast, Mike.

Green: Thank you, Paul, and it's been great spending the week with you, and I've been so impressed with how the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center creates connections and trust and dialogue between the United States and China. It's exciting work, and it's good to see you.

Haenle: Thank you very much. As you know I've been trying to get you out here for quite a long time. You've got quite a number of hats and jobs that you take on in the United States, I know you're quite busy, and we really appreciate your time out here. Before I get into talking about policy, some of our listeners have expressed an interest in learning about some of the experts that I interview. I've known you for quite a while now, as I've said, we met in the White House in the Bush administration. I wanted to...you've been an expert on Japan, an expert on the Asia-Pacific for quite some time. And I wanted to know, I know a little bit about you. You speak fluent Japanese. I run into people all the time who talk about how great your Japanese is. You have a black belt in Iaido.

Green: Close enough.

Haenle: Which is basically the Japanese sword. And I know from my time on the National Security Council, because every once in a while you would request a couple days off to go to Scotland to play the bagpipes, and you've won international prizes on the Great Highland Bagpipe. How did you get into...where did you get your interest in Japan and the Asia-Pacific?

Green: I grew up in Washington, in the Washington DC suburbs, and my mom was a diplomat in Italy before I was born, and my dad worked for the Justice Department and Supreme Court. So I'm sort of classic East Coast establishment, Washington DC kid, and always looked to Europe. That's where my ancestors came from, that's where your ancestors came from. In high school, we studied much more about American and European history than we did about Asia and even in college, I was a history major but most of the coursework I took was on the philosophy of history, European history, American history...I really only had one semester on Asian history. So it was kind of a fluke, basically it was after college, that I came to Asia, to Japan. I passed the diplomatic exam, the Foreign Service written exam.

Haenle: So you were thinking about joining—

Green: I was pretty sure I wanted to be a diplomat, like a lot of my friends growing up in Washington. So I applied first to spend a year in Scotland. I was going to learn bagpipes and then I was going to join the Foreign Service and I was going to go to Europe and it was the Cold War and I was going to stare down the Soviets and win the Cold War as a diplomat. But I went to Japan and then I traveled around China, spent a month traveling around China in 1985, and Mongolia. And I was fascinated, and I learned Japanese. I got on the airplane and I got a Berlitz Japanese book and I—konnichiwa. And I came out surprised I learned Japanese reasonably well, and I studied Korean, and I just got hooked. And then in graduate school, even in graduate school I was thinking I would do security studies in Europe, and I realized how important Asia was becoming and how few people there were in our universities and Foreign Service who spoke Chinese or Japanese or Korean. I spent the rest of my career playing bagpipes but also going back and forth between government jobs and university jobs and for me, that was exciting because you could think about ideas, write books, then you can go into government and see what does and does not work. It's not easy to do, but in the American system you could be a scholar practitioner. It's exciting.

Haenle: So you work at Georgetown University as a professor and teach a lot of students. Given your experience in how you got into Japan and Asia, what lessons did you learn? What sort of lesson do you impart upon your students in terms of their career, and how to think about their career trajectory?

Green: One thing is, learn languages and learn them well. Don't just take Chinese in college and think you're going to be a China expert. If you really want to know China, you've got to be able to dream in Chinese, which I bet you do.

Haenle: Maybe. My son does.

Green: Okay, your son does. You have to be able to really get inside the system and understand it. Frankly nowadays, there's so many American kids—not a large number, but there are lot of kids—who take immersion courses in Chinese, Japanese or Korean, in elementary or high school. When I was in high school, basically as an Asia expert you know one language. I took Korean too. But nowadays you have students who can speak Japanese and Korean, or Chinese and Japanese, because they're starting so early. And that's really important. Also, you have to decide your career track. If you want to be a professor, it's going to pull you in a certain direction. You really have to become an expert on theory. If you want to be out in the field doing diplomacy, working in the field on democracy and local people-to-people interaction, then you have to go into NGOs or maybe the government. It's important to know your track. You can change later, but you have to get one thing right first. I also tell people it's good to be an Asia expert—a China expert, a Japan expert—but you'll do well if you also know an issue. You know defense issues, for example, maybe it's energy. Maybe it's women's empowerment, maybe it's nonproliferation. It's always a good idea as a scholar or at an NGO or as a practitioner to know the country and then have one functional issue that you really know well.

Haenle: And what have you tried to make yours—strategy?

Green: For me it was security policy, though I spent time in USTR (United States Trade Representative) so I'm also interested in trade policy. I'm also interested in democracy and human rights. But the core one was national security policy.

Haenle: I was at Georgetown last month, as you know. Your colleague and our former NSC colleague Victor Cha asked us to come talk to the students. One of his students pulled me aside after the talk and said, you know, I'm interested in learning the language, and I'm interested in going into foreign policy work, maybe as a foreign service officer or through some other route, but I'm worried with what I see going on in the Trump administration, where they don't seem to be relying on the national security experts and the foreign policy experts. Budgets are being cut. How do you respond to questions like that? What do you think the trajectory in terms of the roles and the contributions that students and professionals will be able to make?

Green: I get that question from my students all the time, [and] I got that question a lot from students after the election. The Trump campaign was an anti-establishment, anti-intellectual, anti-expert campaign, a lot like Brexit in the UK, where basically all experts, all data were doubted and people got their own information on the internet and so forth. And that's disturbing, especially if you're embarking at the beginning of your career, learning all of these languages and history. It won't last. It won't last. It's a revolutionary moment for people like Steve Bannon in the White House who want to break the East Coast elite, but the reality is, if you're an American, American companies, American Congress, American people, church groups, NGOs, and the American government want more expertise on Asia, not less. And you can already see the changes in the Trump administration as he has started bringing in people like General McMaster in the NSC and so forth. Those guys do not want amateurs telling them what to do when they go to China. And if they do get amateurs, they'll go to China, or they'll go to Japan, they'll make a mistake, and they'll say, get me somebody who knows something.

Haenle: Professionals.

Green: Yeah, experts. So I think experts will be fine. But it is disruptive and a bit unnerving right now.

Haenle: I think that's right, in fact, I told the student, I was leaving there and going to the State Department to talk to them about China and NSC officials about China, so below the top leadership level, it seems to me that the people in those key positions are looking to experts to help them already. I see it already happening. Maybe not the president himself, but below, you know, his people below him.

Green: You know the Clinton administration in 1993 came into office and in those days Japan was the big threat, the economic powerhouse. It was going to dominate the world. So Bill Clinton got together this group of experts to advise him on how to get Japan in economics, how to beat Japan in economics, and almost none of them spoke Japanese or lived in Japan or did serious scholarly work or policy work on Japan. And they gave him advice and it completely failed. And one reason I got into government was because I finished my PhD on the U.S.-Japan alliance on Japan's economy and politics in 1994 and initially the Pentagon, Dr. Joe Nye, Kurt Campbell, and others, were looking for people who really knew about Japan, not people who had some theories about Japan. And I taught for a year at SAIS but then they said "can you come to work for us at the Pentagon?", and from that point forward, the Clinton administration wanted people who knew Japan and knew China. And even in the Bush administration, we had that incident in 2001 when the U.S. patrol plane, the E-P3, was hit by a Chinese fighter jet and had to make an emergency landing in Hainan. It was the first major crisis for the president. There were some people who came to the president and said I know how China works. I know how Asia works. But in the end, it was obvious who did and who didn't and people like Rich Armitage, who stayed, did. And that's who the president turned to on Asia.

Haenle: Even in the Clinton administration, they over time really—

Green: Sooner or later. Sooner or later the ideology or the academic theories crash into the reality. And so you know, they're going to need a lot of expertise.

Haenle: Let's use that to pivot into what we're looking at today. You and I last spoke, as I mentioned earlier, a couple months away from the end of the Obama administration. President Obama was still in office, he had just completed his 11th and final trip to Asia for the G20, and he also went for that trip to the US-ASEAN summit and the East Asia Summit. We evaluated his performance during that discussion, we talked about Southeast Asia and what the Obama administration had done with respect to expanding the sort of, the presence in Southeast Asia and great power relations. I think you gave a subpar rating there, particularly looking at the rocky relationship with China. We talked about the pivot to Asia, and what a failure the TPP would do with respect to a pivot to Asia. Fast forward five months, we're here today just finishing President Trump's administration's first two months in office. He's done a lot of tweeting. He's already on day one pulled out of the TPP. He's criticized China during the campaign for trade imbalances, not doing enough on North Korea, building and militarizing disputed islands in the South China Sea. At the same time he's been criticizing our allies in the campaign, his campaign rhetoric. Japan,

South Korea, not doing enough to support our alliances, not taking on enough of the burden. You've just published your book, as I've mentioned, *By More Than Providence*, which goes back and looks at the over 200 years of U.S. strategy policy to the Asia-Pacific. Given it took you what, eight years, to do that research. —considerable research done to put this book together.—given that perspective, what really are we seeing here from President Trump? How much can he, and will he, move away from what appears to be at least over the last few decades, a consistent U.S. foreign policy approach to the Asia-Pacific?

Green: Initially, as a candidate, as a president, Donald Trump looked like he was going to change everything. He threatened the two pillars of American strategy in Asia today: our alliances and our relationship with China. And I think a lot of people questioned whether this was a complete change in American strategy. But then, in February, within two days, he talked to Xi Jinping on the phone and reconfirmed America's One China Policy, and then he hosted President Shinzo Abe of Japan and confirmed that the United States' security commitment to Japan was solid, and particularly to areas administered by Japan, which includes the Senkaku/Diaoyu. In China that's sensitive, but for Japan, that's the litmus test of an American president's commitment to Japan's security under the treaty, a commitment that Clinton and Bush and Obama all made. So he suddenly went back to—at least on these big pillars of American Asia policy—he went back to the fundamentals. Why did he attack them in the first place? This is how Donald Trump has succeeded. By being a negotiator who will leave nothing sacred. In his real estate negotiations, in his bankruptcy negotiations, business people who have dealt with Donald Trump say, he will attack or go after whatever you want. In military strategy, they talk about the other guy's center of gravity, their weak point. Trump will always go after the weak point, the thing the other guy wants the most to try to get a better deal. It's disruptive, it's hardball, it's one reason why very few businesspeople in America do business with Donald Trump more than once, but it's worked for him politically and economically. So I think he was saying to China and Korea and Japan, to our allies and our friends: nothing is sacred. If you don't do what I want, give me what I want, I'm going to go right at you and the thing you care about most. The problem is, you can do that in business and walk away and never deal with a company again. But America can't walk away from China. America can't walk away from Japan. And Japan and China called his bluff and he reconfirmed those two key pillars.

Haenle: How did he get to the point where he decided to reconfirm America's commitment to the One China Policy? What do you think actually happened?

Green: So I think fundamentally he was bluffing. In his book *The Art of the Deal*, when he talks about how to deal, he writes about how to bluff.

Haenle: You're not supposed to tell people how to bluff.

Green: Yeah, if you're going to bluff, and that's a corporate strategy, it's probably not a good idea to write a book about how you're going to do it. Part of the answer, Paul, is that he never really meant it. It was all transactional. That being the case, you can imagine both Tokyo and Beijing are wondering, well, if he flipped once, how solid is this commitment? Japan's pretty happy, I think, [with] the Chinese government's reassurances but there's still a bit of anxiety. Maybe Donald Trump wants it that way.

Haenle: Does he have a grand vision for the Asia-Pacific?

Green: No.

Haenle: Does he have a view for how China fits into this?

Green: No. In my book, from one presidency to the next, you can kind of find a very clear idea of Asia strategy. Reagan had one. Theodore Roosevelt had one. Sometimes there are presidents who think mostly about Europe, but some of their broad foreign policy strategy extends to Asia. Almost every new president says I'm going to focus more on domestic issues. That's, even in the Cold War, what Americans care about. So it's not new for Donald Trump to say I'm going to focus on American domestic issues. What's new is the organizing concept for his political domestic and foreign strategy is, it's transactional. He is going to get a better deal, on everything, from everyone. And that is not a strategy. That's a collection of tactics, that's a process issue, that's a negotiating style. So no grand strategy, but you look at people like H.R. McMaster, one of the great historians of American strategy, who's now a top adviser in the White House, or General Mattis, who is called the scholar-warrior because he's not married and he goes home at night and he reads history books. Or Rex Tillerson, who operated in an enormous international organization. These are very strategic people. So there will be...and that's also, by the way, why the One China Policy came back, because these guys convinced him. There are elements here of grand strategy. But the core ideology of the White House for many people is disruption and attacking the establishment and winning everywhere. Those are incompatible. You have to prioritize. And we'll see that basically sort itself out. It will be, I'm quite confident, moving back to a mainstream foreign policy trajectory, but it will also be chaotic and exciting to watch.

Haenle: In his book *Art of the War*, he also talks about keeping your opponent off-balance and using unpredictability and, you know, you can argue that's part of what he's doing with China. He seems to be doing that with some of our allies, but I'm not sure that's a great strategy, but nevertheless, with the One China Policy and with some of the tweets that he put out early on, and just his initial approach to China and posture toward China, has this been effective? His press secretary says, Donald Trump always gets something out of a negotiation, and with respect to the One China Policy, implied that he got something by threatening, from the Chinese side, but he didn't disclose what that might be. Did he get anything? Was it effective? Does it make sense to hold that One China Policy as leverage?

Green: Three points. Number one, he didn't get anything. The coal cut-off was not because Donald Trump was disruptive. Number two, the fact that there was a disruption in U.S.-China relations, or some an apparent threat to the status quo, is not new. Ronald Reagan came to office promising—after Jimmy Carter had normalized relations with the PRC—that he would then normalize relations with Taiwan too. He moved away from that pretty quickly. But his first year as president, there were huge fights in the White House and State Department.

Haenle: And by the end we were selling weapons—

Green: Exactly. By the end, George Schultz had his historic trip across China, we were selling weapons. Bill Clinton came in and said I'm going to condition human rights and most favored nation status. We're not going to give China trading rights unless they make specific progress on human rights. And there was huge turmoil, and in about a year, they didn't abandon human rights completely but they moved away from that very mechanical and disruptive approach. And Bill Clinton and Jiang Zemin reached a historic agreement on China joining the WTO. So the fact that there's disruption and uncertainty... Even George W. Bush had the E-P3 incident, he said on television, I will do whatever it takes to rise up and defend. Presidents normally didn't say that, it was shocking on the Chinese side. But he went to the Olympics in 2008 and had a relationship with Hu Jintao that was quite strong. So the fact that there's initial disruption in an election, that American presidents come in and start out tough with China, if you look at the historical pattern, you end up having six years of productive relations. Barack Obama came in and promised to respect China's core interests, he said in our administration, we said U.S.-China relations would be cooperative, constructive, and candid. The Obama White House dropped candid and said, positive. It will be positive! It started out very optimistic and generous and probably had the most difficult relationship between an American and Chinese leader that we've had in maybe 30 years. So whether that's a cause or just a coincidence people can debate, but the fact that we've had these initial collisions does not mean that U.S.-China relations are headed on a downward course. We may find that this president, especially the team around him, like two big tough guys in a bar, realize they're better off working together.

Haenle: Initially they're confrontational...

Green: A little pushing, a little bump on the shoulder, a little tough talk. And then, alright, I respect you and you respect me, let's get on with our business. And I'm not sure that that will happen, but I think history suggests that it could.

Haenle: It at least opens up space now where the two sides can begin to put the bilateral agenda together, which up until that point I think the word we heard from here in Beijing was that the Chinese side wasn't willing to do anything until they got this commitment on the One China Policy.

Green: One word of caution for listeners on China. I think it's very unlikely that Donald Trump, given the ideological views in his administration but also the center-right views in his cabinet, I think it's very unlikely that he will go back to the new model of great power relations. I think it's very unlikely that this administration will give China the privileged position in Asia. I think this is going to be a very pro-Japan, pro-Taiwan administration, even though we'll have friction with Japan, because we'll have friction with everyone. And I think you will see some significant upgrading of American defense capabilities, cooperation with Japan in missile defense, arms sales to Taiwan—not revolutionary changes, but I think Chinese listeners and people who care about Chinese-U.S. relations should not expect that we end up after this difficult initial period, back to the new model of great power relations. I think they're going to have to let these two leaders find a different framework for China-U.S. relations, beginning with candid. First be candid.