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Transcript

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## CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Dennis Wilder**

Episode 67: U.S.-China Relations Past and  
Present, Part I

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**Haenle:** Today we are delighted to welcome my old colleague and good friend, Dennis Wilder. Dennis previously served as the special assistant to President George W. Bush and senior director for East Asian affairs and previous to that as the China director on President George W. Bush's national security council. Dennis just recently retired after close to four decades of public service as a leading China expert in the intelligence and diplomatic communities and has now taken on a new role at Georgetown University as an assistant professor of practice in the Asia studies program and senior fellow at the university's new initiative for U.S.-China dialogue on global issues. Dennis is being hosted here this week by the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center and will participate in Tsinghua University's 5th Annual World Peace Forum, the premier security forum here in China for global affairs and international security issues and that will take place July 16 and 17 here in Beijing.

Today we are going to speak to Dennis about several timely issues which he has been working on and following frankly for decades, including North Korea—both the nuclear issue and the cyber dimension of that issue—as well as U.S.-China relations more broadly. Dennis, I want to thank you very much for joining us here in Beijing and thanks for joining the podcast this morning.

**Wilder:** Well Paul it's a great pleasure to be here in Beijing and I thank Carnegie for giving me this opportunity. It's been a long time since I was in China. I came to the Olympics with President Bush in 2008 and this is my first visit back to Beijing so I'm delighted to be here and delighted to have a chance to chat.

**Haenle:** Well let me just start on a more personal note. You're finishing up government service after 37 years and that's a long time, it gives you a great amount of experience and accumulated a deep reservoir of knowledge on China and related Asia issues. How did you first get involved in this profession—1981 I think you said you started?

**Wilder:** 1980.

**Haenle:** 1980 at the CIA as an analyst. What got you started? What piqued your interest early on and how did it begin?

**Wilder:** Well it began the same way that Ambassador Stapleton Roy—who you know well—and perhaps Richard Bush, began their interest in China. I was the son of a Methodist missionary and my father served the Chinese overseas community in Singapore and Malaysia. I was born in Singapore and grew up around the overseas Chinese. So, from an early age I became fascinated with Chinese culture, Chinese language, and when I went to college, I was determined that I would learn to speak the Chinese language, that I would spend time in China, that I would devote my career to China. In those days, it was the Cultural Revolution, and it was a time when U.S. students could not go to China, even to visit and certainly not to study. So I ended up in the Yale in China program at Chinese University of Hong Kong and spent a year there.

**Haenle:** This is in the 1970s? Late 1970s?

**Wilder:** This would be in 1975 and 1976, which is a very interesting year because Mao died, Zhou Enlai died that year, and I had one roommate from Guangzhou whose brother was Red

Guard and my other roommate—we were all on the swim team together—and my other roommate was the son of a Hong Kong bureaucrat working for the British. So I got to see just two sides of the China question very early on. I then was fortunate enough to go to Georgetown for graduate education where I met a man named Father Sebes—one of the great Jesuit scholars of China—and continued my work there. I had fallen in love with the subject of party-army relations in China, and so I did my graduate work on that. There were not that many places in the world at that point in time who were interested in party-army relations in China. But there was one organization across the Potomac in Langley, Virginia who seemed to be interested in my skills.

**Haenle:** And that you started in 1980 as an analyst on China’s military if I recall correctly. This is right after China’s opening-up under Deng Xiaoping in 1979 so a very interesting time in China’s history, right after the Chinese border conflict with Vietnam in the same year 1979. You’ve witnessed over your course of 37 years a number of pivotal moments in U.S.-China relations: Tiananmen Square in 1989, 1995-96 missile crises with Taiwan, EP3 crisis of 2001, and of course the current sort of standoff that we’re seeing right now between China and its neighbors in the East and South China Seas. I’m wondering if there are any certain moments or events that particularly stick out or make a particularly important impression on you and what lessons you learned about analytical or policymaking and about China during that experience?

**Wilder:** For me, there have been incredibly high moments and incredibly low moments in my career. Certainly, I would have to say the highest moment of my career was joining President Bush in coming to the Olympics in 2008 to watch the U.S.-China basketball teams, to watch Chinese root just as hard for the American “dream team” we called it—dream team number two—was really enjoyable. And President Bush of course had a tremendous time during those Olympics and certainly was probably for me the highest point in my career related to China. The low points? There are two of them: one was the Belgrade bombing. The organization that I worked for, we targeted what we thought was a Serbian building, instead it was the Chinese embassy. And I remember distinctly the Friday night, I had just come home from work when I got the call from the CIA operations center that said, ‘You’re not going to believe this.’ And I couldn’t believe it and I raced back into work and started looking at the information. Regrettably, the Chinese government could not believe that this was a mistake. No matter how much evidence we showed that it was a mistake, and of course there were some very dangerous things that happened here in China because of it.

**Haenle:** I remember, I was here.

**Wilder:** Our consulate in Chengdu was sacked. The embassy here in Beijing was very much destroyed. And so that certainly was a hard time. The other hard time—which actually I think turned out very well—was the EP3 situation of April 2001 right at the beginning of the Bush administration. Scary moment to have Americans down, military people down on Hainan island. It took very delicate diplomacy to bring them home. And I think that actually out of that experience President Bush realized that he had to have a constructive, cooperative relationship with the Chinese government. So in many ways, out of a disaster came real progress. But I can tell you that for the period that crew was here in China I was advising a new administration on how to deal with the situation, I thought I understood what was needed, and I was glad that Ambassador Prueher and others were able to resolve it. It’s scary.

**Haenle:** I always find it remarkable looking back on the course of the official U.S.-China relations from 1979, we've had a number of incidents including the two you just mentioned—the Belgrade Embassy bombing and the EP3—that really had the potential to really derail the relationship and set it back quite significantly. But yet it's remarkable that we managed to work through those crises, and even through that, resolve them and improve the relationship over time, which tells me—and I'd be interested in your perspective on this—that to this point in our relationship and history with China, leaders on both sides have determined it's in their country's interest to have a constructive and productive relationship with the other side, which has allowed us over the history to work through those crises and build a relationship going forward. Do you agree with that?

**Wilder:** I would actually agree with you completely, but on two levels. One is, I think the leaders on both sides do understand that as the world's leading power, and the world's second largest economy—China—the interests of our two countries are highly compatible in terms of global issues, and you just look at things like the unfortunate incident this week in South Sudan where Chinese peacekeepers died. You can see that we both are shouldering international responsibilities, and we both have to—on both sides—have to endure some of the unfortunate consequences of being global leaders. So I think economically, politically, diplomatically there is plenty of room—and there still is—for the two sides to cooperate. I think on another dimension—and I think it's probably what got me interested in the first place in China—the Chinese and American people have a special link. We actually think more similarly than people understand. We're both very entrepreneurial peoples, we're both extremely dedicated to our families, and to building better lives for our children. I don't think it's any mistake that Xi Jinping is calling his program the “China Dream”. The “American Dream” and the “Chinese Dream,” for individuals, is not dissimilar. And so I think there's a great deal of commonality, both at a strategic level, but also at a personal level.

**Haenle:** Well thank you very much for spending time with us today. 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.