



CARNEGIE-TSINGHUA
CENTER FOR GLOBAL POLICY

Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Evan Medeiros**

Episode 55: Xi Jinping's State Visit to the United States

September 20, 2015

Haenle: Today we are delighted to be speaking with Dr. Evan Medeiros, who until this past summer served nearly six years in the White House National Security Council, advising President Obama on China and Asia. Evan joined the National Security Council in the summer of 2009 as the NSC China director and then from July 2013 to June 2015, served as the senior director and special assistant for the President for Asian Affairs. Evan, thank you very much for being with us this week in Beijing for the Carnegie–Tsinghua Distinguished Speakers Program.

Medeiros: Great Paul, it's great to be here in Beijing this week. It's been a lovely week, we've had blue skies a few days and this is the first major activity I've done since I left the White House, so thanks for arranging this and we've had some fascinating discussions this week.

Haenle: We've had some great discussions this week and I'd like to cover some of the topics that you covered while you were here in Beijing for our listeners. I want to start out by going back to when you started your time at the NSC in 2009, the United States and the international community were in the midst of a global recession, we were witnessing shifts in global distribution of power, President Obama was shaping a new approach to U.S. foreign policy and the U.S.'s role in the world. I want to ask you first, how did Asia fit into the president's foreign policy vision, and in what ways did that impact the strategy which you helped to develop in the Asia-Pacific and our policies with China?

Medeiros: Well Paul that's a great question and it's a good place to start for any discussion about U.S.-China relations because it begins with Obama's view about the United States role in the world, and specifically the United States role in Asia. In 2009, as you said, there was a broad recognition from the president on down that international affairs were changing, that it was becoming more multipolar, and that there was a greater distribution of power. The global financial crisis was clearly having an effect on relations amongst countries around the world, and what we found when the president came into office is that we were under invested in some areas and over invested in other areas given these big changes in the international system. And one of those areas where the United States was underinvested was the Asia-Pacific. So we made a very significant effort in the first year to try and rebalance, or to begin rebalancing, U.S. foreign policy based on this recognition that U.S. economic and security interests were increasingly at stake in the Asia-Pacific. So we began building a strategy that involved the United States being more active in both Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia—more active on economic issues, diplomatic issues, and military issues.

Haenle: And as part of that rebalancing to Asia, can you describe a little bit the China component—how did that China component fit into the overall strategy?

Medeiros: China was an integral component of the rebalancing strategy. The Asia rebalancing strategy is defined by five pillars. One of them is engaging emerging powers, and China is obviously the most prominent emerging powers in the world. And the essence of this strategy was to encourage these emerging powers, and specifically China, to play a greater role in addressing the numerous economic and security challenges facing the international community in the Asia-Pacific like North Korea, and globally, like global economic growth and climate change.

Haenle: We're in a complicated moment for the U.S.-China relationship, with frictions in the South China Sea and cyber coming to the fore and few obvious areas of cooperation. Some scholars have recently called for a revision of our China policy or said that relations are at a tipping point. Do you agree with these assessments, and how would you view the long-term health of the U.S.-China relationship and our ability to manage both the enhancement of cooperation, but also, perhaps more importantly, managing the friction in the relationship?

Medeiros: It's a great question and it's something that I spent a lot of time thinking about during my time at the NSC and during my meetings here in Beijing this week. I don't believe that we're at a tipping point. I think you rightly pointed out that we're at a complex period in the U.S.-China relationship, but in my experience, we're always facing a complex time in the U.S.-China relationship simply because this is a relationship defined both by cooperation and competition and both elements are intensifying in recent years. So the important goal in China policy is to manage that cooperation and competition to ensure, elicit, and encourage greater levels of cooperation from China using both incentives and disincentives, while at the same time bounding the disagreements and areas of competition so that it doesn't become the defining element of the relationship. I think that is the core policy challenge because I think there is wide agreement among specialists in the United States that we want to avoid inevitable rivalry between the United States and China. A final factor to keep in mind in assessing the future of the relationship is that this is a highly resilient relationship. We're in year seven of the Obama administration, not year one. The channels of communication across the relationship are broader and deeper than they've ever been before. We know the Chinese and they know us. We also have built up a very solid track record. The United States and China over the last seven years have worked through difficult issues, we have resolved crises, and we have a good track record of working together to solve important problems like North Korea's nuclear program, Iran's nuclear programs, climate change, etc. So I think fundamentally this relationship over the next 18 months under the Obama administration will continue to be a constructive one.

Haenle: Given where we are today, what needs to be improved, what are the areas that can be improved in the relationship and what are you worried about in the relationship going forward?

Medeiros: Well the principle issue that I'm worried about is China getting drawn into the U.S. election cycle because that's never a source of stability in the relationship because it results in debates in the United States that can often demonize China in ways that negatively affect the U.S.-China relationship during the election and potentially constrain candidates if and when they are elected. So that's not a helpful dynamic. I think the areas we need to work on are the areas of competition that you referred to earlier, particularly South China Sea and cyber. These are issues that not only affect U.S. economic and security interests but also touch on the fundamental question at the heart of the relationship which is: What kind of rising power is China going to be? Is China going to adhere to international norms well accepted for decades or is China going to seek to revise those rules in ways that support China's narrow interests? So work on the South China Sea issue and cyber issue is going to need to be done over the next 18 months so these don't become corrosive issues that undermine the overall stability of the relationship and put us on a path to inevitable rivalry.

Haenle: You mentioned the state visit, and I'd like to talk about that a little bit. President Xi Jinping will visit the United States next week, his first stop will be in Seattle, and then he will go onto Washington for a state dinner and a meeting with President Obama, and then onto New York, for the UN general assembly. Could you give our listeners a sense of what your expectation are for the visit? I know you were integral in the planning and execution of last year's summit between President Obama and President Xi on the margins of APEC in Beijing and by all accounts that was deemed a very successful summit. What are your expectations for next week, what are the most important objectives for the visit, and what are the things that our listeners should watch for?

Medeiros: Well having been through three of these big summits between President Obama and his Chinese counterpart, I have modest expectations. I think first and foremost, the most important element of any of these visits is ensuring that there's plenty of time for both leaders to have extended discussion about the major strategic priorities in the U.S.–China relationship. It's difficult to overstate the importance of that sort of interaction between the president of the United States and the president of China, to really work through the complexity of the relationship in order to expand cooperation and manage competition. I would encourage your listeners to do an assessment of the deliverables. That's always important, and in particular it's important to demonstrate that the U.S.–China relationship is delivering for the American people and that it's serving American economic and security interests, but that should not be the only metric by which the state visit is judged as a success or a failure. I would encourage your listeners to pay attention to what President Obama and President Xi say at their press conference on the morning of the 25th. That is very high level strategic signaling on both parts, and hopefully both of them will have significant messages about taking the relationship to the next level.

Haenle: Well thank you, and finally I want to come back to an early part of your career, when you were at CEIP as a junior fellow in 1993. You spent the next decade working as a scholar and you spent the last six years working as a policy maker, a policy practitioner. I wanted to ask you what kind of things do you think, given your six years of experience, think tanks should be thinking about in terms of how best to assist policy makers in understanding the challenges that exist, but most importantly, finding constructive solutions to this problem?

Medeiros: That's a great question Paul and it's something I've thought a lot about as somebody that has lived in both of these communities. But as you said, my career after college did begin at the Carnegie Endowment and I am profoundly, profoundly grateful for the opportunity I was given as a junior fellow beginning in the summer of 1993. It was my first introduction to the world of policy research and policy making and it really gave me my start, so I want to thank the Carnegie Endowment for giving me that chance. In terms of the role of think tanks, I think that think tanks play a very important role in policy making. First and foremost, think tanks have the ability to conduct research on the essential aspects of security challenges and economic challenges throughout the world, and their work helps policymakers better understand the nature of the challenges they are facing. Oftentimes in government you simply don't have time to pick apart the problems you are dealing with, and so good quality research based on real data is helpful in understanding the nature of the problem and then offering policy relevant recommendations is always welcome, and I think the Carnegie Endowment does an excellent job of not only analyzing problems but also offering a range of options that are implementable. I would encourage the Carnegie Endowment and any research institution to really focus on those two elements.

Haenle: It has been a pleasure to have you out in Beijing with us as part of the CTC DSP, and thanks again for doing this podcast with us.

Medeiros: Thanks.