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TRANSCRIPT
Pekingology
**“Ambassador Nicholas Burns on the U.S.-China
Relationship”**

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FEATURING
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U.S. Ambassador to China

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Jude Blanchette: China has emerged as one of the 21st century's most consequential nations, making it more important than ever to understand how the country is governed. Welcome to Pekingology, the podcast that unpacks China's evolving political system. I'm Jude Blanchette, the Freeman Chair in China Studies at CSIS, and this week I'm joined by Nick Burns, a career diplomat, currently serving as the United States Ambassador to China since 2022. Today we'll be discussing his views on the current state of the US-China relationship.

Ambassador Burns, thank you for joining the podcast.

Ambassador
Nicholas Burns: Thanks Jude. Really nice to be with you.

Mr. Blanchette: Ambassador Burns, if I may, I'd like to ask you the question we ask all guests, which is a biographical one. I'm curious how you got interested in Asia and China, any early experiences or formative experiences that drew you to the region?

Amb. Burns: Jude, thanks and it's very, very good to be with you on this podcast. I was an American Foreign Service Officer. I started as an intern in 1980 in Nouakchott, Mauritania and my early experience in the foreign service was in West Africa and the Middle East. But I had a chance in 1988, when I was a young officer, to work for Secretary of State George Shultz. And I traveled to Asia for the very first time with him in the summer of 1988 to nine countries. It was an extraordinary learning experience for me. And one of them, of course, was Beijing, where he met with the Chinese leadership. And of course it was an eyeopener in 1988 to see China that had just emerged the decade before from the cultural revolution from the Mao era, trying to find its way forward to develop itself. This huge economic expansion, historic expansion started back then.

So I was here then I came back in 1989 with President George H. W. Bush. I was a young staffer at the State Department and was here before Tiananmen in February '89 on his first trip as president in his first 30 days as president to meet Deng Xiaoping. And then came back, I was not a China specialist, came back when I State Department Spokesperson with both Secretary Warren Christopher. I was with Madeleine Albright, Secretary Albright on June 30th, 1997 in Hong Kong at the handover. And then as a more senior officer when I was under Secretary of State, worked closely with the Chinese leadership on Iran sanctions on North Korea, on Afghanistan, on Iraq, the great issues of 2005, '6, '7, '8 when I was under secretary. So had a pretty good sense of the Chinese leadership, of our bilateral relationship, but I had never lived in China.

And so when President Biden asked me to be ambassador back in 2021, I was, you know, honored by the appointment obviously. And for my wife, Libby, and I now, over the last two and a half years, to live in this country, to learn this incredibly difficult but beautiful language – try to learn Mandarin, to travel around the country. It's been an honor and it's been fascinating. So I've had a long journey here. I would say one more thing, Jude, our embassy here in Beijing, our consulates in Shenyang, Wuhan, Guangzhou, and Shanghai are filled with young American foreign service officers, civil servants, military officers who are China specialists. And so they're people like you who've mastered Mandarin, who've been focused on China more or less as their key focus as American diplomats. And I'm so grateful that we have that young core here. I'm not one of those people, I'm not a career long China specialist the way they are, but we really need to see in the next generation of Americans into the '20s and '30s, that kind of commitment to understand this extraordinary country.

Mr. Blanchette: Yeah. And I have always just been so extraordinarily impressed with how deep the bench is in the United States government, but especially the State Department, of folks who just have such a granular understanding of all aspects of China, its economy, society, its political system. It really is quite impressive.

Ambassador Burns, I have a bunch of questions I wanna ask you. Of course wanna ask you about, about the U.S.-China relationship, but let me ask you to put your China analyst hat on. We just had the completion of the third plenum last week, and on Sunday night our time, we finally got the plenum decision. Everyone here has hot takes about the plenum and what it means, but it's a rare opportunity to have someone on the ground there. How did you interpret the plenum? What for you were the big takeaways?

Amb. Burns: Well, for, for those listening to this podcast who may not know about plenums, these are very important sessions that give the Chinese leadership an opportunity to think about and then communicate their long-term economic strategy for the most part. And so we're just now digesting over the last couple of days some of the documents that came out, as you say Sunday, here in Beijing about the plenum. I think it's too early, Jude, to draw any kind of definite conclusions about what policy changes in the economic sphere might emerge from this because the Chinese tradition is to maybe not reveal everything about the plenum at first blush. We're gonna see some speeches that will be published in the next couple of weeks or even months that will give us a much more granular and specific idea of exactly what they intend to do in terms of economic policy.

So I would just say that a little bit too early to draw definite conclusions. But two points. First, as I listen to all the economists here, and I've talked to Chinese and American and international economists about the plenum, I think there's a feeling that this seems to be like a status quo plenum, that major economic changes are not being forecast. And yet many economists to whom I listen, say the big challenge here is to stimulate consumption by the people of China in order to drive economic growth forward. There was not a lot in the plenum about spurring consumption. Other people say it's important to build a stronger social safety net, healthcare, pension system. Well that doesn't seem at this point to have been a priority in the plenum as well. And so I think if there's criticism of the plenum and, and I'm just kind of observing the criticism right now because I think I wanna withhold judgment. That's what you're hearing from economists. Not enough stimulus, not enough attention to the property sector.

But I think the point for Americans and for American policy and for our administration is what did come through in the plenum. In the speeches and in the documents is this Chinese focus on the new productive forces that China wants to stimulate production in lithium batteries, in electric vehicles, in solar panels, and really exceed the, the demand here at home and have a major surge of exports of these products in order to drive economic growth. That's gonna be a problem for the United States and for many other countries of the world. And I think it's gonna drive trade tensions even further than they are. The basic problem that we have identified, and Secretary Janet Yellen was very vocal about this when she was here a couple of months ago on a six-day visit, is that China seems to be keying on producing two to three times domestic demand in some of these categories, exporting these products at artificially low prices often below the cost of production. So classic definition of dumping, and dumping them on foreign markets in a way to gain market share and to compete – in our sense – unfairly against domestic producers outside of China.

So you've seen this big reaction from Turkey against what's happening, from the European Union, from Canada, from Brazil, from Mexico, and certainly from the United States. We're all concerned that China is going to, in a very blatantly unfair way, try to outcompete, unfairly, domestic industries in our countries. And we're not gonna tolerate it. You've seen the EU begin this process of tariff hikes. President Biden already announced 100% tariffs on Chinese EVs, substantial tariffs in other categories. We are not gonna abide a second China shock where Americans lose their jobs in huge numbers because China is not playing by the rules.

So I think that, in the wake of the plenum, is the issue that leaps out at me and at my government and at many other governments around the world. I think this is a very unwise decision by the Chinese leadership.

Mr. Blanchette: Ambassador Burns, just to follow up on that, do you think there is any space in Beijing to make any comprehensive course correction on this? Because in some sense it seems like the wave of exports we're seeing now is the apotheosis of the Xi Jinping vision of political economy, right? Double down on state support and subsidies for some of these export oriented key sectors with the idea that China will be surging exports out to global markets. And that, that seems to be crashing into the reality that advanced democracies have really woken up to this and are saying we're not gonna allow a China Shock 2.0.

I'm just curious, you're on the ground there. Do you get any sense that the leadership in Beijing has any interest or appetite to make that course correction that I think many from Brussels, as you say to Turkey, to the U.S., are asking them to make?

Amb. Burns: Unfortunately Jude, I don't see any reconsideration and that's very disappointing.

When Secretary Yellen was here in a very long visit at the beginning of April, she had lengthy discussions with Vice Premier He Lifeng on this issue and other Chinese officials. And we really hoped that by outlining what a threat this was to the rest of the world and particularly to the United States, that there will be some reconsideration here. We've not seen it. In fact, I think one of the early takeaways from the plenum documents that have just been published is that the Chinese leadership is doubling down on an export driven strategy on these new productive forces. And as I said, that's gonna cause considerable trade tensions and there is going to be a reaction, a continued reaction from the rest of the world.

We had hoped that the Chinese would understand this is not 2000 again, it's not 2005, you know, we went through this terrible period in our country where well more than a million jobs were lost, in large part to this unfair trading practice of the Chinese and we're not gonna stand for it again. But we've not seen that kind of turnaround in Chinese thinking. We've seen a doubling down and that's gonna cause problems.

Mr. Blanchette: If I can ask you a question about the broader state of the U.S.-China relationship and how you see it from the vantage point of the embassy there in Beijing, we had this Woodside Summit last November, it appeared as if there was a mutual coincidence of wants in both Beijing and Washington to really try to stabilize the relationship. I have my

own guesses about what was animating the Chinese desire for that stabilization.

Since November, it's been a rocky stabilization, you know, because of issues ranging from China's continued support for Russia, tensions in South China Sea over Second Thomas Shoal, PLA exercises after Taiwan President Lai Ching Te's May 20th inauguration speech, Ambassador Xie Feng here in the United States telling a senior White House official that the fentanyl issue is quote not China's problem. So again, as an external observer watching this, it feels like this is a very fragile stabilization. How do you assess where the bilateral relationship is now, you know, eight months after the Woodside Summit?

Amb. Burns: Jude, I would say two things in response to your very good, and I think probably the key, question, is where are we now in the U.S.-China relationship? I was of course with President Biden at the Woodside Summit, and I do think point one that the relationship because of Woodside is relatively more stable now than it was in my first year here in 2022 and for much of 2023. Why do I say that? We went through a period between Speaker Pelosi's visit in August 2022 and the balloon crisis in February 2023 where we really had very few senior level consistent channels of communication between the two governments. And that was, I thought, a dangerous period in the sense that, you know, the two strongest militaries in the world, the two strongest economies in the world – you've got to have connectivity, and we didn't. And so we consciously set out to recreate those cabinet channels.

So you've seen now Secretary Blinken's been here twice, Secretary Yellen's been here twice, Secretary Raimondo, we had our first CODEL, a congressional delegation, in five years when the Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of the Senate came out with a bipartisan delegation. We hadn't had a governor here in five years until Governor Gavin Newsom came to China on a very long visit in October of last year. So I think President Biden and President Xi agreed, look for all the problems in this relationship, let's keep talking. And I think that has been a byproduct, a positive byproduct in a way, of the Woodside Summit.

And then in addition to that, what's gone perhaps better since Woodside? Well, first we are beginning to have now senior military to military communications that we did not have before. So Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has had a meeting just last month with his Chinese counterpart in Singapore. Our Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Brown has had a similar meeting with his counterpart. These are critically important contacts because our militaries are operating in very close proximity to each other and international waters of the Spratlys and Paracels of the South China Sea, and the Senkakus in the

East China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait. And you wanna make sure that you've got senior level military contact in case of an accident or misunderstanding. So I think in that respect, we're ahead of the game. We are beginning to make, this is still in the positive side, beginning to make some progress on the fentanyl issue, the Minister of Public Security here, Wang Xiaohong, he has opened the aperture to broader law enforcement cooperation with our Drug Enforcement Agency, with Department of Homeland Security. I think that's a positive.

Third, we've begun a discussion. This is on the positive side of artificial intelligence. It's nascent. We're trying to look at risks associated with AI to our two countries and to the global balance of power. So I think in that respect, certainly as I see it, Jude, here as the American Ambassador talking to the Chinese every day, it's a relatively more transparent and stable relationship. That's the good news. That's point one.

Here is point two. This relationship remains highly competitive, very difficult, often very disputatious. And I certainly feel that as the point person here for the United States. And I just describe it in a couple of ways. We are military rivals, we're rivals for military power in the Indo-Pacific. One of the things that we feel most positive about is that under President Biden's leadership, we have strengthened our alliances with Japan, South Korea, with the Philippines, the development of AUKUS, the development of the Quad at the head of government level. We've strengthened the American position here and we have every intention of maintaining our military power and our military alliance relationships.

But that's a very competitive relationship. Technology I think, Jude, is maybe the heart of the competition between China and the United States. I mean, most people will focus of course on the commercial competition. We're very proud of the leading position that the American tech companies have given our country and artificial intelligence. But that's a big competition. It's gonna certainly last well into the next decade. And there will be military dimensions as we see AI develop, machine learning, biotechnology, quantum mathematics, we're gonna see a new generation of military technology produce and we intend to be in the forefront of that, not as number two, that's an arena of competition.

Trade and investment. China is our third largest trade partner. But I can tell you I meet with American CEOs, I just met with several yesterday here in Beijing. There is no level playing field for them. So part of my job is to try to help level that playing field.

And then finally, on the competitive side, and this is really first in my mind, we believe in human freedom. We believe in freedom of speech and freedom of religion and freedom of the press. And we contest, in a battle of ideas, the authoritarian policies of the government of China. And what's happened, I mean the tragedy in Xinjiang, the continued repression in Tibet, the complete transformation unfortunately of Hong Kong. I was there in March and saw it with my own eyes, the lack of freedom in Hong Kong. This is a very competitive relationship and I think in a way we're looking at a structural competition, it's gonna continue into the next decade.

We need to keep it peaceful. We need to drive down the probability of conflict, but we need to compete. And so that would be my main answer. Yes, we've had, I think, achieved something important, greater communication because of the Woodside Summit, credit President Biden with that in his talks with President Xi. But we Americans need to compete with China to protect our national interests on all these issues. And that's what really animates the work of myself and my great colleagues here in China, my American colleagues.

Mr. Blanchette: Thank you, that was a really helpful perspective, Ambassador Burns. And of course, I'm always struck by its obvious ways in which trying to find a modus vivendi with Beijing is challenging. And I think sometimes there can be armchair sniping that these efforts are a waste of time. But I always try to ask people to imagine what the world looks like in which the United States is not trying its best to win the competition, but keep it peaceful and to try to make these efforts to engage with the Chinese. That is a much more worrying world to me. So I appreciate the efforts of you and all your colleagues to stand up for U.S. interest, but also try to manage this at the same time.

Amb. Burns: Thanks Jude. I just want to add one more point just based on what you just said. In addition to the competition, we do have an opportunity to work I would say productively with China on climate change. And John Podesta, who's our new climate negotiator, has started a productive working relationship with Liu Zhenmin, who's the new Chinese climate negotiator. You know, we're the two largest carbon emitters. China's way ahead of us. It's the largest by far, but we have a responsibility to both of our countries and of the world to work on that. I think fentanyl's another area we have gotta work together.

So it's a largely competitive relationship. The great majority of my time is spent competing, disagreeing, pushing, you know, in this relationship. But we do have this engagement side that I think, you know, for Americans to understand, is an important part of why we need to work with China, why we need to have contact with the Chinese leadership.

Mr. Blanchette: Let me ask you, you'd mentioned the military to military dimension and the restart of some of the, the engagement including at the senior level of the Chinese military and our military. That being said, we saw a recent announcement by the Chinese that they were going to tap the brakes on some of the arms control non-proliferation talks. And the proximate reason Beijing gave was arm sales to Taiwan. And just as my own editorial input here, I will say that I have felt very recently the government and some of the people I engage with in the government trying to redefine arm sales as being quote unquote controversial. And my response to them is, I don't see these as controversial. In some ways this is the most banal element of U.S. support for Taiwan as mandated by the Taiwan Relations Act.

But how do you interpret Beijing's announcement of, obviously, I'm sure this is deeply frustrating for you, but is this really about Taiwan armed sales? If it is, why now, given the fact that the United States has been consistently selling arms of a defensive nature to Taiwan as consistent with the TRA, and really what is Beijing trying to achieve here by walking away from what I think we can all see is important ways of managing the competition and keeping it peaceful?

Amb. Burns: This is a very serious mistake by the Chinese leadership to suspend our talks on arms control and nuclear non-proliferation. The two leaders agreed in San Francisco at the Woodside Summit that we would begin, renew this conversation. It's important for the two strongest military powers in the world to be talking about arms control, to be talking about trying to stem the proliferation of nuclear technologies in the world. And the Chinese should not be surprised that we're selling defensive military technology to Taiwan. The Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 commands the United States to do that. Every administration has done that. So that cannot be a legitimate excuse. I think what the Chinese leadership owes the rest of the world is much greater transparency about their dramatic buildup of nuclear weapons. The Defense Department released as you know, Jude, last autumn, the autumn of 2023, an unclassified report on the buildup of Chinese nuclear weapons force.

It's really unprecedented in the world today. And what has been a hallmark of the old Cold War diplomacy beginning in 1963 with the Test Ban Treaty after the Cuban Missile Crisis, nuclear weapons powers agree to be transparent. The United States is very transparent about our nuclear weapons program and China is not. And the fact now that they won't even talk to our government about this is not only disappointing, I think it's irresponsible. So I think the Chinese

government here will feel a lot of pressure from countries around the world and not just treaty allies of the United States, from countries in the Global South. You know, you do owe the rest of the world some insights into what you're planning and how you're gonna conduct yourself in this nuclear realm. And so we hope they'll come back to the table. That was the commitment they made to us. And the excuse they're making now doesn't stand up in international court of public opinion.

Mr. Blanchette: If I can ask just a follow up on that, given that they have directly linked this to defense technology going to Taiwan, which as you mentioned is mandated by the TRA and we've been doing consistently for, you know, more than four decades, is it your sense that they're just not interested in this anymore? Because of course we will continue to supply Taiwan with arms of a defensive nature. So if this is a gambit to get the United States to withhold aid, I don't imagine that that's remotely possible. So they must know that. So is this just for them to find an excuse to walk away from these?

Amb. Burns: It does sound like an excuse to me because as you say, we are gonna continue to supply defense technology to Taiwan. We've been doing it for 45 years and we're gonna continue it under our One China policy.

But on the other hand, we do need to have a serious strategic discussion with the Chinese about arms control and about what they are doing in the buildup of the nuclear weapons forces. It seems like an excuse. They clearly want to continue to develop their nuclear weapons force and to reach maybe parity, maybe that's their goal in the next decade. But we are a responsible steward, the United States, of our nuclear weapons and of our nuclear technology. We believe the rest of the world needs to understand what we are doing and China should be held to the same standard.

Mr. Blanchette: I know I only have you for a few more minutes here, so if I can just try to get a few final questions in. It's the start of your day, the end of mine, so I want to be respectful of that.

There's a lot of discussion and very open discussion about what is America's China policy. The Communist Party in Beijing does not go around having open discussions about their America policy, but I figure you better than anyone would be in a position to summarize what you think the key planks of Beijing's America or U.S. policy are.

Amb. Burns: Well, I think it's a really interesting question, Jude, because I think there's a contradiction between what their stated policy is to the United States versus their actual policy.

The stated policy, if you look at the speeches of their, their ambassador in Washington, Xie Feng, or others is, hey, we can have a win-win relationship with the United States. We should be friends, we should trade, we should have more tourism, et cetera, et cetera. It sounds good, but it belies the reality. I think the reality of their policy is the leadership here made a calculation that the United States was a waning power, say 2017, '18, '19, '20, '21. I remember being asked about this when I was talking to senators to be confirmed that Xi Jinping had said the East is rising and the West is falling. That calculation of the Chinese leadership did not turn out to be accurate. And I think the Chinese have been surprised, maybe even shocked by the resurgence in the American economy to the substantial strengthening of our alliances out here, U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific.

So their real policy is to counter the United States, it's to compete with the United States. They're trying to, in the way that they're building up the People's Liberation Army, both their rocket forces, their naval technology, they're trying to push the United States out beyond the first island chain over the long term here in the Pacific. They're trying to become the strongest military power eventually in the Indo-Pacific. They're certainly trying to divide the United States from its traditional allies. You see this huge charm offensive underway from Beijing to our European allies. It's not working because the big issue in Europe of course is Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine. And I think the Europeans see what we're seeing, that China is aiding and abetting the Russian war machine, the Russian defense industrial base, helping Putin. So that hasn't worked. And the Chinese are also doing something else which is a little bit more insidious, maybe not as visible to most people, not in the front page of *The New York Times*.

They've developed the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Civilization Initiative. This is an attempt over the long term to erode the values of our world order and to take on the primacy that we give to human rights, for instance, and to the rule of law in the United Nations system. And to make that international order in Chinese eyes more friendly to authoritarianism. We obviously resist this. For us, it's a major strategic issue to defend the liberal, small L liberal, basis of the world order that we and our allies have built up since the close of the Second World War.

So if you put all this together, the actual policy of China against the United States, it's very aggressive, it's confrontational in many ways, it's very competitive, and that's why we are where we are in this relationship. You know, sometimes the Chinese complain to me, the Chinese leadership, you know, why are you building up your military

power in the Indo-Pacific? And my response is, you're contesting the sovereignty of the Philippines and of Vietnam. You've been unfriendly towards Japan and South Korea. You're contesting Indian sovereignty in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and the Himalayas. These are all allies and friends of the United States. There has been a reaction.

And we've seen, Jude, this extraordinary turnaround in the Philippines, since President Marcos came in, reasserting the primacy of the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Agreement of 1951. You've seen the Japanese say that they're gonna spend 2% of GDP now in defense, the acquirement of long-range strike weapons by Japan. This is all part of a reaction by the United States and its allies to an overly aggressive China in this region.

So I guess I'd turn the tables. I think there's the declared rhetorical policy of China towards the United States, but it's belied by the assertiveness of China against the United States and many of our most important interests.

Mr. Blanchette: Yeah, and it strikes me that either the largest blind spot, or it's an example of willful ignorance, or it's just an inability to read the room, is Beijing's inability to understand the action reaction dynamic of their aggression and how that reverberates through the region and creates countervailing forces that boomerang back into Beijing's face.

And of course, they like to frame this as if this is all the United States stirring the pot, which is an easier explanation for them. But I think again, that just means that they deny agency to all the countries that are on its periphery.

Amb. Burns: Right.

Mr. Blanchette: So let me ask you just a final two questions, Ambassador Burns, and I'll let you go.

And you had just mentioned the Chinese view of the East is rising, West is declining and, and how they've been caught on their heels with a – whether this is a strengthening of U.S. ally partnerships, whether this is the rebound of the U.S. economy.

Here in the United States, we've had over the last couple years a debate about China's own trajectory and at the outer margins of this, there are those who I think see China as the development curve really going into a vertical, you know, nose dive. And this is under the Peak China rubric that China, its best days are behind it and the downward steepness of

the curve indicating that, you know, China has maybe not collapsed, but something akin to that in the next decade or so.

Where do you come down on your own view of China's development trajectory, political trajectory? Do you buy into the Peak China debate? Do you have a different framework for thinking about where China will be in 10 to 15 years?

Amb. Burns: Well, I've followed our academic debate back home with great interests. Peak China, been reading all the articles. I'd say the following: number one, there's no question that China is facing a much broader set of economic challenges than that they had anticipated just a couple of years ago. They're looking at, certainly in the next several years towards the end of this decade, much lower GDP growth rate per year. That's gonna be a problem. They have a demographic challenge. They still haven't really figured out how to respond to this seismic property crisis that has really been a major problem for middle class Chinese here.

So lots of problems here and yet I think it would be a mistake to exaggerate those problems and to underestimate the strength of China. It remains the world's leading manufacturer, the world's leading exporter. Through BRI, and I've been a very strong critic of BRI, as have other members of our government, it has given China global reach. If you think about the Chinese economic presence in South America, in all of Sub-Saharan Africa, in Central Asia, in South Asia, and Southeast Asia, China has a strong and willful government strategically oriented to try to continue to build Chinese influence around the world. I think it would be a mistake for us to assume that China is on a permanent downward path given all those inherent strengths in the Chinese economy. That's the first point.

The second point is I like the chances of the United States to retain our position as the strongest global power. Our alliance system, and I see this so clearly in working with the Japanese here, here in Beijing, with the South Koreans, with the Australians, with the Indians. We are in an exceptionally strong position and China does not have anything like the American alliances here in the Indo-Pacific.

I'm also, Jude, a former ambassador to NATO. And it's remarkable for me to see the sense that NATO and the EU now have a strategic policy on China because of Chinese support for Russia in the Ukraine war. There's been a furious reaction against China by the European powers. And you see many more members, by the way, of the Bundestag, of the French National Assembly, of the European Parliament, traveling to Taiwan, much like our members of Congress, than to Beijing. And so I

do think that Chinese have been shocked in a way by the fact that Europe is reacting strategically as well as the East Asian Indo-Pacific allies of the United States. I like our position strategically, I think we've strengthened it here in the Biden Administration and look at the recovery of the American economy after COVID. This extraordinary job growth we've had, the stock market, the strength and lead we have in AI technology because of our tech companies.

You know, I tell the Chinese, don't discount the United States. They often look at us. I read the China Daily every day. It's amazing to me, there are four or five editorials every single day making hay, you know about guns, about problems in urban America. Looking at our disputatious politics, and the red blue divide, and saying the Americans are in shambles. I keep telling Chinese in conversations, don't misunderstand us. We're a strong country. American democracy is gonna survive and move forward. We're gonna come out of any crisis that we have because we've proven it over time. And I think that they would be sadly mistaken to think that we're on a downward slope in our history. I, I think America has a lot of strengths in the time ahead.

So as I think about Peak China, don't underestimate China. That'd be a big mistake, both their strength and their will. But bet on an outward looking America that continues to value our alliances. It's a force multiplier for the United States and we need to make sure that we are committed to those allies. And as long as we do that and stay strong ourselves with a strong American military, specifically out here in the Indo-Pacific, our Navy, our Air Force, I think the United States is gonna prevail in this long-term struggle for power.

Mr. Blanchette: I think that counts as about an optimistic a note as you can end a discussion on U.S.-China relations, Ambassador Burns. And I just wanna say I'm also happy you made that point. It was a discussion I was having with someone who, you know, earlier today where I was saying I think we've lost sight of the fact that if you're thinking about the balance of power and you're thinking about in the strategic competition who's winning, I think it's inarguable that we are. Now, that doesn't mean our lead is permanent, it doesn't mean we sit down on the racetrack, doesn't mean we stop thinking about our innovative capacity. I mean this is a constant process, but in the attempt to raise awareness about the China challenge, we can get into a position where we inflate China's capabilities and almost downplay the extraordinary strengths the United States has. Whether it's innovative capacity alliances and partnerships, our university system. I'll take our leadership of our State Department and our military over the PLA and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs any day.

Amb. Burns: Me too.

Mr. Blanchette: So I just really appreciate your point. I think we need to begin just normalizing the fact that the United States is leading in this competition and double down on the areas where we excel at, address the weaknesses that are very real and there, but never lose sight of how manifestly well-positioned the U.S. is in this long-term competition.

Amb. Burns: Jude, I agree. And if I could say one more thing just to kind of unite this conversation, I think that's a very important point. It's not pollyannaish to say that America has a really strong future out here in the Indo-Pacific. It's based on reality and we've just gotta keep, maintain our military strength, we've gotta maintain our diplomatic strength, and our alliances. That's the force multiplier. That's the difference between China, which has no allies, and the United States, which has this really strong group of allies.

I'd say one more thing. We need to stay engaged. We're gonna have to compete with China, and that's gonna be the focal point of our diplomacy. That's what my life and my mission is here, compete with China. At the same time, we can't demonize the Chinese people. We shouldn't. It's gonna be very important as we have a competitive, difficult relationship with the government of China to keep our populations connected.

So I wanna see more American students in China. More than the 800 we have now, down from 15,000, 10 years ago. More tourists, more business travelers. Why? Because you need ballast in the relationship and you need the societies to remain connected because that's a strength of the United States. That's part of our soft power. If you expose a young person in China to the free flow of information, to the debates that we have about our own future in the United States, that's a strong point about America, not a weak point. And so I think as we compete, stay connected on a societal basis, we want the next generation of Jude Blanchettes, China specialists –

Mr. Blanchette: (Laughs.)

– You know, to take my place and to take the place of my colleagues in the 2030s and 2040s to sustain this relationship. Because while we compete, we do have to live in peace with China. We cannot allow ourselves to get close, either country, to a military conflict, which would be catastrophic for all of us.

And so that is a big, big set of challenges, but I think we're positioned to conduct this diplomacy in a strategic and effective way. So thank you for letting me sound off a little bit today about some of these issues.

Mr. Blanchette: I appreciate it, Ambassador Burns.

The only thing I would try to correct you on is I hope the next generation of China Scholars is vastly superior to the Jude Blanchettes of the world.

Amb. Burns: (Laughs.)

Mr. Blanchette: But thank you very much for your leadership out there. Those of us back here in the United States understand how trying and challenging the triangulation that you and the Biden Administration are trying to achieve of positioning the United States for success in a competition with China while keeping it peaceful. I'm sure it feels like that line to walk is even narrower over there than it appears over here.

So thank you for your leadership on this and not nearly as important. But thank you for your time this morning. Genuinely appreciated.

Amb. Burns: Jude, it's an honor to serve here as the American Ambassador and to serve with great public servants, men and women here in our mission. And I hope we produce more Jude Blanchettes in the next generation too. So (laughs) I'll insist on that point.

Thank you so much, Jude.

Mr. Blanchette: Thank you, Ambassador Burns.

(END.)