A Conversation on U.S. - China Relations

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00:00: Welcome back everyone. I hope you had a short dinner break, but now we have a wonderful panel, really the all-star of China experts in the United States. And I'll just introduce them briefly, and then Joe Nye will lead the discussion. Liz Economy is the Director for Asia Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, soon to be also of the Hoover Institution at Stanford, where we will welcome her out in California. She's actually doing this for us tonight even though she's moving tomorrow, so she gets the MVP award. And of course, Liz has written a lot on Chinese domestic and foreign policy, including her recent book, The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State. Minxin Pei is one of the foremost China scholars in the United States. He's a Professor of Government at Claremont McKenna College and he also focuses on economic reform and governance within China. Mike Pillsbury is the Senior Fellow for Chinese Strategy at the Hudson Institute and has been a high-ranking government official in the Reagan administration and elsewhere and is a regular commentator on China and beyond, and Joe Nye, of course, who's our moderator tonight but who is a China scholar in his own right.

01:16: Let me just set the scene for us. Ambassador Cui Tianka was with us yesterday, and he, amongst other things, denied that millions of Uighurs are being held in re-education camps. He said very little about postponing the Hong Kong elections, but he emphasized again and again that a new cold war with the US is in no one's interest and cooperation is. We had the Foreign Minister of Singapore this morning, Dr. Balakrishnan, who was very thoughtful. Singapore continues to walk this tightrope between China and the US. He took no position on the South China Sea because, of course, Singapore isn't the claimant. Prime Minister Morrison of Australia was far more forward leaning. They're doing a lot to build up their defense forces. They've clearly opted into the Quad alliance. They're very worried about what's happening in China, even though of course, there's lots of trade between Australia and China. And so you're seeing a lot of different perspectives, and so we're now very excited to turn it over to you and hear a US perspective on US-China relations.

Thank you very much.

02:28: Thank you, Anja. I must say that we have had a lot China, and today we started with Foreign Minister, Balakrishnan. But that I was also asked about China by Gideon Rachman in the interview I had this morning. And he asked me about, is this a new cold war? And I said the trouble with these historical metaphors is they can mislead us, 'cause it's really a rivalry, but it's a different kind of rivalry. Whereas we had very little trade or social contact with the Soviets, we have a lot of both with China. And therefore, it's a very different type of arrangement. In addition to that, you have some issues like climate change and pandemics, where we can't do anything unless we do cooperate with China. So we have something that's quite new way, where I call a "cooperative rivalry" in which you have to pay attention to both sides of that at the same time and that's not easy. Rather than pontificate about it from Washington's perspective, we have fortunately three people who are really expert on what's happening in China. And in that sense, with the 30 minutes of presentation that we have, we don't wanna waste it on historical metaphors about the Peloponnesian war or the cold war. I'm gonna ask questions about what's going on in China and what can we do about it? To what extent can we shape Chinese behavior? And to what extent do we understand enough to be able to make the right strategy to shape it?
04:07: So, having these three experts, all Mandarin speaking who know a lot about China, gives us a great advantage to make progress in this direction. Let me start with Minxin who has written a very interesting article recently in foreign affairs and who has taken a rather pessimistic view from the Chinese point of view of their future which echoes something that was said by an economist at our Aspen Strategy Group last week, who said that in 20 years, we would be seeing a China in decline, certainly very, very different from the sort of assertive wolf-warrior China we are seeing today. Minxin, what do you see happening inside China and how is that gonna affect our ability to shape Chinese behavior?

04:58: Okay, thank you very much for having me. I think for the short term probably there's little bit of boost for Xi Jinping's authority. He overcame the initial difficulties of dealing with the pandemics, and even though, there was a huge misstep on the part of the government and he was shaking in his leadership at the beginning, the quick response and the effectiveness of the full mobilization model appeared to have helped him. Secondly, the escalation in US-China relations has also boosted his temporary authority, because there is a rallying around the flag effect. But he is spending his political capital not in terms of designing a long-term strategy dealing with this radically different environment. He's spending his political capital on the next party congress securing his third term, moving his people into place and getting rid of the biggest headache domestically, that is actually Hong Kong. Now with the passage of the National Security Law, he appears to have at least temporarily dealt with that issue. Within the regime, I do see that there is full realization that China is now in an open-ended conflict with the US.

06:33: And rhetorically, they do have a problem how to tell the Chinese people about this, because this is a very somber message. And also at the very senior level they have another difficulty of how to communicate their strategies, their intentions, their goals to the outside world. So, we see quite a bit of mixed messaging going on within China. But in terms of strategy, my reading is that a long-term strategy, a very mixed one seems to be emerging. The fixed part is that the party will maintain a very solid, iron, brutal control within China. That is repression will remain as intense, if not more intense in the coming years both to defend Xi's authority through internal purges or suppress societal challenge to the Communist Party's rule. On the economy, there's a lot of debate about the future direction of China's development strategy. Xi Jinping floated the idea of relying mostly on domestic growth, but there are a lot of different voices challenging this assessment.

08:00: So, this is a strategy, a pillar of the new strategy that is still being debated. And the third pillar is what will China's new geopolitical strategy look like? This is the one that is unsettled, and it seems that China has the most difficulty formulating a new strategy in response to America shifting its policy. And my analysis is that, it's politically very difficult because a shift would imply repudiation of Xi Jinping's policies for the last few years. And that's something he cannot accept, and secondarily, an adjustment will impel a lot of domestic policy adjustments, especially on the issue of human rights, domestic repression, economic reform and that's something that will again be unacceptable to Xi Jinping. And third is that is a lot of the hard line stance like wolf-warrior, the hiccup with India, Hong Kong actually reflects Xi Jinping's own philosophy and ideas. So, that's difficult to change as well and Xi himself is actually a pretty weak leader when it comes to leadership, judgment, capabilities, he's fairly mediocre in terms of experience. So he has a inflated sense of Chinese power. Just as a person, he suffers both from overconfidence, excessive risk-taking, and also deep sense of insecurity and inadequacy.
09:47: And on top of that, China currently has a very flawed policy-making system based on over-centralization and the dominance of yes-men, quite mediocre people in the system. And Xi Jinping himself is just not really adequately briefed, understood. I just want to end with a little anecdote told to me by a really well-placed Chinese academic who used to advise the government. This person used to advise Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, last seven years he's never met with Xi Jinping. So, I asked him whether Xi Jinping actually is in touch with the reality. He said he doubts. Secondarily, he revealed to me that two years ago Xi Jinping himself was shocked that the US-China relationship took such a bad turn. And he saw that China was very poorly served. So, this means that probably given how bad things are, the US can do a lot to shape Chinese behavior at least to communicate to the Chinese leadership, so we have channels. The severity of the problems they face and also the potential, that is, there are a lot of things China can do to improve its ties closely with the US and slow down the pace of confrontation. I think I'll just end up here for now.

11:22: Thank you very much, Minxin. Let me turn to you, Liz, and I've learned enormous amount in reading your book, which I also endorse on your suggestion everybody should read. We know that the party in the past has derived legitimacy from a high rate of economic growth. We know that the growth rate is now slowing down even before COVID. And does it then wind up turning to nationalism as its alternative source of legitimacy? Does that explain sort of this wolf-warrior approach where they've blown the opportunity after the initial COVID problems? And what is this slowing growth rate mean for Xi Jinping's foreign policy initiatives, such as the BRI, or the now quieted 2025 plan, and so forth? And what could we do about it?

12:23: Okay, in the next five minutes. Okay, thanks Joe. It's great to be here with you and also with Minxin and Mike and to have this chance to talk about China. Never a dull moment, that's for sure. I guess I would say that overall the pandemic and the slowing Chinese economy have had less of an impact on China's pursuit of its foreign policy ambitions than I would have imagined. Even in the midst of the pandemic, Beijing was pushing ahead with its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. You know, it sunk a Vietnamese fishing boat, it named 80 new features, 55 of which were underwater. It had the deadly border conflict with India that Minxin mentioned, it sailed its ships into Japanese territorial waters for more than 100 days straight. Of course, it legislated and brought into force the new National Security Law in Hong Kong.

13:22: BRI lending actually continued even at the height of the pandemic in the first few months of 2020, BRI lending went on. Now, BRI investment fell off fairly significantly. And I think we are gonna see a shift in the nature of the Belt and Road Initiative moving forward away from emphasis on hard infrastructure like ports and railroads and highways, and more towards the digital Belt and Road satellite systems, e-commerce, fiberoptic cables, and the Health Silk Road, which has really come into its own as a result of the pandemic. And we've seen China really pushing this notion of the Health Silk Road. So constructing hospitals, sending out teams of doctors, enabling countries to follow in the path of China's contact tracing surveillance technology, actually advancing traditional Chinese medicine. And that the Health and Digital Silk Roads have the advantage as well of not being as reliant on the state, on state-owned enterprises, but also engaging a lot of Chinese private enterprises.

14:33: And of course Beijing announced an impending new strategic partnership with Iran. So I
think there's a lot that has happened over the past six, seven months that really surprised me, because one would have anticipated perhaps that Beijing would take a step back and focus much more on what was going on at home. I think the one area on the global stage where China is really likely to take a step back is on its climate change commitments. I think the Minister of Ecology and Environment announced that China would have to take a step back from its more ambitious environmental targets, and we've seen that CO2 emissions have jumped back up to pre-pandemic levels already. So they were supposed to deliver a new action plan this year that's already been postponed I think at least until the end of the year. Some people are suggesting they'll wait until the new US administration to see whether there's gonna be renewed interest in the US getting back on board.

15:34: In terms of the wolf-warrior diplomacy and the turn to nationalism, I think absolutely, and with the slowing economy, Xi Jinping was forced to forgo his doubling income, meeting the doubling income target. It looks like they're not gonna meet the poverty alleviation target that he had set out. So those are two big hits. So where do you turn when you are forced to move away from what was going to be this very significant announcement of success on Xi Jinping’s part with in terms the economy. And I think you turn to nationalism and certainly the US enabled that in part. The Trump administration with its constant hitting on the China virus and the Wuhan virus etcetera, I think as Minxin suggested, served to sort of rally people around Xi Jinping and around China, at a time when, again, in those first few months, there was an enormous amount of criticism of the regime, right. And it was the first time frankly that I had seen that kind of civil society activism and energy and engagement via the internet with people communicating, trying to get trusted verified information about what was going on. You had all those citizen journalists flooding into Wuhan. It was really exciting to see I think in January and the early parts of February what was going on.

17:01: But then there was the crackdown and again you had the US pressure coming in and this sort of sense of, "Okay, well, we're not gonna criticize ourselves when we've got the United States criticizing us too." So, wolf-warrior diplomacy, very unattractive. I think it undermined what should have been a win for China in the end. China did manage to get the virus under control. It was able to provide the PPE for much of the rest of the world and yet they ruined it. I mean, they shot themselves in the foot by going out there and demanding thanks from other countries or threatening Australia and banning beef and putting tariffs on barley because Australia called for investigation into the origins of the virus.

17:45: So, I think it was an instance where really, Xi Jinping snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. So, I'll stop there. I guess maybe I would just conclude by saying in terms of where all of this leaves China and its global standing, I would say to my mind, it's really the pandemic has just reinforced how countries already viewed China, right. What was their predisposition beforehand? So if they were largely supportive of China, say in Italy or Hungary, they tended to laud China's success and welcome its PPE. If countries were more skeptical and concerned about the lack of transparency and human rights repressions, for example, the United States or maybe even the UK, I think that you got a very different response. They tended to focus on the downside of how China managed things.

18:42: Thanks, Liz. Let me turn now to Mike and say, Mike, you've been a long-term and eloquent writer and observer about China's strategy. And I'd be interested to know from your perspective, do
you see a bright future or not? Is this economist I quoted from last week too pessimistic about China going into decline in two decades? Can China's behavior be constrained and changed? And if so, how? So Mike, what do you think?

19:21: My view of Chinese strategy, Joe, has been in all three books, that they debate strategy, there's no single monolithic Chinese view. And it's very much in our interest in these debates that certain points of view will win and other points of view will lose. Part of my own experience in the government, and a large part has been with net assessment over about a 40 year period. One thing Andy Marshall taught us always is look at your own strengths and weaknesses, and then the other side's strengths. And in the case of China, especially weaknesses. And Minxin has written two books on the topic highlighting weaknesses, problems. The other side is the World Bank, the IMF forecast, the Goldman Sachs forecast, that whatever the source of these Chinese growth rates, we don't seem to understand what are the levers we would have to apply to change the Chinese growth rate, that is to slow it down. For example, if intellectual property theft is a major portion of their growth rate, choking that off, which the Phase One trade deal has enforcement mechanisms about that, should slow the growth rate. And the so-called Thucydides Trap of fear will never happen.

20:49: But when you ask economists, and we paid a lot of money to a lot of economists, to tell us what exactly are the sources of Chinese growth? What you find out, they all pretty much say the same thing. "Well, it must be capital. Wherever they're getting, their capital." Well, could that be choked off? The answers yes. Demographics, and here I was checking your own book, Joe. On page 198 and 199, you go into how our demographics, are one of the few countries in the world on the growth side and China is decreasing the size of its workforce. Thirdly, productivity, and that's where the economists all get into fights with each other. Productivity is kind of a buzz word, which I think means I don't know. Somehow technology, science, certain procedures, operations research in the case of the Japanese, somehow this magic factor works. And in the Chinese case, they have had enormous productivity growth. Again, can we somehow affect that or as Liz hints in her Foreign Affairs piece last year on Neo-Maoism in China, "Are the Chinese their own worst enemies? Are they gonna make mistakes?"

22:02: Back to your question about can we induce change? One of the things that's come out of the first phase trade negotiations process, we learned two things. Number one that tariffs work. Remember there was great doubt about that, an enormous opposition. But we learned from the Chinese themselves that they had their own list of reforms they wanted to implement, and our pressure... And this is the concept the Japanese used to tell us about too. Outside pressure that strengthen the hand of the reformers. The guys who wrote in the party congress, the market is the decisive factor, which really isn't the case in China, but that led them to sign up to 95 pages of detailed promises with an enforcement mechanism. So that's clearly change took place in China with reformers helping us. Some of these delegations were 30 people from various... It was like an interagency nightmare where they are all watching each other, but progress came out of it. Now I'm more concerned, as you know, about the military side of things. And our own plans, as publicly announced, are to really build up Guam, to have a very good 360 degree defense on Guam.

23:22: Maybe 20 Billion dollars over the next few years. It's called The Pacific Deterrence Initiative, for lack of a better word. That is one of the things we're doing. Will that affect Chinese military decision-making? Well, super hawks in China say, "Oh my god, the Americans want to
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come at us in the first island chain with Guam as their base," which some Americans have unfortunately publicly stated. Americans who have four stars on their shoulders, Joe. The other thing we're doing is talking about missile defense being more comprehensive, not just Iran and North Korea. The Chinese instantly pick up on that, and State Departments disavow that initial defense against China is not our goal, that looks hollow to certain Chinese in the debate I mentioned to you. That they fear the American nuclear strategy is seeking what they call absolute superiority over China. They have thought they had a second strike capability, but it's beginning to look like there's a debate about that as well. So they did not show up June 24th in Vienna, despite the President's own personal invitation to participate with the Russians and the Americans on either a cap or at least could they accept the concept of strategic stability.

24:40: Confidence building measures all the things that you live through that had to do with start and assault. The Chinese say "No, that's not for us." And their explanation was fascinating. "We're too weak. We're not at the point yet. We're at the same nuclear delivery level as the Russians and Americans." So as sort of a come back and then the American side says, and the Russians are helping us, "Oh, gee, when did you plan for us to come back?" And they won't say, "How many nuclear warheads have you got?" They won't say. "Why do you think you have a second strike capability?" They won't say. This is after 15 years of track 1.5 and track two talks. So these military areas are sometimes looked down on by great scholars like Liz and Minxin. But to me, the doing or undoing of a Cold War and a Thucydides trap has a lot to do with these military issues and how the Chinese perceive what the Americans are up to. My own view is bipartisanship is our only hope. The Chinese are exquisitely sensitive to political conflict in Washington DC. They know everything about Steve Bannon and Peter Navarro. And is Larry Kudlow more of a hawk than Steve Mnuchin? They fill their papers with this kind of detail. Most of our China experts can't name all the members of the standing committee of China. They have no idea of the politics at the very top.

26:11: So there's an asymmetry in analysis of being able to understand how are we affecting their debate. We have a lot of American experts who say there's no debate in China. They are sort of a Nazi party and it doesn't matter what these debates are all about. I don't agree with that, but how to influence them seems to me involves understanding how we're perceived in China and how that debate focuses on what we do. So bipartisanship helps us enormously. It's our multiplier, if you will. Because when they see, "Oh my God, all the Americans from James Stavridis, over to Mattis over to you name a super-hawk, all agree on this." For example, "Build up Guam or China, you come to the talks on nuclear arms control or else you'll be punished." That really has an impact that I think will induce change in China. But the more polarized we are, the more we attack each other, the less hope there is of our influencing China.

27:13: Great, well, thank you very much, Mike. We have now reached the point where people, participants get to use the last 15 minutes to raise questions. And I have a number of people on the list already. Let me first turn to Naseem Kader. And Naseem Kader, if you can unmute yourself and make sure your video is on, you will have the floor. And it's gonna take about 10 or 15 seconds for it to all register properly, but Naseem, give it a try.

28:00: Otherwise let Minxin say some more.

28:02: Duh, duh, duh, duh. [chuckle]
28:04: So Naseem, if you're not there, then I'm gonna talk to Ginny Nguyen. Ginny Nguyen. Can you unmute?

28:22: Yes, I'm here.

28:24: Okay, speak up.

28:27: My question is to Dr. Minxin Pei. What do you think Xi Jinping and the PRC look at Vietnam and its role in their overall strategy of the China's trim? Would Xi Jinping allow Vietnam to be more democratized, more independent and lean forward with the Americans and the free world. And what techniques, what has been most successful for the PRC in their coercions toward the Vietnamese leaders?

29:14: Well, I think China's long term strategy for Vietnam is that it remains a one-party state, independent from big powers. What I call strategic neutrality and then political autocracy will serve China's interest the most as far as Vietnam is concerned. I think the biggest question is really for Vietnamese leaders. Do they want to fundamentally improve the quality of their relationship with the US by taking the next step? Vietnam has already moved faster than China in terms of political change. And it can actually do a lot more and make some even more fundamental changes that will solidify, that will lay an ideological or value-based foundation to its long term strategic relationship with the US. And China really cannot do that much in terms of influencing that aspect of Vietnam's decision-making.

30:19: Thank you. Next on my list is David Shambaugh, and he's gonna be followed by Mike McFall and Chris Stone. So David, unmute and let's hear from you.

30:32: Hi. Greetings. Thanks Joe and colleagues. Good to see you all. Greetings from Northern Michigan. So Mike Pillsbury spoke about China's weaknesses and both Minxin and Liz have talked about the messaging issue. Minxin talked about China's internal messaging. Liz, the wolf-warrior issue. So I'd like to ask all of you, including Joe, because you've written about soft power somewhat. You were the father of soft power, Joe. How do all of you see China's messaging in the US-China competition framework? The competition between the US and China is gonna play out in multiple domains, including the perceptual information domain. And that's an area where I think China has a lot of weaknesses. As Mike referenced, they live in what I think is an echo chamber and they're not very adroit at adjusting their messaging. So I'm just kind of curious. I'll throw a softball question to all of you, including Joe. How do you see this playing out? How the US could take advantage of China's inept messaging and weak soft power and vice versa. Thanks.

31:42: Let me ask Liz, then Mike, then Minxin, and then I'll put a footnote on if there's time. [chuckle]

31:48: Thanks. Thanks David. So I think, as we know, China's soft power is weak. Soft power is organic and emanates from a culture and the ideas of what makes a country attractive to others, and I think the Chinese leadership finds it very difficult to not make it more of a government-oriented
effort. So it has to have control. I see this is especially true with Xi Jinping. Frankly, it's astonishing to me, given how challenged the United States has been over the past three years with its own soft power, with the Trump administration and with our relations with our allies. Just how little China has been able to accomplish when you look over the past three years in terms of winning over some of the United State's partners and allies. So to my mind, in some respects, Xi Jinping and his desire for control and just the ugliness and the repressive nature of the regime was really the greatest gift to the Trump administration, and it really salvaged us for the past three and a half years in our own standing on the global stage.

33:00: Mike?

33:00: There is a book called The Beautiful Imperialist by a guy. It couldn't be you, David Shambaugh, he has the same name David Shambaugh, but it couldn't be you 'cause you look much too young to be the author of that book. But it's the first real study of debates in China, and it argues that the professors were more ideological than the front line warriors, if you will, at the New China news agency and distinct tanks were sort of in between. This hurts China's soft power capabilities because of their system. You could find out by living in Beijing for a year and keeping track, and you could write the book to assess the issues in the debate. But Chinese themselves, when they're on soft power missions, they can't do that. So the fact of their intra-party democracy going on and the fact that they have different views, and they're not all wolf warriors, there are some globalists and words fail me for other debating voices. So they're handicapped by their own lack of a democracy.

34:12: And if Liz is right about the Neo-Maoists have arrived and are not leaving, then China's handicapping itself except for money. This is where they have... There are stories all over Africa of a Chinese coming in with a briefcase, a large briefcase. It's a million dollars in cash to do X, Y, Z. So I don't know if Joe, as the father of soft power, included cash bribes but the Chinese have had a lot of success in that. Frankly, if they came to me and said, "Here's $10 million. Could you say Xi Jinping is the greatest leader in the world?" I'm sure I would say no and turn down the money, but I'm not sure all other China experts would be so ethical as I would. [chuckle]

34:54: Great. Minxin?

34:55: Just a quick word. I think the US can do a lot more by living by its own values and examples. I think what could have happened much more in favor of the US in the last few years is US simply will just live up to the expectations of what people around the world think the US should be doing. I think that did not happen. Just think how different the world would look like had the US pursued a policy that truly reflects American values.

35:38: And my footnote, David, is that I think Chinese soft power is greatly overrated. If you look at this London index, the Soft Power 30 that's published every year, China comes out about 27 or 28 of the 30 countries, and they have two inherent limitations. One is it's very hard to be attractive in Delhi if you're killing Indian soldiers on the border in the Himalayas. And the other is that if you insist on tight party control, you undercut civil society, which is a great source of a country's soft power. If you have a genius like Ai Weiwei and then you expel him, you undercut your own soft power. So I think Chinese soft power is actually quite limited. Next on the list is Mike McFall.
36:25: Hey everybody. A great conversation. Thanks for letting me in, Joe. I'd like to get a little bit more perspective on what Minxin said about Xi's erratic risk taking behavior. Let's just say, for purposes of argument, we all agree with that. Although the Trump administration's latest speeches don't seem to agree with you, Minxin. They have a much more strategic assignment to Mr. Xi Jinping. But in the spirit of the debates, could you all tell us what we know about debates about that erratic behavior within the party, within the government, within the business community? Do people agree with it? Are they despondent? Give us some flavor in the spirit of Mike Pillsbury's assessment that we need to pay more attention to these debates. Tell us what the debates are to the best of your abilities, about Mr. Xi Jinping's erratic behavior.

37:32: Yeah. First, I have to admit these days, it is really hard to do China watching. China is more opaque than any time in post-Mao history. And now is the not just economic decoupling, but what I'm afraid a scholarly cultural decoupling, it will become even harder in the future. But let me just point to two examples, that is the two very controversial examples, actually it's three, they are all signature Xi Jinping moves. One is the announcement of the air defense identification zone in East China sea. The other is the building of artificial islands in the South China Sea and the third is Belt and Road. So the ideas did not originate with Xi Jinping. The ideas were out there a long time, long before Xi, a considerably long time before Xi came into power. But it was really under Xi’s rule, in very quick succession. 2013 November, then April 2014, and then I think it's also 2013, they were rolled out, very, very quickly without adequate deliberation about the pros and cons, so that's just a data point I can supply. And the other is that the Chinese awareness of this fundamental shift in USA policy occurred about two to three years ago, and you did not see real change on the part of Xi Jinping. And that's a big puzzle is why didn't that happen?

39:31: Let me try, if we are quick, to get Chris Stone in in the two minutes that we have left. Chris, are you there?

39:39: Anja's kind of the grim reaper, when she shows up it's...

[chuckle]

39:46: I am. Like the person with the long hook. [chuckle]

39:50: Okay, it looks like we've run through our time, Chris. We'll have to apologize.

39:56: No worries, thank you.

40:00: Anyway let me take the chance to thank our panelists. We had little time but I think we covered an enormous amount of territory, and I know we threw a little extra light on what's been a full day of China here. Thank you all very much for joining the Aspen Security Forum, and I'll now turn it back to Anja.
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