Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Ambassador William J. Burns
February 27, 2019

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Menendez, Members of the Committee -- it's an honor to be with you today and an honor to join Steve Hadley, a friend and former colleague for whom I have deep respect. I'm very pleased to offer some brief thoughts about America's changing role on a changing international landscape and its implications for the work of this important committee.

The Landscape

Today's world is more crowded, complicated, and competitive than at any point in my three and half decade diplomatic career. The global order that emerged after the end of the Cold War has shifted dramatically, creating unprecedented challenges for American statecraft.

Great power rivalry is back, and it has brought with it complex risks and trade-offs for which we are out of practice. China is flexing its muscle and expanding its influence. The Chinese leadership no longer subscribes to Deng Xiaoping's "hide your strengths and bide your time" philosophy, and has accelerated its effort to not only establish China as a global economic peer of the United States, but to supplant it as the leading power in Asia.

China's ambition to recover its accustomed primacy in Asia has already upended many of our comfortable assumptions about how integration into a U.S.-led order would tame, or at least channel, Chinese aspirations. And our traditional allies in Asia, as well as new partners like India, are taking notice and adjusting their strategic calculations -- raising regional temperatures and increasing uncertainties.

Russia is proving that declining powers can be at least as disruptive as rising ones, punching above its weight as it exploits divisions within the West. Vladimir Putin's relentless focus for much of the past two decades has been to reverse the decline of the Russian state and its international standing -- and the result is a Russia that sees its best bet for preserving its major power status in chipping away at the American-led international order. If he can't have a deferential government in Kiev, Putin can grab Crimea and try to engineer the next best thing, a dysfunctional Ukraine. If he can't abide the risk of regime upheaval in Syria, he can flex Russia's military muscle, emasculate the West, and preserve Bashar al-Assad atop the rubble. Since I left government, Putin has shifted from testing the West in places where Russia had a greater stake and more appetite for risk, like Ukraine and Georgia, to a wider range of places where the West has a far greater stake, like the integrity of our democracies.

Alongside these great power frictions, crises of regional order continue to bubble, driven by both the strengths of local competitors and the weaknesses of failing states. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Middle East, which remains best in class in dysfunction and fragility. No longer the global energy player it once was, no longer able to sustain its rentier economies, no longer able to camouflage its deficits of opportunity and dignity, much of the Arab world teeters on the edge of more domestic upheavals, with extremists eager to prey on its vulnerabilities.

Beyond the unsettled rivalries of states, and the decaying foundations of regional stability, new global challenges are straining the capacities of governments to create workable international rules of the road. The pace of the revolution in technology makes the impact and dislocations of the Industrial Revolution look plodding by comparison. Advances in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and synthetic biology continue to move at breathtaking speed, outpacing the ability of states and societies to maximize their benefits while minimizing their potential downsides. We have already seen how authoritarian regimes can harness the apparently decentralizing power of technology to consolidate control of their citizens.

Meanwhile, the transformative effects of climate change are becoming more evident with each passing season. With polar ice caps melting, sea levels rising, and weather patterns swinging wildly, the consequences of an environment badly damaged by human behavior are growing more dangerous and immediate.

America's Pivotal Role

These challenges would be daunting in any era, but they are particularly urgent now, at a time when America's singular post-Cold War dominance is fading. On today's international landscape, we are no longer the only big kid on the geopolitical block. That's not a defeatist argument; it's merely a recognition that the United States no longer occupies the unrivaled position of strength that we enjoyed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. What we do have, however, is an opportunity to lock in our role as the world's pivotal power – still with a better hand to play than any of our rivals.

No other nation is in a better position to navigate the complicated currents of twenty-first-century geopolitics: we still have the world's best military, spending more on defense than the next seven countries combined; our economy remains the most innovative and adaptable in the world, despite risks of overheating and gross inequalities; advances in technology have unlocked vast domestic potential in natural gas and clean, renewable energy; and we still have more allies and potential partners than any of our rivals, with greater capacity for coalition-building and problem-solving. These advantages are not permanent or automatic – but they do give us a window in which we can shape a new international order before others shape it for us.

Fashioning a strategy for America in a post-primacy world is no easy task. Neither unthinking retrenchment nor the muscular reassertion of old convictions will be effective prescriptions in the years ahead. We will have to rebalance American foreign policy priorities to tackle the most pressing challenges and respond to the most urgent threats. That will mean sharpening our attention on managing competition with great power rivals, and using our capacity to mobilize other players to address twenty-first-century challenges. That ought to be infused with a bold and unapologetic vision for free people and free and fair markets, with the United States as a more attractive exemplar than it is today.

Asia must continue to be our first priority. The most critical test of American statecraft is managing competition with China, cushioning it with bilateral cooperation wherever our interests

coincide, and a web of regional alliances and institutions that amplify our leverage. Our economies are deeply intertwined, but that is not in itself a guarantee against conflict.

Both the United States and China will have to work to ensure that our inevitable disagreements do not spiral out of control. As regional apprehensions about Chinese hegemony grow, there will be increasing opportunities for us to strengthen existing relationships and forge new partnerships in the region. Part of our strategy has to be defensive, pushing for overdue changes in China's trade and investment practices, ideally in concert with partners in Asia and Europe who share similar concerns. And part ought to be affirmative, laying out a compelling vision – and a renovated architecture of trade relationships, alliances, partnerships, and institutions -- for Asia's future. The primary aim is not to contain China or force others to choose sides, but to ensure that China's rise doesn't come at the expense of everyone else's security and prosperity.

We also have before us a rare moment of opportunity to reduce the threats posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, with a second summit meeting unfolding this week in Hanoi. This will require a serious, sustained, disciplined diplomatic effort, backed by economic and military leverage, and closely coordinated with our allies in South Korea and Japan, and other key regional players, like China.

A deeper American focus on Asia makes transatlantic partnership more, not less, significant. It implies a new strategic division of labor with our European allies, where they take on more responsibility for order on their continent, and do even more to contribute to possibilities for longer-term order in the Middle East, while the United States devotes relatively more resources and attention to Asia. Now is the moment for a renewed Atlanticism, built on shared interests and values in a world in which a rising China -- as well as a resurgent Russia and persistent problems in the Middle East -- ought to cement a common approach.

Managing relations with Russia will be a long game, conducted within a relatively narrow band of possibilities, from the sharply competitive to the nastily adversarial. Even as we push back firmly against Putin's belligerence, we cannot ignore the need for guardrails – lines of communication between our militaries and diplomats that can help us reduce the risks of inadvertent collisions. We should be engaging in serious strategic stability talks, and working in our own cold-blooded self-interest to limit nuclear threats. Russian violations have helped trigger the demise of the INF Treaty, but it would be foolish for us to let the New START Treaty lapse in 2021.

We should not give in to Putin, but we should not give up on the possibility of more stable relations with the Russia beyond Putin. Russians may eventually chafe at being the junior partner of a rising China, just as they chafed at being the junior partner of the United States after the Cold War, and that may open up space for artful American diplomacy.

Tackling these challenges will require us to take a hard look at America's involvement in the Middle East, where we have focused so much of our foreign policy attention for the past several decades. We are no longer directly dependent on the region for the bulk of our energy needs, and a clear-eyed assessment of our interests argues for a different kind of engagement. We cannot neglect our leadership role in a region where instability is contagious and threats can quickly

metastasize, but we ought to continue to shift the terms of our engagement, with less demands on the American military and more reliance on creative diplomacy,

As part of a long-term strategy, we should reassure our traditional Arab partners against the threats they face, whether from Sunni extremist groups or a predatory Iran. But we should insist in return that Sunni Arab leaderships recognize that regional order will ultimately require some modus vivendi with an Iran that will remain a substantial power even if it tempers its revolutionary overreach. We should also insist that they address urgently the profound crisis of governance that was at the heart of the Arab Spring. At a time when authoritarians feel the wind in their sails, the United States cannot afford to blindly and willfully indulge autocratic impulses. This body has already strongly condemned acts like the killing of Jamal Khashoggi and called for curtailing the overreach that has bred such horrendous conditions in Yemen; we must also do more to make sure that these condemnations are followed by tangible actions.

As members of this committee know very well, the strategic significance of Africa and our own Hemisphere has often been underplayed in Administrations of both parties. That is a mistake. Demography -- with Africa's population likely to double to two billion people by the middle of this century -- and a variety of uncertainties and possibilities in both of these critical regions will only increase their importance for American interests.

Successfully executing a pivotal power strategy will require shoring up America's alliances. Just as in domestic politics, it's important to "remember your base" -- in this case, a set of partnerships that sets us apart from lonelier powers like China and Russia, and serves as an enormous force multiplier. Over the coming decades, we'll have an increasing interest in putting ourselves in position to manage relationships and build influence in all directions. European partners will be instrumental in countering Putin's Russia, while our allies in Asia will be a necessary part of a broader strategy for dealing with the rise of China.

We must also do better when it comes to following through on our international commitments. It was, in my view, an historic mistake to make the perfect the enemy of the good and walk away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership; with a subsequent effort in Europe, we could have anchored two-thirds of the global economy to the same high standards and rules as our own system, helped emerging markets join the club over time, and shaped China's options and incentives for reform. Our withdrawal from agreements like the Paris climate accords and the Iran nuclear deal has further deepened international mistrust of our motives and undercut our image as a reliable partner. So has our backtracking on migration and refugee issues, and humanitarian diplomacy more broadly, which has hampered efforts to get other states to do their part and left critical frontline partners increasingly on their own.

Reconnecting with Americans and Rebalancing our Tools

Just as it has at other crucial moments in our history, this committee can play a vital role in answering these challenges, and in formulating a new strategy for the century ahead. You have both an opportunity and a responsibility to help bridge the disconnect between an uncertain American public and an often undisciplined Washington establishment, and rebalance the tools in our national security toolkit to fit a new era.

All of you are acutely aware of the tradeoffs and interplay between America's foreign and domestic priorities. You know firsthand the costs and benefits of our international commitments. It will be impossible to fulfill America's potential as the world's pivotal power unless we make more vivid the connection between smart American engagement abroad and renewal at home. We have to show our fellow citizens that effective American foreign policy not only begins at home, in a strong political and economic system, but ends there too -- in more jobs, more prosperity, a healthier environment, and better security.

In my experience, most Americans don't need to be convinced of the wisdom of disciplined American leadership in the world, in our own enlightened self-interest. But they are less persuaded of our capacity, across Administrations of both parties, to be disciplined in the application of American power, and to ensure that Americans across our society are positioned for success in a hyper-competitive world.

This committee has an equally important role when it comes to overseeing and shaping the tools of American foreign policy. In the years ahead, we won't be able to get everything we want on our own, or by force alone. So as a recovering diplomat, it won't surprise you that I am absolutely convinced that diplomacy -- backed up by military and economic leverage and the power of our example -- will matter more than ever as our tool of first resort.

Unfortunately, American diplomacy has suffered from decades of strategic and operational drift. We were lulled into complacency by our strength after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and we inverted further the roles of force and diplomacy in American statecraft following the terrible shock of September 11.

These long-term trends have been greatly exacerbated by the current administration's hollowing out of American diplomacy. The after-effects of its early, ill-conceived "redesign process" are still lingering. Intake into the Foreign Service was cut by over 50 percent. The Foreign Service has lost many of its most capable mid-level and senior officers. Key ambassadorships and senior positions in Washington remain unfilled. What was already painfully slow progress toward better gender and ethnic diversity has been thrown into reverse. Most pernicious of all has been the practice of blacklisting individual officers, simply because they worked on controversial issues in the previous Administration.

There is never a good time for diplomatic malpractice, but this is a particularly damaging moment. This committee can – and should – help shape an affirmative agenda for diplomacy's renewal. At its core ought to be a compact – a two-way street in which the State Department and the executive branch follow through on serious reforms, streamline structures, and find a rational balance for budgets and roles across the national security community, in return for more support from Congress.

That will mean an honest self-appraisal by the State Department; while individual American diplomats can be remarkably innovative and entrepreneurial, the Department as an institution is rarely accused of being too agile or too full of initiative. It will mean smart bureaucratic reforms that de-layer the Department and push authority downwards and outwards, empowering

ambassadors in the field. It will mean holding nominees to high standards and working to fill vital diplomatic posts around the world. And it will mean adequate resources for diplomacy, with more flexibility allowed in the use of funds. Neither the State Department nor the Congress can revitalize American diplomacy on their own, and this partnership will only work if it's embedded in a wider compact with citizens that restores their faith in disciplined American leadership and the significance and utility of diplomacy itself.

The window for defining America's pivotal role will not stay open forever. Whether we seize the moment of opportunity before us will depend in large measure on whether this chamber and this committee can help recapture a sense of shared vision and shared purpose; whether we can recover a sense of diplomatic agility out of the muscle-bound national security bureaucracy that we've become in recent years; and whether we can come to terms with the realities of a new international landscape, and shape it skillfully with our considerable enduring strengths.

Thank you very much.