

## **CSCC Podcast Ep. 22: “Unpacking the Present Crisis in US-China Relations – Ryan Hass”**

### **Introduction:**

Welcome to the podcast of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Study of Contemporary China. I’m your host, Neysun Mahboubi, and in today’s episode you’ll hear my conversation with Ryan Hass—now a fellow at the Brookings Institution and previously National Security Council Director for China under President Obama—exploring the important and ever more lively topic of the US-China relationship.

As I record this introduction in early December, it remains quite unclear whether Presidents Trump and Xi Jinping will reach any kind of trade agreement in the near future. Insofar as there has been growing anticipation, in recent weeks, for at least a preliminary, so-called “phase one” agreement, most commentary about the prospective deal has been muted at best. What’s been reported as likely, or possible, is not the sort of comprehensive trade deal that US and Chinese negotiators have circled around for the past 16 months, while the trade war between the two countries has escalated. It may be that a preliminary agreement would help pave the way to a broader deal in the longer term horizon, which addresses the so-called “structural issues”, like China’s industrial subsidies, that were a driving US rationale for the trade war in the first place. But at this moment, with the Chinese position on its core economic model hardening, that larger US goal seems as distant as ever.

Whatever the likelihood—and beyond that, the implications—of a potential truce in the US-China trade war, it seems clear that the overall relationship between the two countries has lately entered into a new, more harder-edged phase, defined by competition and perhaps even conflict in multiple areas: economic, technological, ideological, strategic, and conceivably military as well. New dynamics have given rise, in turn, to a proliferation of slogans aiming to best capture the present state of US-China relations, and guide their future course: from “managed interdependence” to “strategic competition” to “constructive vigilance”, and all the way to the notion of a “new Cold War”. In the United States, these and other terms have been deployed in often heated debates, not limited just to the present or future, but including over past attitudes and choices—indeed, over the basic wisdom or utility of the past 40 plus years of engagement with China, in the first place.

In this charged rhetorical atmosphere, Ryan Hass stands out for the sobriety and insight of his analysis, which he has shared in extensive commentary, across a wide range of platforms, since leaving the US government in 2017, after a distinguished 15-year tenure. Highlights from his service include 5 years as a foreign service officer in the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, 4 years as National Security Council Director for China, as well as his work and participation on the state visits exchanged between Presidents Obama and Xi Jinping in 2014 and 2015. Since joining the Brookings Institution in 2017, Ryan has directed the reporting skills for which he was previously recognized with one of the State Department’s top honors, now towards public audiences, publishing high-impact analyses something like every few weeks. So I was thrilled to record this conversation with him when he visited the University of Pennsylvania in early May, to speak at the CSCC’s annual conference, which focused on the security dimensions of US-China relations.

We covered a lot in our conversation, starting from the question of how the present compares to prior moments of tension between the two countries, and then moving through a fairly robust accounting of the Obama administration's handling of the relationship. It will come as no surprise that Ryan views the Obama administration's efforts in this regard favorably, on the whole, but you will notice that he is admirably open to reflection and even critique—and, also, that he is reasonably balanced in his evaluation of the Trump administration's subsequent approach. The one dimension that you will hear him speak most strongly against is the notion that there is any racial component to be factored into US strategic thinking on China, as was suggested by the then director of the State Department's policy planning staff, Dr. Kiron Skinner, a few days before Ryan and I spoke. On this point, I should note, we very much agree.

Towards the end of our discussion, you will also hear our shared dismay and disapproval over the Chinese government's actions towards the Uighur population in Xinjiang province, including the mass detentions which have horrified so many around the world, and about which we have all learned so much more from internal files leaked to the New York Times and other outlets in the weeks before this episode is posted. You will *not* hear Ryan and me discuss the situation in Hong Kong, which obviously has become a greater flashpoint in US-China relations in the time since we spoke, especially after the recent passage of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act. For now, at least, it's truly remarkable how issues relating to Hong Kong have seemed to displace those issues relating to Taiwan which we did cover. And regarding the subject with which I opened this introduction, the prospective US-China trade deal, it's also worth noting how today we remain precisely in the same state of heightened yet uncertain anticipation, as when this conversation was recorded back in May.

All of us who closely follow the evolving relationship between the United States and China are by now well aware of its uncertainties, of the murkiness of the road ahead. In striving for analytical clarity, the best we can do is try to be as informed, as reasoned, and yes, as principled as we can. In the conversation you are about to hear, like in his writing and public speaking generally, Ryan Hass models those qualities as impressively as anyone I know. Like I told him at the end of our discussion, I sincerely hope he will get another chance to serve our country soon. And, in the meantime, while he's more able to speak freely on platforms such as this, I'm delighted to finally share our conversation with you now.