



CIGS and Stimson Center Joint Seminar
**Course Change or Full Speed Ahead?
Post-Midterm U.S. Foreign Policy's
Impact on the Indo-Pacific Region**

EVENT SUMMARY

Date: November 2, 2018

Venue: 1211 Connecticut Ave NW, 8th FL, Washington, DC 20036

On November 2, 2018, four days before the U.S. midterm elections, the Stimson Center and the Canon Institute for Global Studies (CIGS) together hosted a panel discussion analyzing the potential effects of the U.S. midterm elections on foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific region. Moderated by East Asia Program Co-Director Yuki Tatsumi, the panel featured Kuni Miyake from CIGS, Ambassador Derek Mitchell from the National Democratic Institute, and Daniel Twining from the International Republican Institute.

Tatsumi opened the discussion by asking the panelists about their predictions for the upcoming midterm elections. Twining predicted that Republicans will make gains in the Senate and Democrats will make sizable gains in the House. Mitchell chose not to predict the outcome of the election. The discussion transitioned into the topic of bipartisan legislation. Twining mentioned that for the past two years, Congress has been able to work on bipartisan legislations when it comes to foreign policy. Some examples of such legislations included the Russia, Iran, North Korea sanctions bill and the BUILD Act. Mitchell pointed out that although there may be bipartisan support for issues such as commitment to alliances and commitment to international trade, Democrats may distance themselves from the Trump administration on other issues after the midterm elections. Mitchell also noted that the 2020 election campaign season would begin fairly soon as well. Miyake raised the question of what the U.S. will do to balance attention and resources between the Middle East and East Asia. He mentioned that it is very difficult to focus on both regions at the same time and that there needs to be a clear decision made by the U.S. government on its “balance of attention” of its foreign policy. Mitchell agreed with Miyake’s point about how difficult it is to balance resources. The indecisiveness of the U.S. has led to U.S. allies becoming uncertain of its relations with the United States. Mitchell did bring up one topic that unifies both parties in the U.S., and that is China. China is a concern for both parties for a multitude of reasons including human rights and security issues. Miyake added that ironically China is becoming a “unifying factor” in discussions in Washington, D.C. Miyake warned that the U.S. needs to have a clearer goal or demand for its approach toward China, whether it wants China to change its leadership or just its policy.

Tatsumi opened the floor to questions. Hayato Tanaka from the Japan Bank for International Cooperation asked the panelists to elaborate on Miyake’s point of U.S. needs and demands for its approach toward China. Mitchell expressed that there is a bipartisan consensus on U.S. policy and expectations from China. The U.S. would like to see “fairness, equity, transparency, and reciprocity.” The U.S. is not hoping for a regime change in China. Another audience member posed a question about the future of

U.S. relations with India. Twining stated that the United States and India are not aligned in terms of trade but are aligned for other issues. Defense agreements have been made and interests of the two countries are aligned in Africa and other developing nations. Twining expressed his optimism toward the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and India, but later showed his skepticism toward India's cooperativeness especially during times of crisis.

Mitchell responded to a question asked by Satohiro Akimoto from Washington Insights regarding the impact of the election on Indo-Pacific strategy. Mitchell stated that it is difficult to predict the impact of Congress on Indo-Pacific strategy because Congress is very focused on domestic issues during election season. That being said, issues such as the emergence of China, issues surrounding North Korea, and future relations with India, are all issues that may be addressed by Congress. Steve Hirsch, a freelance journalist, asked the panelists whether the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" expanded, slowed, or had no effect on Chinese soft power influence on Southeast Asia. Mitchell answered by stating that it is too early to tell the effects of the policy. Mitchell also stated that China and Xi Jinping's bluff or "mask" is off in some ways in that the rest of the world is realizing what China's true intentions are behind its actions around the world.

Brian Chang from the Asia Group was interested in U.S. foreign policy toward Vietnam and Thailand and how it would evolve over the next year. Mitchell explained that the U.S. continues to have a dialogue with Vietnam and is trying to work on differences between the two countries such as human rights issues. On Thailand, there is a lot of political change occurring in the country and the U.S. has not paid much attention to these changes. Twining added that there is a growing voice among the younger population in Thailand and that these people want to see change in their government. Twining also mentioned that social media growth and influence is prominent in Vietnam. Vietnamese people want to use social media without being sent to prison. Vietnamese people also may be more anxious about Chinese assertiveness and power than people of any of other country due to their historical experiences and geographical relationship with China.

Gil Rozman asked about Shotaro Yachi and his relationship with John Bolton. Miyake noted that both Yachi and Bolton are not "running the show" and that both Prime Minister Abe and President Trump are the ones behind negotiations behind Yachi and Bolton.

Renata Janney from TV Asahi asked whether the Democrats will cooperate or obstruct more with the Trump administration on foreign policy after the election. Mitchell pointed out that the current administration deals with opposition “as hostility, as the enemy,” and that it “takes two to tango” on issues. Mitchell believes that Democrats will work with the current administration on topics such as foreign policy but may push back more on domestic issues.

Hani Nasser from the Canadian Embassy asked about the impact of the elections on the administration’s South Asia policy. Twining mentioned that there is a “bipartisan consensus on hardening of position on Pakistan,” and that “there is much more skepticism towards Pakistan today on Capitol Hill than there has been at any time maybe since 9/11.”

Jennifer Zeng from Epoch Times asked the panelists to elaborate on the topic of a regime change in China and whether the U.S. would like to see one in the future. Miyake claimed that China will not change, and that China’s neighbors want a “stable, less threatening China.”

An audience member from the Vietnam Embassy asked that if Democrats do take control of the House, would it pressure the administration to engage in dialogues regarding free trade agreements. Mitchell responded by pointing out that Democrats are fairly aligned with the Trump administration on trade deals and are against agreements like the TPP. Mitchell shared his confusion surrounding TPP because as Democrat he had defended the agreement for a period time until the Democratic Convention before the 2016 election.

Tatsumi closed the seminar by thanking the panelists and the audience for the discussion.