

## Keynote Remarks from Senator Kim at Foreign Policy for America's Leadership Summit

May 18, 2026

I've had the chance to be able to talk with a lot of you over the last few months, over the last few years, and I've just been reflecting as I came in here about this theme about strong, principled leadership. It had me thinking about something. This summer, this year, almost exactly to the day, is 20 years since I first came to this town for an internship at USAID. I was very proud to be able to show up here and I remember coming out of the Union Station and being simultaneously in awe of the Capitol building view, but also terrified because I realized I knew nobody in this entire city, not a single person.

Back then I didn't have a cell phone. Back then the taxis ran off this zone system that was so confusing. But I felt welcome though, despite feeling like an imposter, wondering whether or not I belong here, whether or not I could represent this country. It was interesting having that opportunity at USAID and then subsequently, I had a chance actually 20 years ago, to work at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I was a graduate student fellow at SFRC, working out of the fourth floor of Dirksen and I feel really blessed because I started the same day as another fellow, a fellow from the State Department named Chris.

Chris became an extraordinary mentor to me and somebody who really taught me what it means to serve this country. I think about him a lot because he's the one that convinced me to join the State Department and someone who guided me through his career until the tragedy in Benghazi, as my friend Chris was Ambassador Chris Stevens. He and I shared an office 20 years ago so when I think of strong, principled leadership, I think about Chris. I think right now more than ever, our foreign policy can and should be guided by that type of model.

I can't stand here before you and simply tell you to reject the "might makes right" approach that we see so much dominating our foreign policy today. It is incumbent upon me and others to share with you what is that alternative? I think an alternative, a Chris Stevens diplomacy and Chris Stevens foreign policy is something that can remind us of the importance of what American leadership can mean without the bullying, without the divisiveness, without the toxicity and the volatility that is out there. It does not mean that it is not strong, but it is one built off of engagement, built off of a foundation of public service, and built off of a sense that humility and empathy can be strengths, not weaknesses.

There's no doubt as you heard from my colleagues there are real challenges that remain, and I, for one, agree that we cannot be looking backwards. But some of the damage that has been done is irreversible and we struggle right now understanding what is going to be our next steps. I heard at the Munich Security Conference that we are no longer seen by others as the indispensable nation. We are instead seen as an unreliable, undependable nation. When we think through what comes next and how we try to chart a course forward, one word for me comes to mind, which is the word resilience. I believe that if we are no longer seen as the indispensable

nation, and we are trying to reject the sense that we are the undependable nation, we must become the resilient nation.

And the reason why I think through resilience is because we are undoubtedly in an era of crisis, and this crisis will continue beyond this present. This is not something that is short term. This is an era of crisis. We are certainly strong as a nation, but we have not built ourselves in a way where we can withstand the shocks. We need those shock absorbers. We need those reinforcements necessary, as if we are a tall, skyscraper built with yesterday's tools.

I hope that we can think through what comes next. This sense that we can protect our economic security with the same intensity and vigor that we protect our physical national security. To recognize that we have work to make sure that we have the resources that we need from energy and medicine, critical minerals, to reduce our vulnerabilities and create those shock absorbers for those economic crises ahead, and that we can define and build our partnerships around economic and technological growth, not just around geography and security relationships.

And yes, this calls upon us for an era of pragmatism and humility. This year is also 15 years since Andrew Albertson and I worked together in Afghanistan. I remember the world we were trying to build coming out from there and how far we've strayed. The one thing that I learned in Afghanistan is you have to fight on the battlefield of which you were dropped, not the battlefield you wish you were dropped on.

We have real world consequences to deal with right now. One thing else that I really learned going through this because I have now spent a significant portion of my career, both in the Executive Branch and the Legislature. I've still spent a little bit longer in the Executive Branch, but it has given me grill insights into some of the challenges that we're facing.

One thing comes to mind, in particular. When I worked at the National Security Council, I was often told that there was a firewall between foreign policy and domestic policy, as if the idea is that we have to be thinking through our foreign policy without the sense of how the domestic politics and whatnot engage.

I agree with some of those principles. I'm the first is saying that the last place that partisan politics belongs is in this situation room. I agree with that. But I think that this sense of division between foreign policy and domestic policy has come to our detriment, especially in these areas of crisis. I've seen too often how the American people feel so distant from the decision making.

You see that now more than ever right now with this Iran, without the approval, it is a war done in the name of the American people, at the cost to the American people, but without our say. That is something that we have to make sure that we're changing. What I've seen too often is our bureaucracy, our Executive Branch structured in this way where we are not able to take into account the challenges that cross this. Gutting our NIH funding and abdicating our role as a global leader when it comes to medical research, that has broad foreign policy implications too. Cutting off our foreign students into the United States, much like my father 50 years ago coming

here to be able to study, decimating our ability to continue to be a global magnet for talent. I, for one, believe that our position as a global magnet for talent does not take away from our position and our ability to grow that talent here at home. I recognize that actions that I took in Congress, like the CHIPS and Science Act or the infrastructure law are two of the most important foreign policy pieces of legislation that I have passed, not just about domestic growth.

I wanted to talk to this group because many of you I've worked with over the years. Many of you continue to engage, but I hope that we can challenge each other to make sure that we are building a different kind of approach. One that very much understands that have to break down that barrier. We have to be thinking about the domestic implications of our foreign policy and the foreign policy implications of our domestic policy and understand together how we build on this through a common word of resilience.

When I think through the challenges that we face right now - yes, so much when it comes to China, so much that we saw in regards to our competition shaped over the course of the past few decades that we saw rise up to a summit this past week. What we see or two leaders very much representing these two different countries, seeking to shape the world around them.

President XI, very much laying out his terms of global order, one favorable to Beijing. Now the question on us is what are we going to do? I hope that we build something that recognizes that we have to approach this with an understanding that we cannot be looking backwards. We cannot have some new president come in 2029 and say, America is back. We will not have the credibility, neither at home nor abroad.

That does not mean, though, that we give up on this project of American leadership. For this project of American leadership needs to be built off of a national project on resilience -- built around that idea of rebuilding that with the Chris Stevens of the world, with people that actually believe in this country, being able to repopulate our civil and foreign service, to be able to grow what comes next, to be able to do so with pragmatism and on standing what it actually takes to execute. You see, right now what happens when you have a foreign policy unmoored from reality. Unmoored from what it takes to actually execute, and you see how much more that has weakened us around the world.

Today, I say enough. We need to make sure that we move past it, but not just from a sense of what we're against, or a sense of anger at what we see happening to our country right before our eyes.

I believe in this group, Foreign Policy for America, because I've had the chance to be able to work with you for a number of years. I believe you have so much of the expertise right here in this room and throughout this community to be able to engage. What I share with you is that we, as a group, need to make sure that we're going out and talking to the American people, that we are hearing from them about what is first and foremost on their minds, and then being able to work together to be able to build that type of foreign policy.

Foreign policy for America absolutely also needs to be about domestic policy for America, and that's how we're going to be able to build something stronger, more resilient, and usher in a new era of American leadership that I'll be proud to raise my eight year old and my ten year old in.

Thanks so much.