

Remarks by Senator Andy Kim on Building a Foreign Policy to Provide Opportunity to All Americans

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Good evening, everyone. How are you doing today? Well, thank you so much. I have to say, it's incredibly humbling having a chance to be able to speak at this school.

50 years ago, my father was doing his post-doc here at Harvard. And he was a foreign student. You know, he's somebody that was born during the Korean War – somebody who had polio and tried to seek any and all opportunities that he had. And my mom was a nurse, went to nursing school and was a nurse here at the Brigham and Women's Hospital where I was born. So, for me to be able to return here now, as a United States Senator, I think a lot about my parent's journey.

I asked them once, “why did you do it?” Why did you travel from South Korea to the United States over 50 years ago? Because they didn't know anybody here in the entire Western Hemisphere of planet Earth when they came here. But yet they did it. And I asked them and they said, because they felt like here in America, they could guarantee that the family that they raised – that me and my sister – would have a better life and more opportunities than they did. It was about opportunity.

And so, for me, to now stand here as the first Korean American U.S. Senator ever in our nation's history, to be able to talk through the challenges of opportunity in this day and age – it's not just theoretical because now I come before you, not just as a Senator, but as a father of a nine-year-old and 11-year-old little, two little troublemaking boys.

And look, I'll be honest, I just want the same thing for them what my parents wanted for me – a sense of opportunity. The idea that I could tell my boys, I guarantee you, you will have a better life and more opportunities than me. But I'll be honest with you, because of so much of the chaos and the challenges we face domestically and abroad, I don't think I can make that guarantee.

And that's why I'm here, because that's actually why I'm in the Senate. I'm trying to think through, how do I shape this world for my boys, for you, for your generation? And I think so much of that revolves around this issue that we're dealing with when it comes to opportunity – when it comes to some of the biggest geopolitical issues of our time.

So, what is opportunity? Opportunity, it's rightly a very amorphous concept. Opportunity is the antithesis of anxiety. And a lot of us feel that right now.

Opportunity means shaping the world that my two boys are going to grow up in – the sense of stability, the sense that they will have choices of growth and some predictability. And as I said, I want that for not just my boys, but everyone's kids and grandkids – for that next generation.

But unfortunately, today, we're waking in a moment of tremendous anxiety that, within our lifetimes, we've never been more divided politically or governed more corruptly. We've entered another war of choice that's driving up our costs, driving away our allies. We have so many problems just tearing away at the insides of our nation. But opportunity isn't driven solely from dynamics within.

There are two other major tectonic plates that are in play right now that are colliding in this moment. One, is that we are entering an era of unprecedented technological velocity with innovation surging. And second, we are living in the most globally competitive moment that any human being on this planet has ever witnessed. And at the intersection of these tectonic plates is the defining question of what the relationship between the United States and China will be, as they are two of the main drivers of technological innovation and two main drivers of global competition.

Now, on this question – sitting in Congress for the past seven years, I've seen more wrong than right. A few years ago, I was named as a member of the Select Committee on the Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party. The focus of this committee should have been on tangible actions that we can take to increase our competitive strength.

But what I repeatedly heard from many of my colleagues were assumptions that conflict was inevitable, that full economic decoupling was necessary, and that any dialogue was a sign of weakness. I even heard rhetoric that made me, as an Asian American married to someone of Chinese descent, not only deeply uncomfortable, but sometimes outright disgusted. But now, a few years later, we see an altogether different but still flawed approach by President Trump that is equally frustrating.

Just a few weeks ago, President Trump welcome President Xi. Now, I worked at the National Security Council. I helped plan summits at the White House. These are moments trying to drive a sense of purpose. But what can we tell the American people was the purpose of these summits? What did they gain out of this besides having to pay the bill? Well, the only purpose I saw, honestly, in many ways, was the pageantry. That it's clear that when it comes to China, there hasn't been a sense of focus from this administration. No sense of purpose, plan, or strategy. Are we on the verge of conflict with China or are we on the verge of trying to start a G-2 with China? With no purpose driving our policy, the answer seems to be “yes” and “no” to all of these questions.

But I refuse to believe that the only policy options towards China and global competitiveness are binary. That it's either the saber rattling or turning the blind eye. And if we are to pursue opportunity in this nation, for our future, we need to move past the incoherence of the present and build a future with focus grounded in honest assessments, not wishful thinking or fear mongering.

That we recognize that we are not in a new Cold War, nor is conflict with China inevitable. That the relationship between the U.S. and China is inherently competitive, and China is seeking to shape a global order that would weaken America's position and our interests. Both of us hold critical chokepoints that can greatly affect the other economically. We should expect both countries to remain the two most powerful and influential for many years to come. So, working off of these assumptions, how best should the United States position itself to maximize opportunity for the American people?

Well, first, reducing vulnerabilities and managing threats. While our two countries have very different visions for our world ahead, it's critical that we find ways to inhabit it together and avoid destabilizing competition that could lead to conflict.

In my years working in war zones, I've learned that opportunity is hard to build, but easy to destroy. While conflict with China isn't inevitable, that doesn't mean it's impossible, and nothing would be more devastating than a war between the two most powerful nations. All efforts should be made to deter and reduce that outcome.

But deterring military conflict is only part of the challenge. We must also take seriously the economic and security threats that China has posed that have deeply affected our ability to create opportunity. Trump has assented to President Xi's moniker for the relationship of constructive strategic stability, but the truth is, China is still engaged in a range of destabilizing actions while attempting to moderate and minimize any American action.

Chinese parts are powering Russian drones attacking Ukraine. Reports of Chinese intelligence helping Iran plan attacks that have killed U.S. service members. Massive cyber-attacks like Salt Typhoon that have breached our telecom industry and government, on top of hacks that have targeted critical infrastructure.

I have issues that we're seeing right now when it comes to AI distillation or IP theft, dumping goods and weaponizing chokepoints; and regionally, resumption of island building in the South China Sea, increased military action around Taiwan, and aggressive action towards Japan.

A successful approach on China does not mean turning a blind eye or minimizing these harmful actions. Instead, it demands concerted strategy to reduce our vulnerabilities while engaging China to reduce the risks of mistakes, misunderstandings, and miscalculations.

Now, this requires having meaningful and productive open channels of communication at multiple levels of leadership. I'll stress that again, multiple levels of leadership. Because Trump's singular focus on a "head of state" relationship that plays to his "great man theory" instead plays into China's strengths.

China has historically been resistant to talks on critical security issues, often viewing discussions about arms control on nuclear or cyber issues as a means to hold them back. But nonetheless, we need to be clearly messaging to Beijing on AI, bioweapons, and other topics to ensure that they're clear on our perceptions and intentions, and over time attempt to build a platform for more robust dialogue. This would require a massive change in approach from what we're seeing right now from the Trump Administration.

President Trump seems to be more concerned with rebranding AI rather than controlling it. And when he met with Xi, he failed to discuss guardrails around frontier AI and China's practices of distillation that has been stealing from American frontier models. All while this administration failed to maintain our export controls framework especially when it comes to advanced chips, as well as a chip manufacturing equipment.

It's also common sense to take further steps to reduce our vulnerabilities. One key area has been our overdependence when it comes to critical minerals and materials, especially when it comes to China. Last year's trade disputes showed China's willingness to restrict rare earth magnets from American businesses and industries, and we see how such reliance leaves our economy exposed and susceptible to shocks. We can be more resilient by safeguarding these supply chains and working with our allies and our partners to do so.

And finally, this is a situation about what's within our own control. We must stop these wars of choice around the world that are self-inflicted wounds that drain the resources, drain our focus, drain our credibility. This Iran War has made us poorer, years behind in munitions production and readiness, and the most isolated diplomatically that I've ever seen in my lifetime.

This has serious negative implications for our deterrence posture in the Indo-Pacific, increasing our vulnerabilities and the risk of conflict. Beyond reducing our vulnerabilities, we need to play to our strategic advantages. And as I said earlier, the relationship is fundamentally competitive. But it should not be about competition for competition's sake. It also doesn't mean that the United States must fundamentally compete on everything.

We must be grounded in a reality, as we don't have the capacity to dominate every industry, field, and sector. Nor should we strive for it. In fact, there are places where we should avoid overextending ourselves and draining resources. What we decide to focus on must be strategically chosen; rooted in areas that benefit the American people, protect their security, prosperity, and way of life; and be backed by resource investments and structural focus.

We can start by the factors that are largely in our control, like growing a world class workforce by prioritizing investment in education, rather than working to dismantle the Department of Education. And stopping the efforts that are targeting colleges and universities that have been deterring so much of the growth that we made in many ways. It's about attracting the world's best and brightest and giving them a path for opportunity like this country did and this city did for my parents 50 years ago.

Few factors will shape future opportunity for the American people more than innovation and transformative technology. Transformative technologies like AI will alter every aspect of our society. American discoveries continue to inspire, but our diminishing manufacturing in comparison to China's growth should push us to focus not just on invention but proliferation.

In 1990, Microsoft had 90% of the global market for computer operating systems. Today, Android and Apple combined hold nearly the entire global market for mobile platforms. But for this new wave of technological competitiveness, China heavily dominates advanced robotics, biotech, EVs, and their cheaper AI models are getting wide traction as their costs undercut U.S. models, despite our companies having superior capabilities.

One area we have maintained our edge is that of the advanced manufacturing of semiconductor chips, and the chip manufacturing equipment. Where we lead, let's keep it. It's common sense to protect our

advantages through export controls, like the bipartisan MATCH Act that I introduced with Republican Senator Ricketts.

Now, transformative technologies like AI have the power to alter every aspect of our society, and it's critical that the American people are in the driver's seat of shaping what that change looks like.

Our government has been slow to recognize and adapt to these changes, but in order to position America for success in this competitive moment, we must decide how and where to lead and work alongside like-minded partners to build the future we want to see.

When the US is 4% of the world's population and China is 17%, the question of success is whose tech is the rest of the 79% using? When we seek trade and national security partners, what helps us build those coalitions?

When I was at the Munich Security Conference earlier this year, after Secretary Rubio spoke about how diversity is destroying our societies, the head of the Chinese delegation, Wang Yi, gave a speech saying that China is the partner now on stability. And [Trump] is helping [China] make that a reality – in attacking our allies and our partners and acts with purposeful recklessness. Some of the damage Trump has done is unfortunately irreversible.

Our next president won't be able to stand at their inauguration and credibly tell the world that “America is back.” If we want to regain trust and build depth and power in the kind of alliances and partnerships that have been core to America's strength for generations, we need to rethink them for this moment. We need to recognize that our relationships will look different than before and embrace areas where we can no longer just work together with our allies in power and partners, but we need to empower them now to lead.

As Japan is being antagonized by the Chinese government, we should forge stronger partnerships through East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia; with Japan and South Korea nations across the Indo-Pacific. We should be doing that instead of berating them over tariffs and praising Kim Jong Un.

We also need to maintain peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, which is essential for securing opportunity. Ensuring a strong and prosperous, secure and confident Taiwan is critical in doing so and needs to remain a pillar of our policy as we seek to expand our focus on the important shared economic prosperity of our partnership.

Now, many of the partnerships across the globe are focused on security and military deterrence, but in order to be competitive, we must reframe our engagement to include collective economic and technological opportunity.

Now, what I laid out for you today is an effort to try to refocus our foreign policy and use that to shape the relationship that will be the most important and most impactful bilateral relationship in the world.

Now, instead of a constructive strategic stability from a weakened position, the United States can engage in a pragmatic competitiveness with a goal towards reducing vulnerabilities and playing to our strengths to grow opportunity. It's not going to be easy, but it's important and essential.

One way or another, these are going to be difficult and complex times. But I urge you all to find your own way to try to meet this moment. Because if we do work to meet this moment with purpose, I truly believe that this can be a moment of change. Where we can move to an era of opportunity, not anxiety, and be able to provide my kids and you and your families the kind of opportunity and the kind of stability that you deserve.

Thanks so much for coming on out and I look forward to your questions. Thank you.