

## Nicholas Burns on Healing the Political Divide

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by Robert Huebscher

American history teaches that we can rise above our deep political divide, according to Nicholas Burns. The U.S. rose to independence based on the “power of ideas,” he said. Lincoln put the country together after a divide far deeper than what we face today, and FDR led the country to victory in its most difficult war. Those challenges were infinitely more difficult than what we face now, Burns said.

Burns was a keynote speaker at the Schwab IMPACT conference in San Diego on November 13.

He is a professor at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Previously, he served in diplomatic positions for both Democratic and Republican administrations. He served as the ambassador to NATO under President George W. Bush and as ambassador to Greece under Presidents Bush and Clinton.



Burns gave a scripted talk, starting with the advantages the U.S. has in economic, political, military and “soft” power. He defined soft power as the attractiveness of our culture, based on our rule of law, free speech and technology. He discussed five broad trends that are driving the world economy and geopolitical outlook. I have summarized those trends below.

Burns was nonpartisan, but he acknowledged the degree to which discourse in the U.S. has been divided by political party, age, ethnicity and geographical location. When pressed in the question-and-answer portion of his talk, he identified policies under President Trump that have been harmful to U.S. interests (e.g., minimizing the importance of NATO and withdrawing from Northern Syria).

His most memorable comments came at the very end of his talk, as I noted above, when he provided a positive outlook for healing the political divide in the U.S.

### 1. The economy

It’s all about the economy, Burns said, which is the “enabling power.” Without a strong economy, a country cannot have a strong military. The last two presidents have been good stewards of the economy, Burns said, based on stock market performance, employment and corporate profitability.

But the trade war continues. There is a truce now, he said, “but an end is not in sight. It’s likely there won’t be a deal before the 2020 elections.”

Trump has been right about attacking China for its theft of intellectual property, according to Burns. Trump made a mistake, though, by sanctioning six other countries at the same time as he did China. Trump has also been right to make India an important strategic partner.

Germany’s growth has flat-lined, he said, and India’s growth is down to 5%. China says its growth is 6.3%, and the U.S. is under 2%. Growth is slowing in the largest economies, he said, “but it doesn’t mean we are heading into a recession.”

### 2. The global balance of power is shifting

For the last 500 years, most of the economic, political and military power has been in the West, more recently in the U.S. But the American century is “coming to an end,” Burns said. Power is shifting from the West to the Indo-Pacific region: India, China, Japan, South Korea and East Asia. The U.S., China, Japan and India will be the future powers and the transition will be destabilizing. China and India are gaining on us, he said, “and others will follow.” In 18 of the last 20 centuries, China was the dominant global power. “It is returning to its normal place in the universe,” Burns said.

The biggest story of our time is how we relate to China. A rising, returning power challenging the established power usually leads to war. Over the last three to four years, the U.S. has shifted from “engagement” to “competition” with China, he said,

driven by the theft of intellectual property. He credited President Trump for confronting China over that issue.

We are competing on four fronts: military predominance, where the U.S. has an advantage because of established allies in Asia, and there is a consensus that we have to maintain our dominance in Asia; technological dominance, where the U.S. leads in artificial intelligence other advanced technologies, which he said are being “weaponized.” Whether we get there first depends on our government working with the high-tech industry; the battle of ideas, where China champions an authoritative rule and is forcing the U.S. to win the hearts and minds of those in other countries; and the battle for economic supremacy, where the deck is stacked against our technology companies. Winning that competition is the most important thing we will do in this century, Burns said.

Burns sharply criticized China for its human rights policies. In western China, he said, one million Muslim people have been put in “reeducation programs.” China is trying to wean them off Islam. Those people “won’t stand for that,” he said, and this is a “massive violation of human rights,” as is what is happening in Hong Kong. The U.S. must be critical of those actions.

Europe is on the decline and Russia is doing even worse, due to demographics and health care. India, Brazil and Nigeria are slowly rising to global power. Our grandchildren will need to pay a lot more attention to those countries, Burns said.

### **3. Transnational challenges**

For the first time ever, the 7.6 billion people on Earth have to work together to solve problems: climate change and human trafficking. Drug cartels are out of control in Mexico, he said, citing the recent murder of nine Americans in northern Mexico.

We need to work transnationally to solve problems that extend to cyber challenges and pandemics. U.S. presidents need to build coalitions to address those problems. We cannot solve this alone, Burns said.

### **4. The role of the U.S.**

Burns cited Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who has said he worries about the “demonization” within the U.S., by red versus blue, liberal versus conservative, north versus south and urban versus rural. “We need to treat each other more kindly,” Burns said, “and reflect on the fact Americans have a lot in common.” This means being a responsible steward of our power and be outward looking. We can’t be the policeman of the world, he said.

We need to be outward looking and resist the temptation to be isolationist. Burns said that isolationism is one of the biggest worries he has about U.S. policy. He criticized the withdrawal of troops from Northern Syria, pointing out that the Kurds were one of our most reliable allies.

There is a consensus that NATO and other alliances are vital. But Trump has diminished that view, he said, and that is a mistake. Burns recalled his experience as ambassador to NATO at the time of the 9/11 attack. He received calls from other NATO members saying that they were ready to go to war, invoking article five (“an attack on one is an attack on all”). He recalled a conversation with Condoleezza Rice, who told him, “It’s good to have friends in the world.” All those countries went to war with us, he said, and are still there in Afghanistan 18 years later.

He worries about the spread of biological weapons, especially in the hands of a terrorist organization. He called this the greatest threat to the U.S.

### **5. Hope: positive global trends**

Burns cited a number of very positive achievements in his lifetime.

Approximately a billion people have been lifted out of poverty in the last 30 years, more than during any other period.

Global public health is advancing. Polio is nearly eradicated, he said, because the U.S. and people like Bill Gates and Michael Bloomberg have put a lot of money into vaccinations. Similar progress has been made toward malaria and HIV.

Women have risen in power in the U.S. But that is not happening in the Shia or Sunni world, he said, but it is happening across Europe, in corporations and boards.

### **6. Summary**

Burns concluded his scripted remarks by quoting Churchill on the role the U.S. must play in global politics.

By 1943, it was clear that the U.S. would win World War II. Burns told of when Winston Churchill addressed the students at Harvard, at a time when power had shifted from the U.K. to the U.S. Churchill was symbolically handing the baton of power to the U.S. The key line of his speech, according to Burns, was, “the price of greatness is responsibility.”

Churchill saw the price of isolation in the 1920s. He said, “One could not rise to be in many ways the leading community in the civilized world without being involved in its problems, convulsed by its agonies and inspired by its causes.”