



TRANSCRIPT

Environmental Insights Episode #3, 2025

Guest: Nicholas Burns

Record Date: May 28, 2025

Posting Date: June 9, 2025

LINK to podcast: <https://on.soundcloud.com/5zA3QHezsz7WUyXts>

Nicholas Burns:

I am someone who deeply believes in [the Paris Agreement](#), that we need to remain committed to working with China and the other 193 or four nation states as part of the [Conference of the Parties](#), and that this is an existential issue for the future of our planet.

Rob Stavins:

Welcome to [Environmental Insights](#), a podcast from the [Harvard Environmental Economics Program](#). I'm your host, [Rob Stavins](#), a professor here at the [Harvard Kennedy School](#) and director of the program. In this podcast series, I've had the pleasure of engaging in conversations with authorities in the scholarly world who have also had very significant experience in the policy world. And my guest today is certainly no exception because I'm joined today by [Nicholas Burns](#), my colleague at [Harvard Kennedy School](#) where he is the Roy and Barbara Goodman Family Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Relations, and the founder and faculty chair of the [Future of Diplomacy Project](#). And of course, he served as the U.S. Ambassador to the People's Republic of China from 2021 to 2025, where he helped to stabilize relations with Beijing. Before that, he worked in the U.S. government for more than three decades, serving six presidents and nine Secretaries of State, including serving as Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs from 2005 to 2008. Included among the many diplomatic issues for which Nick Burns has played key roles are environmental issues, including of course climate change. Welcome Nick.

Nicholas Burns:

Rob, thanks very much. Nice to be with you.

Rob Stavins:

So, as regular listeners to this podcast will know, I always start our conversation by asking my guests to say a few words about their personal and professional background. So, before we turn to your observations on China - U.S. relations, including perhaps on climate change, let's go back to how you came to be where you are. So, where did you grow up,

Nicholas Burns:

Rob. I grew up not far from Cambridge, Massachusetts in Wellesley, Massachusetts

Rob Stavins:

And that meant primary in high school in Wellesley.

Nicholas Burns:

I went to the public schools from kindergarten through 12th grade. I'm a proud graduate and ancient graduate of the class of 1974 at Wellesley High School.

Rob Stavins:

So, then you remained partly local at Boston College, but partly not very local at the Sorbonne. So, can you explain that?

Nicholas Burns:

Well, I was a history major at Boston College and in my junior year decided to take that year in Paris where I studied European history and French history at Paris IV, at the Sorbonne. And it was a very important year, Rob, because I met my future wife there.

Rob Stavins:

Oh, gosh.

Nicholas Burns:

She was also a student, and ironically from Boston. We had never met and that was 49 years ago. So, that was an important year in my life.

Rob Stavins:

Indeed. That's wonderful to hear. Now after that you went on to graduate school. Can you tell us about that?

Nicholas Burns:

I went to Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington. I wanted to get an advanced degree, and this is directly after college, which students don't do much anymore. At the Kennedy School we usually want students to take a break between college and grad school, but I went directly there, and I really had one goal in mind. I wanted to be an American diplomat, a career member of the foreign service. I was never drafted for Vietnam. In fact, I was 17 when the war ended for us, but it affected me, my generation, the war, the tragedy of the war, and I had an idea that I wanted to play a part in an American foreign policy because of the tragedy of that war. And so, I got my start in 1980 as an intern in the Sahara Desert in our tiny embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania, and I never looked back because I was really proud to be working for the U.S. government.

Rob Stavins:

And then your first job, full-time job out of graduate school.

Nicholas Burns:

Well, I took the exam to get into the foreign service. In those days it took about 18 to 24 months between taking the exam and getting a job offer. Don't ask why. It was the glacial pace at which hiring

proceeded in those days. So, I worked for an NGO called [Appropriate Technology International](#). We ran low-tech, low-cost development projects. I worked on projects in Mexico and in West Africa for them. It was a great experience.

Rob Stavins:

And then you moved on from that, indeed, to the State Department where you served in by my quick count a dozen or more different positions between 1983 and 2008.

Nicholas Burns:

Right. And I started off thinking that I wanted my entire career to be in either Africa, the Arab world, and so, I spent my internship in Mauritania. I was two years in Cairo, two years in Jerusalem at our consulate where I managed our aid program, economic assistance program for the Palestinian people on the West Bank and east Jerusalem. That was a seminal very important experience for me. I was an Arabic speaker. I thought I would spend my whole career there. Never went back to the Arab world. Ended up in Soviet affairs and that was really the big turning point in my career where I spent five years at the White House between 1990 and '95 at this time when the Soviet Union crashed and burned, disintegrated, the 15 new states emerged and all of our history, some of it positive in the early days with Russia and Ukraine and now very tragic in more recent days.

Rob Stavins:

Indeed. And then taking advantage of all of that very diverse international diplomatic experience, you became a professor, a colleague of mine at the Harvard Kennedy School in 2008. So, what precipitated that?

Nicholas Burns:

Well, I retired from the Foreign Service after a long career in 2008 and some friends here at Harvard Kennedy School – the late Ash Carter, Larry Summers, Graham Allison, the late Joe Nye, said come on up and see if you like teaching for a year. I thought I'd give it a try for a year. I stayed 13 because it turns out that I love teaching. I deeply, deeply admire the work of everybody at the Kennedy School and at Harvard University. And so, I was happy to be here until President Biden asked me to take a leave of absence and to go out to China as his ambassador.

Rob Stavins:

So, let's turn to your time as U.S. Ambassador to China. Were there particular top priorities that you had and did those evolve over your time in Beijing?

Nicholas Burns:

I think we had two major priorities as an administration in President Biden's term in office. First is, we understood we had to compete with China on a whole host of issues where we were at loggerheads or we were directly competitors with each other – everything from trying to maintain American military predominance in the Indo-Pacific against a very aggressive People's Liberation Army to the technology wars. And Rob, they kind of took center stage during my ambassadorship. The emergence of AI and biotech and quantum and the commercial competition as well as the military competition for first mover advantage. Of course, we had profound differences on trade tariffs even in the Biden years and on human rights. So, competition for us was the main focus of our efforts with China, but we also knew,

and here's where climate change comes in and environmental cooperation, that we have to live in peace with China. The idea of a war would be catastrophic for both countries and the world and that there are some issues where our interests are aligned. We need to work together for the benefit of both of our countries in the world. And for me, I thought that signature issue was climate change and that China and the United States could actually work together both in the Paris Agreement process and also bilaterally. And so, we spent a lot of time on environmental and climate issues, and I had the great, great pleasure to work with both John Kerry and John Podesta on the American side and on the Chinese side, two very fine negotiators, Xie Zhenhua, the legendary Xie Zhenhua, and more recently over the last 18 months, Ambassador Liu Zhenmin whom I got to know very well throughout this process.

Rob Stavins:

So, you know there's a striking reality Nick, talking about climate change and relations with China and the link between the two, and this is something that I've written about and often spoken about, and that is that at least in my perception, cooperation between China and the USA were in an all-time high during the Obama administration years, in particular on climate change policy, when in fact, as I've often said, the Paris Agreement simply would not have come into force, it would not have been achieved had it not been for the co-leadership of those two countries. Now that went away of course during Trump 1.0 and then it began to reappear, particularly with the [Sunnyland Statement](#) that I'm sure you're very familiar with from 2023 in the Biden administration years. But now in Trump 2.0, there have been movements towards a trade war really between China and the United States which economists like myself believe is both terribly unfortunate and completely misguided. In your view, is there some way that the U.S. can or should think about what is sometimes referred to as economic decoupling versus strategic engagement with China?

Nicholas Burns:

The U.S.- China relationship is extraordinarily complex for all the reasons you just cited, Rob. There's no question China is our strongest competitor in the world. I think there's bipartisan agreement in both political parties in our country, and I certainly agree with that mainstream view. At the same time, as I said before, our relationship is not just one of competition, although it's predominantly competitive. We have to work with China when it's in our interest. And I am someone who deeply believes in the Paris Agreement, that we need to remain committed to working with China and the other 193 or four nation states as part of the [Conference of the Parties](#), and that this is an existential issue for the future of our planet, for the eight billion people who live on it. And so,, we always felt, I felt personally this was the issue where actually we could get something done with China. And I think we did, you refer to the Sunnyland Statement where John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua spent a lot of time together, in overtime or in extra innings as we'd say in American baseball, to achieve that statement where in all the summit meetings in which I participated with President Biden and President Xie, they held up climate change as an issue where it was definitely in the interest of both countries and that both of us had to play a leadership role. And so, I'm disappointed, I'm gravely disappointed to see the backsliding by the Trump administration on this issue. I guess we shouldn't be surprised given what President Trump did in his first term and he threatened to pull us out this time, which he's now done, but that is not in our interest. In fact, it's really harmed our ability to protect our own country from the ravages of climate change, and it's harmed our global credibility as a leader in the world. When you travel in the world, as you and I do, you very rarely meet climate deniers in any stage of life, whether at a university or a government ministry or talking to journalists. It's accepted. The science is accepted largely around the world. So, I think this is one of the areas where I'm most disappointed by our present government.

Rob Stavins:

Yeah, indeed. You mentioned about the pullout from the Paris Agreement in the first term and now in the second term. And in the first term, of course, there was a four-year delay because no country could file the papers to withdraw until three years after the agreement came into force, and there's a one year delay for the withdrawal to become immediate. And so, for the entire period of right up to election day in 2019, the U.S. remained a party to the Paris Agreement. This time, however, because obviously the three years since coming into force has long since passed, there's just this one year delay and so on January 20th, 2026, the U.S. will be the only country in the world that is not a party to the Paris Agreement.

Nicholas Burns:

Well, that's right. And the United States by dint of our history, by the outsized role we play in the global society, from the number one economy in the world, the strongest military in the world, we have to be involved when other people cite climate change as their number one concern, as so many people do around the world. And the fact that we're not, I think, is really going to diminish our credibility in many other areas. It's going to rebound not just on this issue Rob, but I think in others as well.

Rob Stavins:

Oh, absolutely. Another difference between Trump 1.0 and 2.0 on this issue, in addition to the fact that the U.S. officially remained as a party, is that the U.S. was actually quite engaged because it was the people from the State Department, Trig Talley and all the others, they were still there. Now that's what the Trump administration and MAGA people negatively referred to as 'the deep state.' Since those are the people we train at Harvard Kennedy School, people who could in fact go into the civil service, that was actually part of the saving grace at that time.

Nicholas Burns:

Well, Rob, that's such an interesting point because in mid-July 2023 when John Kerry made his first visit to Beijing to talk to Xie Zhenhua and he met the premier of China at that time and the vice president of China, a former climate negotiator himself, I hosted a dinner for Kerry, Senator John, and Xie Zhenhua and their teams, and it was a three or four hour dinner well into the night. What struck me about that dinner is it resonated with what you just said. The American and Chinese negotiators had known each other since the 1980s and 1990s. We represented very different governments, and yet they'd established a pattern of working together. I thought they'd established trust between each other, which is very rare in the US-China relationship, between the governments by the way. And I was really impressed by that because that meant that they had found a way to push progress forward between us based on the fact that they knew each other and trusted that the good intentions of both negotiating sides. I thought that when John Podesta took over for John Kerry and Liu Zhenmin took over from Xie Zhenhua, I think Kerry, Podesta, excuse me, and Liu Zhenmin were able to find some common points. When Liu Zhenmin made his first trip to the United States about a year ago John and his wife cooked dinner for them and actually cooked the dinner and then served it at their home, and the Chinese were so impressed by that. And when Liu Zhenmin came back, he told me about that dinner, he said, it's very rare for us to visit an American home, much less have the climate negotiator actually cook and serve the dinner. So, diplomacy sometimes can really be pushed forward by these personal relationships. And I think that's what we had built up from Kyoto on between these two delegations. And it's very difficult to put that back together if we're not even willing to meet with them.

Rob Stavins:

It's interesting that there were times at which climate change cooperation between the two countries was essentially collateral damage of disagreement on international trade, human rights, lots of other issues. I think back to the visit of the former Speaker of the House that then precipitated a break off on discussions about climate change, and that was collateral damage. But there also have been times of use, as you've said, in which climate change, that's the one issue on which we can cooperate and talk and understand that it's reasonable and then that can sort of facilitate broader cooperation.

Nicholas Burns:

Well, that's right, and I was frustrated by the government of China on multiple issues, but on this one as well. When speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August of 2022, the Chinese then in a fit of peak really shut down eight different communications channels including climate change. And I made the point to them, look, some issues are of such cosmic importance for the future of the planet that you just can't afford to walk out when you're unhappy with us on a completely unrelated issue, albeit an important one, the issue of Taiwan, and I think the Chinese used this tactic and they've used it for two generations now on American diplomats to try to leverage us and intimidate us. And I found fault with the government of China and said, look, you're not showing much seriousness about climate change if you suspend our ability to talk for six to eight months, which is what happened.

Rob Stavins:

You've commented on the current state of U.S - China relationship, which is, as you said, it's very complex. Some people would say this is a new Cold War or entering into one. Those are the governments. What I'm wondering about now that you are back from China, and I'm sure you're in lots of informal discussions. You might be standing up with a glass of wine in your hand at a cocktail party and people ask you about China or make comments about China. Are there some common misconceptions that Americans have about China and then vice versa? Are there some common misconceptions that Chinese seem to have about Americans?

Nicholas Burns:

I think for the first part of your question, Rob, what I'm struck by having returned to the U.S. in mid-January and moved back. I still have boxes left, unpacked by the way. A lot of Americans, I think, underestimate China's scientific and technology strength as a partner and competitor of the United States, and kind of think of China in the old way that it doesn't innovate, that it's an economy built on theft and imitation. Well, there's still some theft of American intellectual property, and I worked hard and was very critical of the Chinese on this, but China has become a near peer competitor in science and technology and certainly on technologies that would mitigate the worst aspects of climate change. Think of the Chinese dominance globally in electric vehicles, lithium batteries, solar panels, and so actually there's something we can learn from the Chinese in that regard. When it comes to the Chinese government itself, I think sometimes they act more than sometimes, most of the time they act as if they're the virtuous country, that they've made this great effort on renewables, therefore we are the laggard. And so, we felt – John Kerry, John Podesta, and myself – important to keep pressing them to do better on methane, on nitrous oxide, on the continued construction of coal plants during my entire time in China by the Chinese authorities, whether it was the Beijing government or provincial governments. And so just to keep them honest, I would say, look, I recognize how much China has done on renewables. I recognize the fact that you've been a leader with us in the Paris process, but there's a lot

more that China needs to do. And so, we had this kind of back and forth, push and pull quality to all of our conversations.

Rob Stavins:

So, you've mentioned before that you gave examples in fact, of how personal relationships between American and Chinese officials have actually influenced policy and negotiation outcomes in positive ways. That's sort of going behind the scenes of diplomacy. And so, I want to ask you, I think something that our listeners will be interested to hear is, is it possible for you to characterize or describe a typical day for the U.S. Ambassador to China?

Nicholas Burns:

Well, in a typical day I would deal with a thousand different issues. It seemed to me that the U.S.-China relationship, because we're the two dominant economies, the two strongest military powers. We're competitive with each other. We're probably the only two countries, Rob, in the world that have true global reach, that can affect every country and every continent. And so, I didn't have a typical day because on some days I was dealing with a military crisis in the South China Sea or in the Taiwan Strait. On other days, trying to help American companies succeed sometimes against great odds because of an unlevel playing field. There were still other days when a Chinese human right champion would be convicted of what we would consider First Amendment rights in the United States, the right to speak out, the right to be critical of one's own government. And so, I had to deal, I dealt and I had a great staff, a great team working with me on all those different issues. So. you become, in a way, a jack of all trades. You have to have a very wide understanding of lots of different issues. I found that fascinating and very worthwhile. Looking back, I'm really pleased that and honored I had the opportunity to serve the United States and China because I think it's fair to say this is our most important diplomatic relationship in the world. What happens in this relationship is going to drive a lot of history, our global history in the next decade, two or three. And so, I think my team and I felt we were working on consequential issues, and therefore I used to tell my staff, if you can't get motivated to come to work on a rainy Monday morning in Beijing, you're in the wrong business because the work we're doing is meaningful for the United States, for the American people, and I think on climate for the world itself.

Rob Stavins:

So, looking back on your years in Beijing as Ambassador, is there a moment that you're especially proud of? And it doesn't have to be about climate change, whatever it is that stands out in your mind?

Nicholas Burns:

I was proud when we in the United States stood up for human rights. And there were countless times when a Chinese citizen would write an article or speak out on a certain issue. And this happened a lot during the COVID crisis when there was an extraordinarily draconian authoritarian lockdown of the Chinese people and we would defend them. This happened a lot concerning Tibet where there are a mass of human rights violations underway, in Xinjiang Province when we tried very much to help some of the Uyghur citizens who've been imprisoned unfairly. And I was proud of our country for standing up for human rights. Also proud that we had four Americans who were imprisoned in China, one for 17 years on trumped up political charges, and we were able to get all four of them out of prison just in my last three months in China. So, when I look back on it, we worked on some existential issues, whether it's climate change or Taiwan, the war and peace issues that separate us. But some of the accomplishments I think that will stay with me and my team because I couldn't do anything without my

team, are these individual issues where you just try one by one to achieve justice or help someone achieve justice or get out of jail. So, I think those are the memories that will predominate.

Rob Stavins:

Well, that is very inspiring to hear. And Nick, I'll tell you that there are quite a few of the people who subscribe and listen to this podcast regularly are young people, they're college students, graduate students from around the world. And so, many of them listening to you, maybe they were already but certainly now they might be thinking about working in international relations, thinking about a career in diplomacy. What would you say to those people, particularly if they're discouraged by some of the things they observe today?

Nicholas Burns:

Yeah. Well, Rob, it's interesting. That's a very pertinent question here at Harvard Kennedy School where you and I have to look students in the eye and say, please consider if you're an American citizen going into the State Department or what is left of the U.S. Agency for International Development. But we need good men and women to go into public service in our country, to serve the military, in the federal government, and especially in the State Department as we engage countries around the world. And I think that the pendulum will swing back towards an appreciation for nonpartisan public servants. I'm dismayed by how the DOGE effort has discredited dishonestly, the work of our federal civil servants dismayed that 8,500 people were fired from U.S.A.I.D., and it's now down to 15 – one five people. We've got to do better than that. And on the issue where you are leading us at the Harvard Kennedy School as our acknowledged climate expert and the dedication you've shown, we've got to show the rest of the world and our own countrymen and women, that we're as committed as they are to taking on the challenge of climate and to meeting it the only way that's going to be effective working with other countries, including China. So, if you're a young person listening, trying to figure out what you want to do with your life, there's so much good you can do. There's human agency, and I think that we'll, I hope quickly in the next few years, return to honoring public service. We at the Kennedy School deeply believe in that.

Rob Stavins:

Well, now I'm convinced, Nick, that if you have not previously been a commencement speaker somewhere, it's definitely in your future.

Nicholas Burns:

Well, listen, I'm just trying to get my sea legs after three plus years in China, but so happy to be back at Harvard, which is such a great university. I'm so proud to be a member of this community at this present time as we stand up for our constitutional rights and for the value of a university in American society. Why some people in Washington want to tear down our universities. I think it's one of the great strengths of America and one of our great contributions to the world.

Rob Stavins:

Absolutely. It's a positive part of our international trade balance, actually, is education.

Nicholas Burns:

That's right.

Rob Stavins:

People coming from around the world to join us. So, with that, Nick, thank you very much for having taken time from your busy schedule to join me today.

Nicholas Burns:

Rob, thank you. And thank you for the great, great work you are doing to keep us moving forward on climate change here in the us.

Rob Stavins:

So, thank you, Nick. My guest today has been [Nicholas Burns](#), who is the Roy and Barbara Goodman Family Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Relations at [Harvard Kennedy School](#). Please join us again for the next episode of [Environmental Insights: Conversations on Policy and Practice](#) from the [Harvard Environmental Economics Program](#). I'm your host, [Rob Stavins](#). Thanks for listening.

Announcer:

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