

TRANSCRIPT

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Guest: Meghan O'Sullivan

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Meghan O'Sullivan: I think it's incredibly important whether the world can get to net-zero and in a time frame that's going to have a big impact on our climate and allow us to address all of the insecurities that come about through climate change.

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. Today we're really very fortunate to have with us [Meghan O'Sullivan](#), the Jeane Kirkpatrick Professor of the Practice of International Affairs at the [Harvard Kennedy School](#), where she also directs the [Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs](#). The title of her 2017 book "[Windfall: How New Energy Abundance Upends Global Politics and Strengthens American Power](#)," provides a nice summary of some of the themes that have run through her work. And her most recent book is "[Hand-Off: The Foreign Policy George W. Bush Passed to Barack Obama](#)." In my view, she is the quintessential Harvard Kennedy School faculty member because in addition to her extensive and relevant scholarly research, she has had abundant experience in the policy world as a practitioner, including work in the policy formulation and negotiation space.

In that regard, I will mention just one appointment among many that she's held, namely her role as Special Assistant to President George W. Bush and Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan. Welcome, Meghan.

Meghan O'Sullivan: Thank you, Rob. It's a real pleasure to be with you and I'm always happy to contribute to the excellent work that you do in Environmental Insights and elsewhere.

Rob Stavins: Well, thank you. Before we talk about your current research and your thinking about the geopolitics of energy, let's go back to how you came to be where you are and where you've been, because our listeners tell me that they always find this particularly interesting. So where did you grow up?

Meghan O'Sullivan: I actually grew up in Lexington, Massachusetts about eight miles from where I am sitting at this very moment in Cambridge, Mass. So, I've gone full circle.

Rob Stavins: So, does that mean primary and high school were in Lexington?

Meghan O'Sullivan: Yeah, I went to Lexington High School.

Rob Stavins: Excellent. Then you went on to Georgetown for college. Is that right?

Meghan O'Sullivan: That's correct.

Rob Stavins: And what did you study there?

Meghan O'Sullivan: I was a double major in economics and in political science. At the time, the two disciplines often were done independently. Now it seems kind of crazy that you could be in the world of foreign policy and not know anything about economics but at the time it was possible. So, I was trying to bridge those two worlds.

Rob Stavins: Or being in the world of international economics and not know anything about the political science of the world.

Meghan O'Sullivan: Sure.

Rob Stavins: So, when you graduated, did you immediately go on to graduate school at Oxford or something else happened?

Meghan O'Sullivan: No, I decided to embark on the real world for a little bit. And initially right after I graduated I went to Indonesia as a Henry Luce Fellow. And this was the first time, and I guess thus far, the only time in my life that my ignorance has qualified me for anything. It's a fellowship. It's a fantastic fellowship for people who don't actually know that much about Asia. I wasn't studying Asia. I wasn't even that interested in Asia, but I went and I lived and worked in Indonesia for a little bit more than a year, and that really changed my perspective. And Asia has always been a special place to me ever since that time. I came home after that and I went to work for Daniel Patrick Moynihan on Capitol Hill, the Democratic senator from New York. And that was also formative in the sense of it's really where I caught the policy bug. Once you catch it's hard to get rid of it.

Rob Stavins: God, working for Moynihan must've been a very special experience, I assume.

Meghan O'Sullivan: Yeah, it was a very special experience, really formative.

Rob Stavins: Is that at the point when you finished up in Washington that you went across the pond, as they say?

Meghan O'Sullivan: Yes. I spent about a year there and then I went back to grad school and actually ended up first doing a master's in economics and then doing a doctorate in politics at Oxford University, in part inspired by what I had learned on Capitol Hill working for Senator Moynihan. He was writing a book about ethnic conflict at the time that I was working with him, and I had the pleasure of working with him as a research assistant on that book, and that really became some of the focus of my work, both in my economics degree and the political science one.

Rob Stavins: As you probably well know that one of the very first times at which the phrase climate change, or, at the time it wasn't called that, it was probably the Greenhouse Effect, came up in government circles was from Moynihan.

Meghan O'Sullivan: You know, I actually did not know that.

Rob Stavins: I wish I could cite you chapter and verse. I can't. But when we're done, I will forward something to you about that.

Meghan O'Sullivan: Okay, fantastic. I mean, he definitely was someone who often came up with concepts in a way of framing them that shaped the public debate. I'm not surprised and I'm pleased and I'm always learning stuff from you, Rob.

Rob Stavins: Well, I don't know about that, but tell me what was your dissertation and who was on your committee?

Meghan O'Sullivan: So, the Oxford system is a little bit different. So, you have supervisors and then you do defend your dissertation, but you defend it to people who you haven't met before or who haven't read your work before. So, it's even more stressful because you go into that Viva without actually having a good sense of whether or not you're going to pass. I'm happy I did, and I think that's in part because I had two great advisors. One was Nandini Gooptu, and Nandini is and was a historian of South Asia. And my other supervisor is an economist, Francis Stewart, and she ran something called Queen Elizabeth House, which is the center at Oxford that's focused on development and development economics. And I was doing a degree in politics. So, it was a very interdisciplinary effort with a historian and economist as my supervisors and my discipline being in politics. Maybe that wouldn't happen today, but it certainly was a good basis for learning at the time.

Rob Stavins: So, tell me, you graduate from Oxford with your degree, with your doctorate. What was your first job out of graduate school?

Meghan O'Sullivan: Well, actually I loved Oxford. It was fantastic, but I decided to go to the Brookings Institution when I was still working on my doctorate. I went on a doctoral fellowship that was put together by Brookings Foreign Policy Division. And so, I spent my last year writing what is my D.Phil., which is the Oxford doctorate in Washington, and taking advantage of the policy bug that was still in me and spending a lot of time around policy and policymakers. And so, I went through a pretty difficult decision point at that point in my life trying to decide whether I was going to go on the academic market or not and I decided that I wanted to go into the world of policy. So, I stayed at the Brookings Institution writing books and articles related to American foreign policy until 9/11.

Rob Stavins: And then?

Meghan O'Sullivan: So, that's where I was on 9/11, in Washington DC, and really enjoying the career path that I had embarked on, and then 9/11 occurred and I had a family member die in the World Trade Centers.

Rob Stavins: Oh my God, I didn't know that. I'm sorry.

Meghan O'Sullivan: And I think like many Americans, I sort of stepped back and looked at things a little bit differently after that point. And for me, I really felt like having a good idea was a great thing, and being able to do that from the Brookings Institution was a privilege and a pleasure, but turning that idea into action was actually what I should be trying to do. And so, I actually joined the George Bush administration about six weeks after 9/11. I went over to the State Department where I worked for Richard Haas in Secretary Colin Powell's policy planning shop. So, that was my first job apart from continuing at the Brookings Institution once I finished my doctorate.

Rob Stavins: That was a wonderful place to be given who your mentors or your seniors were at the time. What a wonderful place to be.

Meghan O'Sullivan: It was. It's also, it's a part of the U.S. government, it's part of the State Department that is a great place for people who really have academic orientations to begin to understand the policymaking process because you're actually working for the secretary. So, you're a little bit immune from the bureaucracy, but you're close enough to it to begin to understand it, and it really set the ground for me to have the opportunity to go work in many other parts of the U.S. government. And I had the benefit of that year or so to really get a sense of how things worked and to benefit enormously from the mentorship of both Richard Haas and Secretary Powell, both of them phenomenal public servants.

Rob Stavins: Right. There's something that's parallel to that for economists in government is that people often say that for economists working in the Antitrust Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, that's a fantastic shop for academically oriented economists while being involved in real world. Obviously important decisions.

Meghan O'Sullivan: Yeah, interesting.

Rob Stavins: So, tell me now. From the State Department, what else, what are the next steps that eventually bring you to Harvard?

Meghan O'Sullivan: Sure. It's a little bit of a winding road, which I'll try to be a little pithy here. But when I was at the State Department, this is, again, I joined six weeks after 9/11. Was working on things related to the Middle East, which is what I had been working on while I had been at the Brookings Institution actually working on sanctions and energy policy and how sanctions affected oil producers and the global market and all of those things. But you show up at the State Department after 9/11, and there's a big focus on Afghanistan, and certainly it wasn't too

long before the conversation turned to Iraq. And I had been writing books and articles related to Iraq at the Brookings institution, but had never worked on Iraq and had never been to Iraq.

And when it became apparent to me that we were going to go to war in Iraq, I volunteered as a civilian to join the U.S. military to go over. I did it. I think in retrospect, I was very naive. I did it in thinking that I had some sense of what Iraqi society might look like after decades of sanctions and wars, and perhaps there was something useful I could do to help this country integrate back into the international community. I had no idea actually what I was getting myself into and what was to come, but I did end up being seconded from the State Department to the Pentagon. And then I went over to Iraq right before the war with the U.S. military as a civilian and spent about a year and a half in Iraq working in what was the precursor to, it was the occupation authority.

Essentially, my job was to work with Iraqis trying to rebuild Iraqi institutions after the fall of Saddam. I went from there back to the U.S. government, but actually back to the White House where I worked in the role that you mentioned at the beginning, which was Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan.

And I did that for many years actually going back and forth to Iraq and Afghanistan for some time up until we had a major strategic review at a big change in our strategy. It was something called the surge in Iraq, a big shift. And at that point, I felt it was time to leave government and I sought to kind of figure out what I was going to do next in the world, but that took quite a while as I ended up fighting myself back in Iraq, helping with the implementation of our new strategy. But at the end of 2007, I left the government. This is shortly before the election that brought President Obama into office. And started at Harvard actually as an IOP fellow with the intention to be here for about three months. And that was 16 years ago.

Rob Stavins: Yes, we won't let you go.

Meghan O'Sullivan: You can't get rid of me. I don't know which one it's.

Rob Stavins: So, let's turn to the program that I believe you founded at the Kennedy School, the [Geopolitics of Energy Project](#). Can you briefly tell me what's the project, what does it do, and how does it do it?

Meghan O'Sullivan: Sure. Well, the project is really based on an idea which I think has become a more popular or widely acknowledged idea over the last ten years, but particularly I would say over the last two years. But it's the idea that energy and geopolitics. And when I say energy, I really mean energy, climate, energy, the energy system and geopolitics are so intimately connected and that the two influence each other and have done so for decades or even centuries. But it's not just a point of interest that they're connected. It is a really useful lens to

think about. Again, I've come to this topic really initially as a foreign policy person.

So, to think about if there's going to be a big change in the energy system, either, one, through a change in technology like the fracking boom that started in the U.S., or a big change in the energy system through an effort to get to a more sustainable global energy system, that that's going to have massive implications for global politics. And similarly, if there are strong trends, new dynamics in the international system, that that's going to have a big impact on our energy and climate space as well. So the geopolitics of energy is really... The project is founded on the idea that understanding this interaction is really important for foreign policymakers to understand that energy is a big explanatory variable when we think about power dynamics in the system, and for people who may be on the energy and climate side to just really better understand how the global system impacts their ability to move the energy system in one way or the other.

Rob Stavins: There have been truly tremendous changes with world energy markets as you know better than I do, and hence I assume in the geopolitics of energy over the past decades. Can you identify for us one or a few of those key changes? What brought them about and what are the consequences?

Meghan O'Sullivan: Sure. You mean the geopolitical consequences?

Rob Stavins: Yes, exactly.

Meghan O'Sullivan: The two examples I'll give, and I'll do them very briefly, and they're very large examples, they've been the focus of my work for many years.

The first I mentioned is this, the fracking boom or the development of technology, technology-driven shift, that allowed for the tapping into unconventional oil and gas in the United States and potentially in other parts of the world. And when this happened, there was a lot of expectation that this was going to affect global politics in a very particular way, specifically by making the Middle East less important. However, looking into what the effects were of that technological change on global politics, really go through understanding and seeing how that technological innovation changed America's energy footprint in a very serious way and America's influence in global markets in such a serious way. That it remade global politics, but not necessarily the way in which many people anticipated. It didn't make the Middle East less important because of course, America just became actually even more integrated into global energy markets, in many ways still as susceptible as anything anytime to big changes in global energy markets. But it did shape the global environment in ways that I think on the whole, we could say it was much more conducive to American and allied interests at the time because it was an era really of abundance, and that tends to favor buyers over suppliers. And so it disempowered some energy actors in the global system. So that's one. The other... And I'll just say this briefly, we can go drill down on it a bit, if you'd like.

But the other is just the global push for the energy transition, the global push to get to net-zero. From my perspective, of course, to me, I think it's incredibly important whether the world can get to net-zero and in a timeframe that's going to have a big impact on our climate and allow us to address all of the insecurities that come about through climate change. But even if we put that very big piece aside, I still believe that the push to try to get to net-zero, the effort that countries and businesses and foundations and individuals are making in the interest of either advancing the energy transition or slowing down the energy transition, that has become a really big driver of international affairs. President Biden came into office and he said, "I'm going to integrate the push to address climate change into my entire foreign policy." And he's really not the only one. Whether or not it's a conscious drive or not, it has become something that has shaped the national strategies of so many countries, not just the United States, but many countries who are affected by climate change even more directly.

Rob Stavins: So, Meghan, if I were to ask you, what's your greatest concern today in the global energy domain, would it be about climate change or is it something else?

Meghan O'Sullivan: Well, I would say climate change would be very, very high on that list. I'd say there are two factors that would, if I'm allowed, Rob, could I have a tie? Could I have two factors?

Rob Stavins: Sure, absolutely.

Meghan O'Sullivan: But they're actually, they're very, very intimately related to this whole discussion. So one would be the U.S.-China relationship And just how tense that relationship is, how it is on more difficult footing than it has been in many decades, and how consequential that bilateral relationship is for the rest of the world.

And then the second piece would be about climate change and about the growing imperative of action, and not a disinterested, but not quick enough action on the part of global actors to address climate change. And these two things are related because of course, one of the big changes in the international system that's become very apparent in the last several years has been this U.S.-China great power competition. And it's in that framework that now we have to drive towards net-zero. And it makes a big difference that we're no longer in this kind of cooperative environment that characterized a lot of the last 30 years, and we're in a global environment that is much more competitive. And so what we can achieve through global mechanisms or through international bodies, we have to assess it differently because the U.S.-Chinese relationship is a big part of the environment in which our actions are unfolding.

Rob Stavins: As you said, it's remarkable how the world has changed. When I talk with students, people that are Harvard College undergraduates, or for that matter, Kennedy School students and PhD students, and I talk to them about a period of time at which the United States and China were co-leaders on climate change

policy, and although there were issues with regards to international trade, they weren't at the forefront of the relation between the two countries. And when I tell them about the Bush 41 administration, which I worked very closely with developing the SO2 Allowance Trading System, and that was a moderate Republican administration that was very environmentally oriented. They can't believe either of those.

Meghan O'Sullivan: I know. And you think about the climate agreement that President Xi and President Obama signed in 2014. That, at least in my timeframe, that wasn't that long ago. We're just talking less than 10 years ago.

But that we are in a very, very different landscape. And if you think about the whole COP process, Rob, which you know better than anyone. The COP process over the last 30 years unfolded in a global environment that was largely cooperative. And so, we're facing, we're facing a transnational problem, one that cannot be resolved by one country, and so it makes sense that in an ideal world, we would pursue the answer to that challenge or the steps we have to take to address that challenge in a cooperative sense. But now we're in this competitive landscape, and it's not a cooperative global environment, yet we're still hoping that we can address this transnational problem through cooperation. Where the answer might be that we have to compete our way to a solution. And I think we're starting to see elements of that. We're starting to see that in the Inflation Reduction Act, we're starting to see that in industrial policy, and we're starting to see that in the way that the drive to dominate clean energy supply chains is part of the geopolitical competition rather than just the drive to get to net-zero.

Rob Stavins: Right. And we've seen tremendous changes there. I mean, coincident with the rise of populism in so many parts of the world, we've also seen the rise of protectionism in many parts of the world. So, let me ask you, on climate change, on global climate change, are you optimistic, pessimistic, or how would you characterize your views on the progress that's been made and the opportunities going forward?

Meghan O'Sullivan: I'm by nature an optimist, and I think when we're faced with hard problems, if we cease to bring a certain amount of optimism to the table, we lose our ability to address it adequately. So, I would say I remain optimistic, but I think if I look at the facts, I have to acknowledge that an assessment of where we are today requires holding a number of things in our heads that seem in contrast to one another. On the one hand, it's absolutely true that we've seen so much progress just in terms of technological advancement and the bringing down of costs of certain renewable technologies and just the really large amounts of money that are going into clean energy investments and all of that, I think is very heartening. On the flip side, though, we can't ignore the fact that emissions continue to rise. And last year I think was the highest level of global emissions, carbon emissions that we've ever seen, and the fact that demand for oil and gas is continuing to rise.

So, I think one, I think we have to acknowledge that there are these two things that are both real at the same time, but I think part of my optimism stems from, one, working in this environment that you and I, Rob, have the real privilege to work in is where we see the passion of all these young people to go into this domain and make a difference. And then, two, I just think we're going to be in a world with hopefully greater technological advance, but also I think we're going to have more and more political pressures to address this, and I think our political landscape will continue to evolve in a direction where greater climate action will not just be possible, but it will be necessary. I think we see a lot of mobilization of people in the interest of action to address climate change on our campuses now, but I think that's just going to continue and it's going to become greater and greater.

And I can see that in the Republican Party that there are Republicans who acknowledge the seriousness of climate change, acknowledge that humans have contributed to this problem, and acknowledge that the need for action. And I will remain hopeful that we can get to a space where we can match our actions to the imperative.

Rob Stavins: So, that ties in with young people, as you said, and something that's been striking starting, I think it was around 2019 in Europe and the United States rising these youth movements of climate activism, not just Greta Thunberg and her groups, but much broader than that, and not just university and post-university people, but primary and secondary school students. I'm really interested to know, as a final question, what's your reaction to these youth movements of climate activism?

Meghan O'Sullivan: Well, I think it's absolutely necessary to move our system along. And so, I feel that it's an answer to the problem. It's part of the solution, I guess is what I'm trying to say. I have two very small children who have already read books about climate change, and when they ask me why I have to travel, I will sometimes tell them what I'm trying to do. I'll tell them about COP and going to COP in December, why I was there and what the purpose is, and I don't expect that their six-year-old and three-year-old minds quite understand it, but I think this is now part of the landscape in which people are coming of age. And so, I think it makes sense, and I think it is absolutely essential to spurring our leaders to take actions commensurate with the challenge.

Rob Stavins: And it is a change. I'll tell you that my children are considerably older than yours. My children are 31 and 33, and when they were in primary school, when they were in high school, there was nothing in the curriculum, there was no discussion about climate change. Simply, it was a topic that was not brought up, and as you've said, that's completely changed today.

Meghan O'Sullivan: Yeah. Well, it's impossible. I mean, even if you tried to explain to them why we didn't get any snow this year. It's much more present-

Rob Stavins: Yes, that's true.

Meghan O'Sullivan: ... in our lives as well. But it is definitely a positive development, I think.

Rob Stavins: Yeah. Well, listen, thank you very much Meghan for taking time-

Meghan O'Sullivan: Oh, my pleasure.

Rob Stavins: ... to join me today. This has been great.

Meghan O'Sullivan: It's always fun to talk to you, Rob. Thank you very much.

Rob Stavins: So, my guest today has been [Meghan O'Sullivan](#). She's the Jeane Kirkpatrick Professor of the Practice of International Affairs at the [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.

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