Marshall here, welcome back to The Realignment.
Everyone wrapped an incredibly busy week.
Saga and I launched the Realignment Live conference in DC on Wednesday.
Lots of great conversations went better than I ever could have hoped for,
so definitely expect a lot of great conversations on your feed in the next few weeks.
Today's episode is one I recorded a little while back.
I spoke with the author and foreign policy analyst Van Jackson about his new book,
Pacific Power Paradox, American Statecraft and the Fate of Asian Peace.
This episode is a great follow-up to the conversation with Representative Mike Gallagher
and the China Select Committee and my other episode recently with Robert Kagan,
which was premised on the idea that the United States is the guarantor of war order.
The conversation with Van is coming at a different direction.
Van is a progressive foreign policy thinker,
and he is looking at the question of how do we preserve peace in Asia through a more critical lens.
He is bringing a perspective that includes the idea that rather than serving as the guarantor of peace and stability,
oftentimes since 1979, which is what the book covers,
the US has played a big role in actually fermenting potential conflict and danger,
which is incredibly relevant given the stakes.
This definitely falls into the category of an episode I'd love to do,
because it's important to have different perspectives on incredibly high stakes issues such as that.
Apologies if I sound a little beat.
This is what 10 hours straight of recording is due to someone,
but I hope you all enjoy the conversation and check out the newsletter that's coming out later today.
I hope you enjoy the episode.
Van Jackson, welcome to the realignment.
Thanks for having me, man.
Yeah, I'm really glad to speak with you.
So I mentioned this to you before the podcast started,
but this is obviously coming out after our episode with Representative Mike Gallagher,
Chairman of the new China Select Committee on 15 different levels.
I know for a fact you will not agree with the committee's conclusions.
You will probably not even endorse the even the existence of said committee.
But if you were on Earth 2, invited to testify, what would you say?
They read Pacific Power Paradox, American Statecraft and the Fate of the Asian Peace.
I probably would seriously say that.
But the substantive reflection I would have or the bumper sticker takeaway is really that we have to think
relationally, ecologically, structurally about China as a problem set.
When we externalize what China represents to us as like the big bad or the other that we have to smite in order to have everything be well.
That really distracts us or redirects our energy away from a number of real problems that China is implicated in,

but that we don't look at sufficiently with like an eye to root causes.
And I haven't, this is like a longer conversation and maybe we'll get into it, but it's really about like the political economy of insecurity.
And to the extent that we see China as a threat, it emanates from economic structures that we are implicated in.
And that's not so much like a blame thing.
It's figuring out what we can do within the policy repertoire of like our own imagination and like what power resources we have.
How could we do things differently so that we can ameliorate the problems that we associate with China, which is like a very different orientation from saying like
big bad, 10 feet tall, need more nukes, you know what I mean?
Or need China initiative, need to spy versus spy.
Like all of that stuff on an individualized basis, maybe you need to do some of that simply to keep up rationally.
But there's not like a solution in any of that.
And so we kind of have to probe deeper about like what do we think the problem is that China represents for us.
This is where I like looking at your perspective, because when you're talking about political economy, you're kind of analyzing the quote unquote China issue through a slightly different lens.
A takeaway I got from your conversations about this topic on your podcast on diplomatic is really the need to not think militarily think at a defense level.
So what do you really mean by the political economy of insecurity like translate that into non-academic year 18 to 19 kind of interest in China issues language.
Yeah, it's not any one thing.
The big one is that there's like many ways to take this.
In 2015, there was a book by this guy named Thomas Oatley.
I want to say he teaches at Tulane, but he's like a mainstream political economist guy.
The book in 2015 was a Cambridge University Press book.
It's not like a market press, right?
This isn't radical Marxism or something.
He's using the quarter masters tools of normal social science, right?
And it was a well received book.
I think it didn't get nearly the attention that it should.
But in it, he showed this remarkable relationship that we don't tend to acknowledge in foreign policy because foreign policy practitioners are not literate in political economy.
And I say that as somebody who used to be a practitioner, right?
And so he points out how America's military buildups at four different intervals since the 1970s.
Each time America was chasing or trying to perpetuate military primacy, which is like on purely security grounds.
You can see why that would make sense in relation to threat perceptions, whether it's like big bad Soviet Union or Vietnam or, you know, war on terror or whatever.
But in each of those instances, we didn't raise taxes and we didn't cut social spending to any major degree.

And so consequently, we had to run deficits to finance these military buildups.
And in order to finance those military buildups, we had to draw in huge amounts of foreign capital.
But this had the effect, the consequence repeatedly of creating an unbalanced global economy where capital inflows from abroad are concentrating into the superpower's coffers so that we can do military primacy.
And what this meant was that it created asset bubbles like in real estate, right, in the United States and abroad.
It deprived smaller governments developing economies of the capital that they would need to redistribute to have healthy economies.
And so that encourages labor suppression and kleptocracy abroad.
It exacerbates inequality abroad.
And those are the conditions of great insecurity, right?
And that is the political economy of American hegemony.
And it's because the peculiar nature of American political economy is grounded in this military dimension.
It has this military dimension that you cannot escape.
The military part of American foreign policy actually distorts the economic statecraft part of American foreign policy.
And so China is a problem within that because China is part of this system.
And they've simply, they're a bigger version who has been more successful at doing the choosing nationalist development over national development over nationalist revanchism.
Like that's the wager that most Asian governments have made over the past 40 years.
And China just made it even more so.
And then one of the problems that we're having in the last decade is that they're doing more nationalist revanchism too.
But that's a separate thing.
The ability to do that nationalist revanchism comes from this political economic structure.
And so China is chief among those who exports capital, profits into America to finance America's military buildup.
And then that creates the imbalances that lead to financial crises, which make foreign governments vulnerable and then therefore need Chinese capital.
So the way to think about China is to a large extent, and this sounds like Bruce Lee or something, to de-center China.
It's to focus on the structure of Asian security other than China to reduce China's ability to kind of do damage.
Because I'm not like a fan of Chinese capital or something. Where Chinese capital goes, it exacerbates whatever tendency is already there.
And it happens that in Asia, there's lots of local corrupt regimes.
And so Chinese capital ends up worsening those things.
And that's not good.
That creates conditions that are self-perpetuating and then ends up creating security problems for us.
And so there's a solution to be had in eliminating or reducing developing economies' needs for

Chinese capital.
And that would in turn leave China's oligarchs less opportunities to offshore their capital when they take profits from workers.
Labor repression and suppression in China is really bad. Workers don't have rights or they have few rights.
And so the reason why that situation exists is because China, the oligarchs in that system, need to park their money somewhere for profits offshore.
And by doing that, they deprive workers of better ability to consume, greater ability to consume what they produce.
So if there's less room to park money in the Belt and Road Initiative, there's less room to put money into corrupt infrastructure projects in certain countries.
Well, that money will be available for redistribution domestically in China.
And that will empower workers in China relative to oligarchs.
And that will reduce the need for the CCP to rely on ethno-nationalism.
So all this stuff is connected. The belligerent foreign policy of China, to the extent that that is an accurate characterization,
it really comes from a stoking ethno-nationalism. This is very well documented.
They try to manipulate nationalism. Well, why?
Because it's the alternative source of legitimacy in a system that systematically deprives the majority of workers a decent life.
You sell them on ethno-nationalism, and it has spillover consequences for foreign policy.
So that's kind of how I've gone for a while. That's kind of how I see this.
And it's just like, that's a world perception of the situation and analysis that most China watchers are not engaged with.
But I think it's correct. I think it's the most correct.
This is going to be the deepest cut of deepest cuts. But I think the fifth episode of the podcast with Bhaskar Sankara then at Jacobin.
And when I asked him about China and Bernie's foreign policy, he talked about worker solidarity and just everything you just articulated kind of brought that all back.
Because I didn't understand what he was talking about.
I was like, wait, like, why are you talking about worker solidarity and kind of like those like internal Chinese dynamics?
Obviously, he's not a foreign policy expert.
So he wasn't going quite as in depth as you were. But I think it kind of goes to your point about how this is kind of a mode of analysis that exists outside of the discourse.
But here's another question that comes to mind.
You know, I just interviewed Robert Kagan and post Iraq war disaster.
It seems as if a lot of folks who are part of the formerly known as neo-conservative crew have rebalanced to probably like the strongest argument in favor of American primacy, which is basically stability.
Which is, look, end of the day, peace in Europe, peace in Asia is partially what you're writing the book around, are due to American power.
Therefore, when we spend money on the military, we invest in defense.

That's actually providing the foundation that undergirds globalization, modern capitalism, all those different aspects.
When you're talking about how like we're doing these defense buildups, but it's going to, it's leading to investment in the wrong places.
How do you think about this U.S. military undergirding just economic forces worldwide?
Yeah, I mean, so the prevailing, so the Pacific Power Paradox book, I'm not trying to mention it over and over, but it's just like.
No, this is my personal line, so please, this is a book show, so you should plug.
So like the, that book makes a series of interlinked arguments, right, and it all centers around this question of the Asian peace or the East Asian and Pacific peace, which is like the absence of interstate war stability since 1979.
And so there's an analytical argument to that, but a second argument that I'm making there is that the prevailing narrative in Washington about America's role in Asia.
In particular, you could extrapolate it globally since Asia is the most important region of arguably, at least in my view.
And so like you can refer to this as only an Asian phenomenon or a global phenomenon, but America's role in Asia is usually conceived in Washington as like we are the oxygen.
Joe and I said this once, we're the oxygen for Asian security.
Like if you take us away, nothing else matters.
There is no security, right?
Hillary Clinton espoused this kind of view all the time.
Like in her first statement about the pivot, it was like, Asia is eager for our business.
Could you contextualize the pivot real quick?
What's the pivot?
The pivot to Asia was a strategy that was adopted in the Obama administration.
I was working in the Pentagon at the time, and this was my portfolio.
Like I was one of the main people working on how defense should be implementing what was announced at a political level as a so-called pivot to Asia or a rebalancing.
And within a framework of Sino-US data, within a framework of great power cooperation, because that was the default mode with China at the time,
we were trying to figure out how to balance China and sort of shore up or solidify, consolidate our presence and role in Asia.
It was like Tom Donilon, old national security advisor.
He had this statement like we looked around at the world, we looked at the Middle East, and we said we're too over leveraged in the Middle East.
And we look at Asia and we're under leveraged in Asia.
And it's like, whatever that means, you can take that in a number of directions.
But the idea was that the global concentration of our resources was misallocated and we were underallocated in Asia.
Does that mean military resources or is that economic, diplomatic?
What does that mean?
This is the open to interpretation part.
So I was in there making the sausage, I know for a fact that the Pentagon didn't have really guidance

about what this was supposed to mean.
And so Tom Donilon, Obama's memoir talks about the pivot and he's like, look, this wasn't a military thing.
This was about reaffirming our alliance commitments and showing the flag that we're a Pacific power, et cetera.
And I think that there's a way in which he probably meant that, honestly, like he's being sincere.
And I think that Donilon probably meant it that way too.
But I think that they were worried about post-global financial crisis, post-economic recession.
Or this was 2011.
It's like we're coming out of the economic recession, right?
So they're looking at the world and being like, there's strong pressures for us to retrench globally.
But the narrative of who we are, the way we see the world, the way we are theories of stability about why the world hasn't gone to shit,
it centers us and our global deep engagement.
And so we can't come off that.
And so the pivot to Asia was a way of prioritizing a region where we thought our stabilizing presence mattered disproportionately.
And there was especially then a common sense that was emerging like, oh, our presence in the Middle East is not stabilizing net net.
Like it's kind of a problem.
And it's sort of the opposite in Asia.
And so that was the conventional wisdom that emerged.
And it was against the backdrop of these huge like $500 billion over 10 year budget cuts that defense was having to take.
So we were in a mindset of like having to prioritize like kind of ruthlessly.
And so that led to say Asia is more important.
But that was a political level like dictate.
We didn't have a strong sense of what that was supposed to mean bureaucratically.
What does that mean for the national security state?
What the hell are we supposed to do different?
And so the entire second half of the Obama administration was kind of floundering about like, how do we implement the pivot to Asia?
And then a lot of the public discourse was about, are we actually pivoting?
And that became the dominant question.
And the fact that we put so much emphasis on the Trans-Pacific Partnership to end up not joining it just like undermined ourselves even further.
But yeah, so like the Defense Department ended up defining what it did.
Like I was part of a group that was defining what we did in order to pivot to Asia, quote unquote.
And unfortunately, we were the only department within the executive branch who had a serious game plan for what to do differently in a world where we pivot to Asia and prioritize Asia.
And because of that, the pivot to Asia looks like basically a China encirclement strategy because it was all military.
And the one name brand initiative, the TPP that we held up as a banner, we didn't do anything with.

I mean, like, so it ended up being in practice like all military, you know, and that's where we were over leveraged in foreign policy to begin with.
And that is what, you know, the Trump administration inherited.
And so within the pivot to Asia, the idea space that Ash Carter, the Secretary of Defense at the time, and Bob Work, his deputy secretary, what they sort of came around to was a discourse about great power competition.
And so as early as depends on when you dated 2010, by 2015, we were 100% Pentagon talking about great power competition all the time.
And so the pivot to Asia became like inseparable from the rhetoric of great power competition.
But the rhetoric of great power competition was just a way of talking about military superiority, military primacy under like extremely crazy contingency scenarios involving like Taiwan, you know.
So that was a long explanation.
No, please, here to once again, your job is to make up for me not to make it enough job of booking alternate voices.
So there's like 20 episodes you need to fill in for.
So, so go for it. So a couple of a couple of things here. So number one, I'm just kind of curious here because you're making the point about 2011 and post financial crisis.
So economic austerity. How much of that also was withdrawing from Iraq that year. Obviously, I saw bin Laden, al Qaeda 2011 and then you have Syria and then the rise of ISIS.
How much of the pivot to Asia was thrown off by the US just being pulled back into the Middle East kicking and screaming effectively.
Yeah, a lot. I mean, the we we we spent a lot of brainpower and sort of like human capital resources time trying to define what does the pivot look like when you implement it.
And we were constantly constrained by the need to do, you know, carrier strike group operations in the med, like we constantly, you know, we had the overseas contingency operations,
which is like a non non trivial part of the defense budget. It was all, you know, Afghanistan stuff is still in the end of the Obama administration.
Like we were we had the NSC, the National Security Council was a crisis management shop.
And the crisis was always about like, well, who are we going to freaking drone strike today and micromanaging those decisions.
And so the opportunity cost when you're doing all that stuff isn't necessarily the big Asia questions.
And if if we had allocated time and resources more, according to like what we claimed about Asia being more important, it's not clear to me that we would have come up with good solutions.
Because we have focused more on Asia since 2016.
And in my view, it has not necessarily produced better outcomes like Asian security is more precarious than it's ever been.
Which is part of what I'm trying to explain in that book.
It's like, look, we have been part of an action reaction process with some bad guys in the region and with some good guys in the region that has led to a net situation that is that leaves us less margin for geopolitical error error than we've had in the past.
Like we we in the past we could do blunders like Iraq, and it doesn't necessarily diminish our power position, right?
It doesn't necessarily lead to great power wars.

We're losing that margin to mess things up.
And if we don't realize that then then all of everything we do is going to become a self fulfilling prophecy in the defense world.
We're doing a lot of history here so I want to keep leaning into that.
So, yeah, yeah, I'd love to hear your version of what happened with US-China relations, basically from 2000 onwards, a.k.a. the US W2O.
Because the version of the story that the conservatives center right and increasing the center left will now tell is in 2000, we made this mistake.
We misjudged China. We basically have these 12 to 15 years of fits and starts were distracted by the war on terror, failed pivot to Asia.
Trump comes in.
Trump shows us that despite how terrible Trump is at various degrees, we needed to reassess our relationship with China.
We do that we engage in a trade war and we basically now have some degree of bipartisan consensus there.
It's obviously like hypersumming it up like way too quickly.
But that's just kind of the version that I as an interviewer and most of our listeners are probably just going to imbibe in general.
So what version of the story would you tell?
Or maybe, and guess what, maybe to your point, the book, the story you're telling should start in 1979.
What alternate story would you offer to my conventional wisdom?
Yes, so the WTO decision I think was downstream of other things.
And so I don't think it was very decisive on its own.
The thing, the pivot point, if you will, of this large relationship was, I think, the Asian financial crisis in 97-98.
And this is Evan Feigenbaum, who's at Carnegie, who does not share my politics.
He was a Bush administration appointee, right?
We're very different people.
But he's a China hand.
He's smart.
He's extremely knowledgeable about the region.
He's made his entire life's work.
And on this, we basically agree, which is to say anybody who knows Asia really well knows that Asia, all these diverse countries, blame us.
And they're not wrong for the Asian financial crisis because of what I described at the top of the show here about military primacy.
We created a structure that incentivized labor suppression in these countries, made them vulnerable to currency speculation and capital outflows.
That's what creates balance of payments crises.
And then they become reliant on the IMF.
The IMF austeritizes them, right?
And then they're fucked.

I don't know if I can say that.
Chris, one quick question because we have an under-25 concentrated audience.
What was the Asian financial crisis?
So the proximate cause of it was the Thai bot, the Thailand's currency, had speculators like George Soros's firm.
You can't mention Soros without sounding like a conspiracy theorist.
This is 1990s context, George Soros.
Yeah.
Totally different situation.
And so, although some of the conspiracy theories about him, everything has a little gem of truth or whatever.
It's extrapolations from over-reading the Asian financial crisis.
But basically, hedge funds and currency speculators, they're constantly shifting capital around the world through our financialized architecture of the economy, right?
Global economy.
And so, currency speculators move tons of money quickly to arbitrage, to bet for or against, shifts in the value of a currency.
So we imposed a regime in Asian political economy that said, like, you need to float your currencies.
And if you want to have a developing economy, you need to be export-oriented, which means you need to have, like, reasonably cheap currencies, right?
But you also need to have stable currencies.
And so, by structuring all of this and saying you cannot have capital controls, we made them vulnerable to speculators.
So the tie-bought crashes, and then it causes an economic contagion that affects the rest of Asia and eventually affects a major, major hedge fund in the U.S.
And initially, the U.S. is just aloof.
Like, well, this is not our problem kind of thing, which is a fucking terrible decision in an interdependent world.
And eventually, they realize, like, oh, this is starting to affect American markets, too, and American companies.
And so what started off as, like, one country's currency crashing and needing emergency foreign currency inflows to get out of a fiscal crisis,
it spilled over into neighboring economies, South Korea, Malaysia, and it ended up affecting the entire region.
And the solution to it was for the U.S. to work with the IMF to impose austerity policies on these countries, including, like, South Korea, our ally,
in exchange for bailout money to stabilize their banking systems.
And so their house is on fire, and we're like, well, we've got a bucket of water for you, but it's going to require you to build your house out of kindling in the future.
And so we imposed those austerity policies on them, and then they had to live with that.
So, like, they were no longer allowed to subsidize oil and heat or for heating in the winter, that kind of thing.
They were not allowed to, they had to cut public sector workforce.

They had to sell off a bunch of their own banks to foreign hedge funds and stuff.
And so they had to undergo pain that the IMF imposed on them under that old logic, like the Washington Consensus.
And the people who lived through that and the policy elites who lived through that are who run these countries today, and they remember that shit.
And they, like, in our own narrative of the Asian financial crisis, it's like, well, them's the brakes.
You know, shit happens, exogenous shocks, sometimes economies go into crisis.
It's a mystery why it's probably because you guys are fucking corrupt.
You know, that was our narrative in Washington.
And, like, send us more money, by the way.
And, like, that was the narrative, and that's not the narrative in Asia.
And why does all this matter?
Because starting as soon as the Asian financial crisis was over, all of the governments, even our friends, even Japan and South Korea,
were like, we ain't doing this again.
Like, fuck that.
We're not going to be dependent on Uncle Sam to bail us out so that they can fuck us over again.
And so what they did in a context where we were already all in on China was to, like, look around and be like, well, what's the alternative sources of growth?
We still want to prioritize national economic development above nationalist revanchism.
How do we do that?
Well, we can yoke our fate to this rising super engine called China.
And why do we think it's safe to do that?
Well, because America is too, right?
You know, trade with China in the US, it tripled during the Clinton years, you know?
That's the ultimate signal that it's, like, safe.
And you got people like Joe Nye and Kurt Campbell being like, and by the way, we're going to remain the cop on the beat.
We're going to stay anchor our military presence here.
So to the extent that smaller governments like Vietnam are worried about, you know, Chinese revanches and Chinese aggression.
Well, they need not be too worried because, like, the imbalance of power just wildly favors the US and the US is sticking around in the region.
So that was the pivot point because from then on Asia, East Asia in particular, started building up a financial and economic architecture that excluded the US.
And we were kind of aloof of it the whole time.
And so there's this architecture that exists in Asia now, a bond market initiative, currency swapping.
There's like a big trilateral secretariat with China, Japan and South Korea.
ASEAN has all these, like, financial surveillance processes, monitoring stuff.
It's all like intra-regional.
It all excludes the United States.
And it was all implemented in the years after the Asian financial crisis so that they could not be so dependent on us anymore.

And China becoming economically powerful and, like, having this throw weight in Asia that, like, the Soviets never had, that is a function of its position within Asian political economy.
And that position is the way small state is owes itself to the way that small states reacted to the Asian financial crisis.
So it's like our imperiousness and our unwillingness to, like, see and acknowledge how we made choices that, like, indirectly shaped these events.
It meant that, like, we were unawares that, like, the smaller states in the region were collectively building an alternative to us.
And it happened to put China in a position where it had greater leverage, if you will, than it would have otherwise had.
And so that is, like, how Asian security shaped differently.
And so for the Bush years and the Obama years, Eikenberry has written about this.
Asia was constituted by what was called, like, a dual hierarchical order, where this was unprecedented in history.
But we had America as the, like, military hegemon, unchallengeable military primacy.
But so, like, as a security hegemon, but then the economic hegemon was increasingly China.
And that had been established probably by around 2011 or so.
It's hard to know when to date it exactly.
And so you had different domains in which the same region had different hegemons.
And the big question of the day in circa 2008, 2009, 2010, is this sustainable?
Is this a form of order? Like, is there a reason why this kind of order has never existed before?
And, like, sure enough, by 2011, you had China trying to leverage its economic hegemony, for lack of a better phrase,
for political gain, status-seeking, greater power means greater status-seeking.
But since at least Trump or maybe Obama, you've had the U.S. try and leverage its military hegemony, security hegemony,
for economic reasons, which is precisely what Biden is doing right now.
And the trouble is that, like, we're doing it from a position of unawareness about our own peripheral position in Asian political economy.
I don't normally do biographical questions, but the number one takeaway I have from this conversation is,
how did you find yourself so focused on the political economy side of things?
You were enlisted as an intelligence analyst.
You obviously do the whole McKinsey stint that's somewhat mandatory in certain contexts.
You go to the Office of Secretary of Defense.
All those very obvious things, and then you've written about how you, in 2016, find yourself just, like, leaving D.C.
in a way that many people talked about but didn't actually do.
None of those paths require you to get into political economy.
So how do you really come around to this perspective?
And so it's not just that you're critiquing American power.
Bunny people do that.
You're doing it through a slightly different lens, giving your Washington background.

So how'd that come about?
Yeah, well, I don't want to have a worldview that is somehow incongruous with observed reality.
I want a worldview that accounts for observed reality better than any alternative.
And so when I was, my whole, like you just recited in my bio, my whole career prior to 2016-ish, was basically like national security state, liberal internationalist, just reflexively.
It was the air I breathed.
I didn't think twice about it.
I was repeating Clinton talking points and not thinking twice about it.
And then when Trump happened, there were anomalies that I couldn't account for.
Like, why did we as a hegemon have so much trouble getting Asian governments to do what we wanted?
Like, that doesn't, that math doesn't work.
Like, we should, why are we so frustrated all the fucking time as like alliance managers and stuff?
And so like, there were problems like that that had no clear answers within a kind of liberal internationalist frame.
It's like, well, if we're the hegemon, we should be getting our way more kind of thing.
Well, doesn't that just mean, you know, to DC think tank of American hegemony pushback doesn't just mean the word, it's not evil, right?
Like the U.S. isn't like, it means that it's not the 1950s anymore.
So isn't one answer just that, yeah, like we're just not going to overthrow a government when they don't,
it's basically that it's no longer the Cold War.
We're not going to pull a, you know, united fruit company.
Right, right.
Yeah, well, let's fingers crossed, man.
Yeah, that's the, so like that was the kind of reflexive response at the time.
That's not satisfying.
Like, why, why, so that presumes like, okay, so we've never really gotten our way.
And so we had to impose our way sometimes and we're just not going to impose our way anymore like that.
And that doesn't explain why we're not getting our way, though, to begin with.
Is it just like inherent conflicts?
It's just unsatisfying intellectually.
And then so like I'm left with those puzzles, but then like the Trump years were like really topsy-turvy.
And the more liberal you were, the more liberal internationalist you were in particular,
the more Trump was the ultimate exogenous shock.
The more it was like, what the fuck is going on here?
And like it created that like pearl clutching moment for a lot of people where it's like, my God, what is this?
This is not who we are.
That kind of shit, you know, and it raises questions.
It provides no answers.

And so I was hearing there's like many strands going on here because like as somebody who was like a deep Asia watch or Asia hand,
I knew about these Asian financial crisis narratives and I just never factored it into my perception of America as a Pacific power, right?
And then I have these anomalies of like, in general, America is having a harder and harder time getting its way in the region.
Well, why is that, right?
And then I'm seeing the like the rise of China, the rise of China had been going on for a long time, but there was a concomitant rise in Chinese assertiveness also.
And so that is that itself becomes a puzzle too, right?
And then with the Trump years, it's just like, how do you explain Trump himself and the liberal internationalist like worldview does not even try to explain Trump,
other than to dismiss him as racist or whatever, you know, it's all our words to white supremacist nations.
So of course we get we get people like Trump.
And it's like, none of that is like intellectually sound, you know, and all of it led me on a search toward question.
This isn't my politics.
I'm curious.
Why isn't that just the answer, right?
So to play, you know, MSNBC 2017.
Charles Lindbergh, America first back in 1917.
They've been recurring, you know, bouts of semi fascism, you know, 2022 term or whatever.
And eventually it just finally worked with Trump.
You had the perfect confidence.
So why is that not an intellectually satisfying answer for you?
Well, it's not that that's incorrect.
It's that it doesn't it doesn't deal with root causes.
That's like a very superficial engagement with reality.
Like it avoids the question of where does that come from?
If if that if if like if white supremacy, for example, was the answer to Trump and Trumpism, white supremacy predated Trump, a constant cannot explain a variable.
Why did we not have it before?
You know, and so like the my social science kind of training how to think logically, even though it's like not always the best way to think about things.
It led me into like intellectual dead ends, where the things that seemed most important in my world remained a mystery.
And it was in these Trump years that I was moving left.
There's a longer story there.
And part of my my moving left was being told by people who were like serious left intellectuals, because there's like, I mean, you have you engage with Baskar Sunkar or whatever.
There are people on the left who just talk shit or like they they traffic in certain slogans, you know, their sentimental or something like that.

And then there's what I would call like a left perspective, which is grounded in pragmatism and materialism and trying to explain things.
Right.
It's about bringing a coherent worldview to bear.
And you might call both of those things left, but they're very different things.
And so like as a national security guide by trade by training, my PhD was at an extremely conservative institution, Catholic University in D.C.
The I had a sensibility that like needed to account for reality better, not worse.
And so what I found was that like the serious intellectuals who were who are making like really valid critiques of society and of power, especially going back into like the early Cold War days.
They were focused.
They were foregrounding political economy.
And it made me realize like, oh, in all of my I R training and all of my security studies training, I've completely forsaken political economy.
And then I'm like, oh, this region that I claim to know so well is focused on political economy for most.
And the Asian financial crisis is a political economic problem event that was a defining thing.
And I don't really have anything except like a Wikipedia understanding of it.
And so that was what set me on my way.
And like that was what got me deep on political economy.
That's that's fascinating.
Another thing you just a phrase you use just intellectual dead end as someone who started a podcast called the realignment.
I've had the pleasure of studying like 15 different political dead ends that I will not get into because it will offend previous guests.
But from your perspective, as someone, I'm an evolving person too.
Of course, you gotta search.
You gotta write like, well, the new right doesn't fix everything.
That's crazy.
But basically, as someone who experiences this moment in 2016, what were dead ends that you saw folks such as yourself go down that you think anyone who's listening to a podcast like this.
Because we have a left, right and center audience.
Like, what are just some spaces that you kind of maybe experimented with.
You differ your toes.
If you're again, I've asked just like, not it.
Yeah.
I mean, so who was like, I was talking to somebody recently about this, but my initial reaction to Trump's victory.
So in 2016, it was unclear if I was going to go work for a Hillary Clinton presidency.
My social network, surprise, surprise, was like all Clinton people at that time.
I mean, Michelle Flournoy, wasn't she in charge of CNN.
So she was going to be secretary of defense most likely.
Yes.

In fact, there's an aside here.
I don't even know how much of I should put this on wax.
But when I was at CNAS in 2015, which is the thing thing she ran, I made the decision.
I was offered it.
Oh, shit.
How much can I say here?
I was expected to stay at CNAS.
And I had been there for a year on a fellowship that was funded by the Council on Foreign Relations.
I was going to stay there long term.
That was the arrangement and the expectation.
And then a few months, maybe like six months before the election or something, I pulled up and I was like, I'm getting the fuck out of here.
And there's a lot that goes into why.
Part of it was like, there's a part of me that is kind of like idealist about what I should be doing with my life.
And I didn't like the network that I was involved in and all of that.
But basically, I got a lot of peer pressure from that world, Clinton world, that like you are fucking out of your mind.
If you think you're going to leave DC, you could be the next assistant secretary of defense, blah, blah, blah.
And I'm talking to my wife and like, OK, so if I become assistant secretary, then what?
What's that? What does that mean?
What is that going to make my life better?
It's going to make my life end 10 years earlier.
It's a stressful job.
Like, what do I get out of that? How am I going to make anything better that way?
And so it's like the carrot that they were holding out in front of me is the same carrot that everyone is chasing in DC.
But like I looked at it, I'm like, man, do I want that?
So I was like, fuck it, we're out of here for a little while.
You know, DC is always going to be there.
That was my mindset.
And then it was a question of like, hey, it's time to be on side.
We're measuring the drapes for the Clinton presidency.
Get back in the tent.
And I was like, I don't know, man, I'm not with it.
Like, you know, I was not a Trump fan, but I'm like, not a Clinton fan either, you know?
And I couldn't say that to them, of course.
But to be fair, if you had said that, they would have stopped asking you to come to the tent.
Well, eventually they did, but it took a while.
And so the whole question was like, do we move back to DC to go serve on a Clinton presidency?
And I was a new academic at the time.
Like I'm a freshly minted PhD at this point, which is like the height of the academic job market

powers.
Like you're never hotter in the academic market than when you're brand new on the market.
And so it's like a pretty revenue company, you know?
And so basically, like, I didn't know if I was going to go back to DC,
but the question was moot anyway, because she fucking lost and it shocked the pearl clutches.
And so during those four years, I was still in touch with all those people.
I still, initially, I still had that same worldview.
I just found it like really unsatisfying.
And so I started formulating critiques of Trump, like everybody else.
But I started noticing that my critiques increasingly applied also to Obama and also to Bush and also to, like,
there's an immense amount of Reaganism in Trump's foreign policy.
And so I was like, what, how can this be?
And like this was the process of writing Pacific Power Paradox is like, I'm coming to terms with all of this.
Like, holy shit, all these criticisms I was throwing at Trump, I mean, he had his own stylistic stuff.
But it's really a critique about the establishment.
It's really a critique about our foreign policy traditions in a certain sense.
And so, like, that was kind of how the book emerged out of that personal experience.
This question started as something different.
No, but I asked a person, I said I don't do biography normally, but I wanted to know, like, your personal thing.
So here is, you know, in our last two sections, here's what I really want to get to.
So then if you're a decent number of progressives on like foreign policy issues,
you obviously have the Ukraine war debate that's going on.
And just consistently, my frustration with progressives who talk about foreign policy isn't moral debates.
It's not like, OK, I think America has been level and you think it's not below.
I get all of that.
Like, I'm intellectually enough to be OK with that.
It's just kind of like the deep unseriousness with which many leftist kind of approach like foreign policy topics.
So like reducing, and listeners, I'm talking about you guys are right into me,
reducing everything to a misreading of like the military industrial complex speech,
or talking about like kind of under the table corruption, which like having been in D.C.,
you actually had a good anecdote about this on the undiplomatic podcast.
Like, understanding D.C., like if D.C. were as simple as people pushing like 100 bucks under the table,
it would probably be like easier to address than like the actual like nature of group think and systems and how promotions.
Only it was so easy. Yeah, that's why I keep yelling at like leftists who write it.
I'm like, no, I must think it's not corrupt.
This is this more common.

You actually give the best articulation of what I was kind of getting at.
Could you just kind of give, can you give advice for like left-leaning people who are interested in foreign policy?
Because there's another problem too.
Like there aren't really serious institutions built around bringing leftists into national security and foreign policy conversations.
You have a great political op-ed.
I really enjoyed it.
I'll like it in the show notes.
You're talking about like national defense, arms control, nuclear disarmament, the world order, authoritarianism and democracy.
There just aren't institutions that are framing things in that way.
I understand that once you create those institutions, those institutions could be captured.
So obviously there's like another critique on top of that.
But just do your own version of kind of what I'm trying to get at maybe.
Or maybe you disagree with me, but this has been my frustration.
No, I share that and I certainly understand it even to the extent I might disagree.
Like I'm leery of leaning into like a circular firing squad because that's the left's problem most of the time.
And so like, but that doesn't mean I don't have frustrations.
And one of them is like, I think you're saying the same thing, but just in different words, which is that there's a reluctance to engage from a left progressive perspective,
or especially from a socialist perspective with the hard questions in the national security space, in the traditional security sphere.
So like there are all of these material questions about like, what do we do?
Every year, the Pentagon has to submit a budget.
Yeah.
Do you have do you have anything to say about that other than no, other than don't?
Like do you have do you have advice to give that would toggle what we're buying, where we're putting it, that kind of thing, right?
More than just the top line.
And most people on the left have nothing to say about that.
And so Stephen Walt had this great quote back in like the 9091 or something.
He was like, the idea, I'm going to botch the quote because I don't have it here.
But he's like, the idea that people who are for peace and against war should avoid studying national security is like people who are against smoking, leaving the study of tobacco research to the tobacco companies, right?
Like you don't want to have like people who are inherently militarists or who are hawks in the worst sense, who are just like dripping with like war profiteering.
You don't want those people defining the debate and owning the space of national security, right?
Like you need to contest that.
And the the leariness that I understand about like a lot of people on the left is like, well, there's a trap because you can never get to peace or equality within that paradigm.

And I get that, but that just means that it's not your horizon.
So don't let it be your horizon.
Be aware that you're walking through a minefield, but walk through it anyways, because the good stuff is on the other side.
You know what I mean?
Like so don't let your horizon be what the national security state decides it should be, but also don't leave them to their own devices and contesting that space means being competent in the questions of the day.
OK, like Taiwan straight, South China Sea, North Korea, right?
You got like what's your alternative defense strategy if you're unsatisfied with the one that costs eight hundred and sixty billion dollars?
You can't just say spend less.
You know what I mean?
So that's my that's my view is like we need greater like education and engagement with like the left doing national security and normal people or libs or the right doing national security.
And that's been kind of missing.
And it would be more prevalent if there were institutions or think tanks of the left who did this kind of stuff.
They don't really exist, you know, and that's a funding thing.
So I don't know.
No, you thank you for salvage.
Because I was trying to be I was trying to be fair to you because to your point, the worst version of this question was.
So, you know, explain to me why the left refuses to take everything I believe about the world seriously, because that's this stupid version.
But I think you kind of you're very generous that you did it well.
Because you said I was trying to get out, which is basically I know what leftist listeners don't want.
I can list it off myself.
I know what they don't want.
But for a variety of, I think, very understandable reasons, there's been less focus on the specifics.
So like once again, like you could like so for example, like when Corey Bush tweets out that, you know, we should cut X amount of the defense budget.
Well, that still leaves hundreds of billions of dollars.
And actually, if you cut X here, that means X will probably need to be readjusted there.
There just needs to be.
I'm really just kind of like challenging like younger listeners who disagree with me.
Thank you for still listening, of course, to just kind of try to find your own answers to that question.
Because I think a key difference in this era of foreign policy and previous ones is look, if it's 2003, and you're on the left, your job is to oppose the Iraq war.
Your job is to oppose the surge.
Your job is to question the nature of the mission Afghanistan.
If it's the 1990s, actually, actually talk about this, maybe it was left better during the like peace dividend 1990s, like when the Cold War was ending.

And there's base closures in the U.S.
But maybe there's something there.
So in the wait, what was the question?
The question is, was the left more focused on these?
What do we want things to look like affirmatively during the 1990s when there's already this framework of, OK, there is a peace dividend.
We're going to spend less money.
We're going to decommission X number of ships in the Navy.
Close all these bases body, body, body.
I'm wondering if I have a left responded to that moment there.
So it's funny.
This is a future area of research that I've started stacking ammo for.
Stacking ammo is my metaphor for like collecting research.
The tourism always.
Look at what militarism does to you, man.
So yeah, I've been building a war chest.
I've been.
Is there a non-war way of thinking?
I've been collecting literature that's relevant on how the left thought about defense in past eras and seeing if there's anything there that's like a resource or a guide to the future, you know.
And one of the things that I've discovered recently is that in the 80s, there was this huge push most disproportionately among European scholars and analysts.
But it seeped over into the US too.
In the 80s with the backdrop of the nuclear scare stuff and the nuclear freeze movement, there was a real hard push toward what was called like non-offensive defense and defense, defense policy, defense strategy that was informed by goals of egalitarianism and peace and democracy and stuff.
And they were engaged in deep line item defense budget arguments.
They were arguing about forced posture.
They were running their own version of war games and scenario building.
It was it was the serious stuff that we attribute now with like, you know, the Pentagon or with think tanks, national security think tanks, they were doing that, but from a place of like anti militarism.
And that stopped with the peace dividend stuff in the 90s.
That was it was the idea that like the threat is over the Cold War is over.
We don't have to focus on this anymore.
Basically turned all that stuff off.
It got defunded.
So like the Ford Foundation and a couple other like philanthropic organizations had been funding some of that stuff.
By the time 9 11 hit, it had all been defunded.
Basically, there used to be some small defense think tanks that basically stopped existing that were like taking this kind of anti militarist perspective.
And those were those were serious ideas, serious people engaged in the same serious questions that the national security people now do, but they had a worldview that connected it back to public policy

back to political economy.
And so like a little bit I see myself trying to revive that tradition.
And yeah, so the 90s was like, it was the idea of peace in our time that like turned the left's brain off on national security.
That's interesting.
So I've got the last question or you said a I think a really evocative and important phrase that the how do we keep everything from going to shit question.
And, you know, had Robert Kagan on the podcast last week and his basic answer to this question is American primacy, the way that we did not over read into him, the way that we keep things from going to shit as we maintain the world order that we've maintained since World War
What is your without like needing to and if you want to talk to Robert Kagan, it's you could take it away with this last question. What is your response to the how do we keep things from going to sit question because from my perspective, as Hawks have,
let's say pulled back from democracy promotion and like forward engagement to changing their argument to well all we want is a status quo.
That's all we're talking about. We don't want to engage in Taiwan. We don't want Japan to go nuclear. We don't South Korea to go nuclear.
Whoa, like it's chill. They're not saying it's chill. That's basically, once again, I think this is the most reasonable version of the argument that's their answer increase the defense budget on and on and on and on.
What is your progressive answer to the how do we keep things from going to shit question.
I mean, the basic problem there is that in what it takes to preserve a status quo as the political and economic context of that status quo changes increases demands exponentially as it turns out.
It doesn't as throughout all periods of history. It's not necessarily the so that it's so now. And so in order to just keep treading water as primacists or as the hegemon in a condition under conditions where we're like rapidly losing that for many reasons,
you know, domestic, political, ideological, technological, you know, the structure of global political economy, all these things and more are creating a situation where it's becoming less and less realistic to try.
It's becoming more Sisyphian, like more tilting at windmills to try and preserve a primacy to try and preserve a hegemonic status.
And so the only solution here is actually to there's a couple of different alternatives to primacy, but you have to come off primacy because primacy requires huge deficit financing with foreign capital, like I mentioned at the beginning,
that creates global economic imbalances that lead to crises that make countries more reliant on bad capital, China, desperate capital, IMF, right.
That's not the world that we want. So we have to actually cure ourselves of primacy in order to make the even to create the conditions of possibility for a better world.
And the key is to balance that with the reality that like there is a particular precarious status quo that's being maintained in places like the Taiwan Strait.
We have to take seriously questions of like power balancing revisionist intentions. We need to engage those questions seriously, but it has to be from a principle of recognizing that primacy is is a cure worse than the the ill worse than the problem.

And so that's one strand. The other strand is we have to reform how we do international political economy.
The neoliberal economic order. It is absolute hot garbage. We have to get past it. That's a classic left position.
But how what we go to next matters and the idea of like geo economic blocks is kind of a disaster, in my view. That's a dangerous world.
This is the one thing you're really not. I'm always the contrary. And though, you know, I should just be more group thinking and be more successful.
But it is it is a huge problem. And it's a problem, particularly because at this historical conjuncture that we're in now, the East Asian development model that the miracle economies, quote unquote, in the 70s and 80s that they used to develop and climb the ladder.
That economic model doesn't really exist anymore. So like export led economic growth, it presupposes that you're going to have really buoyant export markets to export to that.
There's going to be like high and sustained global demand for the shit that you're making. And that's really that's not the world that we live in anymore.
Like demand is stagnating. And it's concentrating in certain weird like high tech sectors that developing economies cannot access. They can't be in that part of the value chain.
So like the model that enabled the economic miracles, which bought us the Asian peace 40 years of stability, in a sense, that model is no more.
And geo economic blocks create makes that problem even worse. It doesn't make that problem better because it doesn't answer it cuts off export market. It cuts off aggregate demand.
And so how are you going to climb the value chains? And if you can't grow economically peacefully, what's your alternative source of legitimacy?
Well, look at the CCP. It's ethno nationalism, baby. It's nationalist revanchism, you know, it's a nightmare.
So like the this particular alternative of like geo economic America first block politics stuff. That's a bad day, I think for everybody, including for us.
But the old way is also just no good. So I think we have to like retool economic statecraft to help developing economies, the global south, manage debt sustainability problems.
A lot incentivize them to not repress labor rights and to actually like address redistribution and inequality within their societies.
And that will encourage a kind of peacefulness that like you can never get with boots on the ground.
But to do that requires making people with power now and people with money now.
Think completely differently about their own existence and about how the world works. And like that's a hard sell.
And so the only way you're going to get that kind of change, I think is like shifts in political realignment.
There we go. And next one, everyone got their the bag they're selling. Shout out the podcast, the book always in his fan.
This has been really, really interesting. I did not expect the conversation to go towards the political economy.
But I'm legitimately, legitimately saying that this is a area of study that I need to focus more on.
Thank you so much for joining me on the realignment.

Thanks, man. This was fun.
Thank you.