Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Fireside Chat
Securing the Edge: America's Technology Long Game for Competing with China
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U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell, U.S. Senator Todd Young
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Transcript of Sen. Cantwell
[Full VIDEO]

Girishankar: Thank you. Dr. Hamre, thank you so much for the inspiration in launching this work. Senator Cantwell, Senator Young, really deeply honored that you would be here to join us for this conversation.

Let me start out. Both of you have led on numerous aspects of the technology revolutions that are afoot and how the US can stay ahead. There is some pessimism. Oftentimes, you hear observers saying, well, maybe the US has not really found its footing, while China plays the long game and while people throw up a question, you both have, in your various ways, thrown down an exclamation point that we, in fact, can have a long game.

Senator Cantwell, you've led on many of these things for many years, both as the Chair and now the Ranking Member of the Commerce Committee, across a number of pieces of landmark legislation. What's your version of the long game?

Sen. Cantwell: Well, Navin, thank you so much. Thank you to CSIS for this invitation. It's great to be here with my colleague Todd Young, and yes, we loved working on [the] CHIPS and Science Act together and getting it over the goal line. Really, really important, and glad that he is such a loud voice on the continuation of those priorities, and it's great to be here with him.

I want to congratulate you on your Tech Edge report. I think that I love the focus on ecosystem. I love the focus on the competitive advantage that China has in scaling, and the focus that we need to have on manufacturing as a response to that. Because that is something we really thought about in the CHIPS and Science Act.

So, when I think about the long game, you know, I'm so blessed to represent the state of Washington in the United States Senate, one of the most innovative states, I think, in our country today. You know, I break that down first and foremost by the number of scientists per capita, which is over 7 percent. So, I think we probably lead as a state in that, particularly if you take out Virginia and Maryland, who just have a big housing of scientists working for the federal government.

Why is that so important? It is because you want the constant ecosystem of those scientists helping other people understand basic science and the proliferation of that science. So, when I think about Microsoft, and AWS, and Boeing, and the space economy, and the Allen Institute and their leadership on AI—and I think about even just basic ag research that goes on in our state at WSU and a variety of other great institutions—it's an amazing ecosystem. I literally cannot keep up with the innovation in our state. I could spend weeks going around, visiting companies, and still not even break the barrier for how much innovation is going on.

So when I look at that, the CHIPS and Science Act was [about] how—if we think about this—we had this telling moment when we had Secretary Raimondo come to Washington and we had a briefing and a bunch of people, and somebody pulled us aside and said, "Tell us where you're going, and we'll follow." And we looked at each other, and we're like, "What are you saying?" And this person said, "You can't do

all the innovation you want to do in expensive places like Seattle and Silicon Valley, so we want to follow where you're going to make more innovation."

The point is, we need the Washington State ecosystem. It'll continue to thrive. Trust me, there's no way you're slowing it down. I could go on for 15 minutes just about fusion, and what's happening on fusion. But the point is, if America is going to compete with China, we need that innovation to be across the United States. We need to build the basis by which those innovative instruments and the structure of them exist in various places.

Why? Well, when you think about it, our economy – two guys named Bill. Bill Boeing and Bill Gates. Okay, those are pretty big economies by two guys named Bill. But if there's another Bill in Montana or in Alabama or [with] a particular focus, then the United States is unleashing that amount of R&D investment into growing something.

This is why the tech hub idea in the CHIPS and Science Act became so popular with our colleagues and so popular overall. Because it is about – it's almost, when Intel put the plant in Ohio, it's almost like saying the high-tech economy is coming to a theater near you, and the level of investment that's now happening in and around Columbus becomes its own generator of more investment in R&D.

[W]e need the United States to continue--particularly in the Information Age—the Information Age is that innovation can happen faster. So, there's a warning there—that means some people can look at your research and try to knock it off, which is what happened with AI and China trying to accelerate after the initial successes of OpenAI. So, we have to be mindful, and it's not just China. Other…countries will also try to take our science and implement it. We have to be smarter, and that's what the Tech Edge report says.

What do we need to do to be smarter? One thing we don't need to do is to cut the scientific research budget in the United States. So, the fact that the Trump administration, and DOGE and Vought all wanted to cut that—and now we're back to flat funding, at least with our portfolio in the NSF and NIST—and all of that is a big challenge. So, somehow, we got Donald Trump to remember his, whatever it was, great uncle who worked at MIT, and embrace the science investment part and stop shortchanging science investment.

And obviously, I don't agree on the tariffs. The tariffs are really having an effect. Research takes years and years and years. So, if you create an exodus of researchers from the United States because people don't like our tariff policies, it's a big mistake. Let's get those things right.
Let's get the investment right, and let's pay particular attention to the fact that the competition is taking our research and implementing it, and what can we do to counter that. We'll talk about that, I'm sure, as we go through this panel.

But really excited about the amount – if people were like, what's going on in the Northwest, we would have no problem, okay, not to just promote that. I'm sure that's happening in Boston. I'm sure that's happening in Silicon Valley. I don't have as much knowledge about how that really looks, but what I'm saying is, if you can make that level of investment across the United States, I guarantee you the rest will be there for the long game for us.

Girishankar: Thank you, Senator. You've highlighted what I would describe as enablers for innovation across different technologies. You mentioned R&D, Senator, you've mentioned workforce. Let me just double click on the R&D piece, because I think the science part of the CHIPS and Science Act is an important thing not to forget.

I want to just come back to you, Senator Cantwell, and then I'll move to you, Senator Young. The Genesis Mission is a significant initiative by the Trump administration, and the idea is to create an AI-driven platform with federal scientific data and various capabilities to actually accelerate the productivity of scientific research. There's no money behind it, but it is a significant initiative, and Dario Gil, Under Secretary there in DOE, is leading that. Any thoughts on that and how that can be broadened to really answer the mail on what you've laid out?

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I love the Genesis approach. I think Steve Ashby, who left our Pacific Northwest [National] Laboratory, is going to try to help across the labs in the implementation of this; and Dario Gil [DOE} and [Director] Kratsios at OSTP, this is great leadership. It really is taking AI and the research at the labs and basically getting done what might take three to five years, and getting it done in a few months. It's amazing.

And when you think about that, that again speeds up the discovery and the research in a significant way. I love the idea that when you think about, okay, what are we doing in the world of AI? And I do think we need to talk more about applications that get the American public excited, because we're hearing a lot of things that make them very anxious.

But when you talk particularly on the biology side, and you can see at a national lab that here's this research and it was going to take us five years to figure out the chemistry behind this, but by applying AI and working machines 24/7 – something that a human couldn't do—and we will figure out this biology in a few months, which will lead to some sort of breakthrough. It's a great initiative. So I applaud our national labs for doing that.

I hope that we can think about other applications, particularly on the healthcare side with NIH. It's really kind of like low hanging fruit, when you think about it. Like, what can the government do to move faster on AI? This is one of the examples of getting our scientists who really already understand AI and its implications, to apply it to their own research, to get discovery in what I would call almost lightning speed.

Girishankar: We are in a world in which we can't do all things alone. In fact, we have had traditional allies for three generations that are part and parcel of our technology ecosystem, but there's some friction in light of the trade agenda that we are currently seeing roll out. What are your thoughts on how to fortify those networks in the moment that we're in? Senator Cantwell, you've talked about a tech NATO. And so when we build out this idea of a tech alliance, share with us your vision for that, particularly as we see an accelerating competition with China.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I definitely believe in a "coop-etition" strategy with China, where you compete and cooperate on some things. I would cooperate, if you could, on clean energy solutions that could drive down the cost, you know, something that would say something like the export of technologies that don't have extra cost to them just to get it implemented.

But I definitely think we need to use our might to counter China, and the best way to do that is to create an alliance with other smart technology countries. If you just took us and Japan and Europe and India and basically a few others and said, "Okay, we're going to say these are the rules of the road for technology: You can't have a government back door. You have to respect these IP rights. You have to do this." And the world should only buy from countries who meet these standards.

If we were successful at really getting countries to embrace that, which they already do – the key democracies and key technology leaders – then we wouldn't be running around the globe trying to rip out Huawei equipment, which is what we're doing now. And there'll be another version of that down the road.

And so why do that? Why not just set the standards right now for what the Information Age and democracy looks like and get people to unite here? And I think that this will play out in the AI debate as well, because what kind of information and what kind of stacks and there's some alliance building there. The United States can ignore this and have China continue to go around the globe promulgating their own economic strategy and convincing countries who have less resources to deploy their technology, or we can work in an alliance way.

In fact, I think we did this in aerospace. I think it was called the Cape Town Accords, where you say, "Look, if you buy into these principles, we'll help you get a discount on the technology and we'll help you get it deployed."

Right now, China goes and offers that, but we know it comes with a price and we should be countering this in a very big way, I believe, by this alliance of the countries. The American public is hungry for this. And I guarantee you, people in other countries are also hungry. What are the real rules of the road for democracies and technology? What are the real rules that should be there?

I guarantee you we're not putting enough pressure on China to live up to those standards. Well, the best way to do that is a barrier of acceptance and saying that the world is not going to accept these practices.

Girishankar: Thank you both for sharing your vision for the long game, and this is marching orders for us as we go into the next phase of the Tech Edge work, and I really appreciate and am honored that you came and spent some time with us. We'll keep watching what you're doing, because that's going to give us the North Star on the work that we're doing. Thanks to both of you. Thank you.