



Meet Abe Denmark, an International Security MA alum with a wealth of experience in China Affairs.

Abe Denmark is a Fellow with the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). At CNAS, Mr. Denmark directs the Asia-Pacific Security Program and several defense strategy and planning projects, including [*The Contested Commons: The Future of American Power in a Multipolar World*](#). He has authored and edited several CNAS reports on Asia, including [*China's Arrival: A Strategic Framework for a Global Relationship*](#), [*Taiwan's Gamble: The Cross-Strait Rapprochement and Its Implications for U.S. Policy*](#), and two reports on U.S. strategy toward North Korea. He is also the American editor and author of [*The U.S.-ROK Alliance in the 21st Century*](#), published by the Korea Institute for National Unification (2009). He has testified before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, and has been featured in major publications in the United States and in Asia, including the Associated Press, National Public Radio, Reuters, Voice of America, Foreign Policy Online, the National Interest, the Korea Times, the Far Eastern Economic Review, Newsweek, and Time magazine.

Prior to joining CNAS, Mr. Denmark was Country Director for China Affairs in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, where he was responsible for developing and implementing strategies and plans vis-à-vis China and the Asia-Pacific region. He is the recipient of numerous government recognitions, most recently an Award for Excellence from the Office of the Secretary of Defense in January 2009. Mr. Denmark studied History and Political Science at the University of Northern Colorado, and earned a master's degree in International Security from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver (DU). He has also studied at China's Foreign Affairs College and Peking University.

Recently Mr. Denmark sat down with D.C. correspondent Shane Hensinger for a wide-ranging discussion on his career, his time at Josef Korbel School and his views on recent events in foreign affairs.

SH: How do you feel your training at Korbelt prepared you for the work you have done at the Secretary of Defense's office and here at CNAS?

AD: Before I came to Korbelt I had not taken a single class in international studies. It has been something I had been interested in, but hadn't taken a class yet. But one of my professors was from DU and he spoke very highly of it and I very quickly realized that I enjoyed it and thought I was good at it. So really it helped me in understanding the theories of international relations to the practicalities of writing policy memos. Frankly when I was interviewing for jobs in D.C. straight out of DU I would talk about the training I got – not in writing long, thirty-page papers but two-page memos, which frankly was much more practical training for life in D.C. straight out of graduate school. That was extremely helpful beyond the substantive and the theoretical training that they gave you.

SH: You're talking about, for example, required Security classes like Defense and Intelligence analysis methods classes, where you learn how to write PDB (Presidential Daily Brief)-style memos?

AD: We had theoretical and quantitative requirements. But we didn't have art of writing memos classes, or if we did I didn't take them. I learned that particular skill in, for example, classes taught by [Peg Sanders](#), where we would be asked to write, for every class, these two or three-page memos. And it's actually a lot harder to write two-pages than it is thirty-pages. And I did write PDBs and it's the same kind of thing. So it was more in classes like U.S. National Security Policy than stand-alone classes.

SH: Were there any courses beyond those taught by Peg Saunders which you considered helpful?

AD: Oh yeah, a few. I took classes with [David Goldfisher](#), I was his Research Assistant actually – poor man, I think I was a terrible RA. His class on strategy and [Sam Zhou's](#) classes were helpful as well – great classes. [Paul Viotti](#) – I really enjoyed his U.S. National Security which I believe is where we simulated the defense procurement process, which was fun and helpful, especially when I moved to the Pentagon. I also took Chinese language classes the whole time with undergrads and that was very helpful.

SH: What was your undergraduate degree in?

AD: European History with a minor in political science.

SH: At what point do you call yourself an expert in something?

AD: I still feel sort of uncomfortable calling myself an expert in anything. I've done a lot on Asia but in D.C. you meet people who have been studying these things for thirty or forty years. So I think it's important to keep a degree of modesty. There's always more

to learn, things are always changing. Especially on Asia – I'm never going to speak Chinese perfectly or understand Chinese culture or government perfectly. But I think I can speak fairly authoritatively on China. And I think I'm getting a better understanding of other countries in Asia but I don't know if I'll ever feel comfortable calling myself an expert.

SH: How much do you think language training, at least having a base understanding, plays into being able to do accurate analysis?

AD: Good question. There are different schools. I think language is essential to understanding a country's culture. I think living in a country is essential to understanding its culture. Do you have to speak the language in order to conduct policy on that country? No. Because ultimately policy is about the United States, not about that country. For example, one of the U.S. government's leading experts on China doesn't speak Chinese, he doesn't need to. Most of the others do. It's a great skill to have but it's not essential.

SH: What do you think sets apart the Josef Korbel School from the other top graduate schools?

AD: Frankly I would put Korbel in the top category. I think DU has a greater emphasis on practicality. Every school focuses in different areas but DU's focus on practicality and on-the-ground intelligence analysis, as opposed to theoretical and academic, puts it above other schools. Frankly theoretical and academic is not very helpful once you get to D.C., unless you want to get your Ph.D.

SH: How vital was networking to you when you came to D.C.?

AD: Networking is very important in D.C. D.C. is 95% relationships. It's not all about how you know but a lot of it is who you know. But anyone coming out of graduate school, regardless of where they went, are going to come to D.C. not really knowing anyone. So regardless of where you come from, you're going to have to build connections. Connections are built by working hard and doing good work. In D.C. everything is your name and your reputation. Networking is fine but it has to be backed up by substance. It's been my observation that in D.C. there are networking people and there are substantive people. The networking people know everyone but they don't accomplish much, the substance people know a great deal but nobody knows who they are. So the key is to be good at both. What sets you apart in D.C. is working hard, working well and being nice to people. And be humble – especially when you just come out of graduate school.

SH: Japan recently arrested and released a Chinese trawler captain who it accused of violating its territory near the disputed islands of Senkaku/Diaoyutai. This, in combination with the ASEAN conference where the US offered to mediate the issue of

the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, has caused some consternation in China. What is your take on this issue?

AD: These conflicts have existed for decades. Basically since the end of WWII if not before. China's position has been on-and-off hostile. In 2002 China signed a joint declaration with ASEAN claiming peaceful intentions and that all disputes would be resolved peacefully in the South China Sea and they quieted the issue for a few years. But over the past few years we've seen a few things. We saw them declare ownership over the South China Sea. They submitted that claim to the UN. They started harassing foreign ships in the South China Sea, the USS Impeccable is the most famous example of that. At one point with the Impeccable there was a guy who attempted to use a hook to grab the sonar the ship was towing, which was stupid because if he'd touched it it would have electrocuted him. But it's happened to other ships from other countries as well. So pretty bad stuff.

SH: Why the change?

AD: There are a few theories. China is pretty opaque. When China's happy with us these events tend not occur. When China's unhappy with us these events occur more frequently. So it does indicate some degree of coordination. I believe, and many others do, that the most recent aggressive behavior in the South China Sea and in the Sea of Japan is driven by China's view that it has become more powerful in the wake of the global economic crisis. According to this theory China sees the US economy in trouble and the rest of the world's economy sputtering while their economy continues to grow. China sees itself as becoming a great power and therefore is due more deference in international politics. It's my theory and what I've been writing about for the past couple of months that naval issues, and issues in the South China Sea and the Sea of Japan, are the leading indicators of what a risen China will look like in the international system.

SH: So what should U.S. policy be in dealing with a risen China? And what should regional policy be?

AD: U.S. policy towards China for ten or fifteen years has been a hedging strategy. Engaging with political-to-political contacts, military-to-military contacts and hedging against its potential to be a revisionist power. So in light of China's behavior in the two areas we're discussing our old policy, which was that the U.S. took no position on territorial disputes in the South China Sea, was insufficient. Secretary Gates' speech this year in Singapore and Secretary Clinton's speech in Hanoi were very clear messages that China's behavior and claims were unacceptable and that the U.S. is a Pacific power and we'll defend international access to international waters. And Secretary Clinton's message, very explicitly, was that these disputes need to be resolved peacefully, that China's behavior is unacceptable and that we can play a mediating role these disputes. Which China interpreted as an attack because China is claiming these disputes are

bilateral and not multilateral. Because in bilateral disputes it's China against a small country and it's easier for them to coerce, whereas if it's China in a multilateral setting it's China against ASEAN and the U.S., where it becomes much more complicated.

SH: When you look at other negotiations China has been involved in, such as the issue of the DPRK's nuclearization, some feel China has played a role which hasn't been helpful. Does it give you hope that China's behavior has seemed to follow this pattern?

AD: I think you can take some lessons from it. I would characterize China's behavior in those negotiations as not completely helpful but not totally unhelpful. They have not vetoed UN Security Council resolutions, but they've not been enforcing the sanctions. China has been receptive to discussions on acceptable modes of behavior, such as how hot-dogging on planes is not a good idea and they stopped. They see Iran's behavior with its nuclear program as unhelpful and they've assisted there. So it's not a black-and-white issue. China has resolved some of its border disputes, such as with Russia. China is capable of having good relations with its neighbors, we're just trying to encourage those relationships without China's neighbors having to back down. Regionally I believe the area is basically mirroring the U.S. response – hedging.

SH: Abe – thanks for the interview.

AD: I've enjoyed it – thank you.

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