A photograph showing President Xi Jinping of China and President Vladimir Putin of Russia walking side-by-side on a red carpet. They are both dressed in dark suits and ties. In the background, there are several Chinese national flags on tall poles and a line of Chinese honor guards in blue and black uniforms. The scene is set in a large, open public square, likely Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

It's certainly true that China's power has increased and Russian power, arguably, increased. What matters as much as the power difference, however, is the character of the rising power and that power's strategic ambitions.

# The World as We Know It: National Security, International Organizations, and Democracy

A Conversation with Dr. Gary Schmitt

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Interviewed by Theodor Su

**Fletcher Security Review (FSR):** Thank you very much for speaking with us today, Dr. Schmitt. As we know, the liberal world order and the national security of the United States and its allies are increasingly under threat from so-called “revisionist states.” Can you start by explaining what this means?

**Gary Schmitt (GS):** Sure. One of the issues that’s arisen, particularly since 2014, is the rise of China and the sort of rise in great power competition moving from the unipolar moment. I don’t think that captures exactly what’s going on. It’s certainly true that China’s power has increased and Russian power, arguably, increased. What matters as much as the power difference, however, is the character of the rising power and that power’s strategic ambitions.

So “revision” essentially captures the fact that these states aren’t liberal and have an interest in modifying or undermining the more liberal global order via security measures, economic measures, etc. But there’s always a tension with the character of the regime, in this case, China, but also with an authoritarian Russia. Authoritarian Iran is also there. Iran has expanded its sights on trying to integrate and use Shia populations throughout the Persian Gulf region to set itself up as the regional hegemon. So, overturning not so much a liberal order, because it’s really not on the border. You know, Iraq is a functioning democracy, even though it has its problems, but in this particular case, it’s really about Iran’s attempt to create a Shia order as opposed to a Persian Gulf order, in which the United States tries to provide stability for both Sunni and Shia.

**FSR:** Let’s focus on China. China has become more assertive in recent years and is more willing to project its power overseas under President Xi Jinping. It seems that great power rivalry between the U.S. and China is inevitable. What do you see in the future for U.S.-China relations? Can the two peacefully coexist, and escape the so-called “Thucydides Trap”?

**GS:** That’s a very complicated question. A “Thucydides Trap” is not what’s going on. That’s a term of art used by so-called realists who actually misread Thucydides. The Peloponnesian War was, as you know, a competition between Athens and Sparta. But the realist misses the fact that it’s not simply a rising Athenian power versus the established status quo power of Sparta. It’s the fact that Athens is, by classical standards, democratic and liberal, and that threatens the legitimacy of Sparta. That is equally as important to understand as simply “rising power versus status quo power.” That’s true for China as well. As long as China is a one-party state, it’s going to view other powers that are democratic and liberal as

competitors.

Every power wants to have a neighborhood, or if possible, a global order that is friendly to its own rule. So the United States prospers when there are more democracies and more market economies than not. China would like to have a situation in which it’s not looking at and surrounded by regimes that automatically call into question its own legitimacy, and the Communist Party has made it clear, even from early on in the reforms, that democratization was not a road it wanted to take.

A lot of people talk about President Xi as being sort of the proximate cause for the rise in tensions, but I would suggest that the underlying fabric of the relations has always been competition. It’s not been stated as such, but the truth is that it’s always been there. President Trump and President Xi have made it more obvious, but it’s a continuation of the competition, not new competition.

**FSR:** You mentioned that the strategic competition between the U.S. and China is driven by different systems and regimes. Can you say more about that?

**GS:** Sure. I mean, with Realism it’s very simple: it’s better to be surrounded by friends than competitors. And who’s the competitor? The competitor is somebody who challenges the very nature of your rule. This has been true about the United States since 1776, when the United States was born and became a republic. The country automatically became a challenge to the monarchies, and we thought the monarchies were a challenge for us. Why? Because we were setting up a different kind of rule. If you’re sitting in China as a Chinese citizen and you look, for example, across the Taiwan Strait and see ethnically Chinese individuals self-governing themselves, you might ask, “Why can’t I govern myself as well?” That’s bound to be a threat to the Communist Party, so that’s one thing. The second thing is that for a one-party state to keep itself in power, it needs to maintain a certain economic system. It can’t reform to the extent that property rights are universal, because if they were that would move away from the party having control. The key ability of the system is to provide its party members with jobs and the like, so it needs not only to sustain itself politically, but also to sustain itself economically. This also means that it’s going to behave in a way that’s distinct from the general behavior of the democratic liberal states since World War II.

**FSR:** Taiwan just had a general election a couple of days ago, and the incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen won by a surpris-





**Taipei, Taiwan.** President of Taiwan Tsai Ing-wen meets with government officials. (Office of the President, Republic of China / CC BY)

sing landslide against the Kuomintang (KMT) opponent. In your opinion, what implications does this have for the future of cross-strait relations?

**GS:** I think cross-strait relations will be more tense. The key reason why Tsai won was precisely because Beijing had made it clear that their version of "one country, two systems" was antithetical to Hong Kong's democracy, and people voted less about day-to-day politics and more about maintaining the island's democracy. They looked at the Hong Kong situation and said, well, if Beijing can't keep its pledges...

**FSR:** You mean they wanted to reject the "one country, two systems" arrangement?

**GS:** Yes, they can't trust Beijing because it is undermining the system in Hong Kong. On top of that, I think you see in the data that more Taiwanese think of themselves as being Taiwanese. Even if they're ethnically Chinese, they think of themselves primarily as Taiwanese, just like the many Chinese Americans who are fundamentally American.

**FSR:** I think that depends on the attitude and behavior of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which definitely would change the opinions and attitudes of Taiwanese people.

**GS:** Yes, but when you take a closer look at the election, one of the issues is that you vote for the president, you vote for representatives, and then you vote for a party list. It's interesting that the party list vote was essentially one third for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and one third for the KMT. The party list suggests that perhaps people aren't satisfied with the DPP's governance, and that is sort of reflected in the local elections back in 2018 when the KMT did much better because people were frustrated with the DPP's domestic policies.

**FSR:** It's notable that about one third of the electorate chose to vote for the smaller and more pro-independence party compared with the one-third that supported the DPP.

**GS:** I think that's a protest vote. I think President Tsai has been very careful of not causing a cross-strait crisis. And again, many Taiwanese think of themselves as independent, so they're somewhat frustrated that she's not more aggressive about that. Of course, in the United States, we're happy that she's not being more aggressive. So they voted for another party precisely to try suggesting to the DPP that they should push Taiwan's independent sovereignty more. Since the election, Tsai has been more assertive; not to create a crisis, but she's still been more assertive.

**FSR:** Some 11 percent of the electorate chose to vote for the New Power Party. To what extent do you think this was determined by the 2019 anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong?

**GS:** I think the January speech in 2019—the New Year speech by President Xi—sort of put the tinder around Hong Kong to the match. So I think it actually had a very large impact. You can just look at the poll numbers—Tsai was down by 20 points at that point, but there was a gradual reversal over the year, particularly after Hong Kong.

**FSR:** In one of your blog posts you described relations between Hong Kong and China fundamentally as "a clash of civilizations." Can you talk more about that?

**GS:** Hong Kong is a product of British colonialism, and in Hong Kong's case, a certain kind of British colonialism which is very much a liberal economic system. That's the underlying basis of Hong Kong's success. Again, we're going back to this other question. Civilization may not be exactly the right term, but what I meant by that are the political differences. It's hard to reconcile a one-party state with Hong Kong's libe-



**Hong Kong.** Protestors make way for an ambulance during a protest against the 2019 Hong Kong extradition bill. (Studio Incendo / CC BY)

rality, both civic and political.

Part of the agreement between the UK and China was that there would be a kind of gradual political opening in Hong Kong. Of course, that hasn't happened, so people are frustrated. They see these steps taken by China on the judiciary system, the police and some other things as a gradual undermining of the British liberal tradition that they grew up in, which was supposed to increase as time went along.

**FSR:** What does Beijing really want? It has been encroaching on the autonomy of Hong Kongers since day one. There is no doubt it would have a big influence on Taiwanese people and their attitudes toward Beijing.

**GS:** I think they just decided that they reached a point they can't tolerate. In 2012, the Chinese leadership faced, I think, a fundamental fork in the road. The economic growth is not going to continue. And, there's a rising expectation that because of the reforms, people were making more money and people were better educated. Their expectation was that this would continue, but the party couldn't continue reforms without giving up power so they had a choice. When you spoke to people in Beijing and other places in China in 2012, you ran across a wide discussion about a fundamental choice that had been made. The party could begin to give up power over the economy, but if it did, there was a danger the party would lose power the next day. That alternative was to go for stability over economic progress. Then you saw President Xi do this by cracking down and maintaining stability at the same time. Meaning, go after other public officials for corruption in the hope that the crackdown would be seen as legitimate.

**FSR:** He avoided a bloody crackdown, although he used a lot of gray area activities to do that. In your opinion, what can the U.S. and its allies do to preserve the autonomy of Hong

Kong?

**GS:** Not much.

**FSR:** But the U.S. has passed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act.

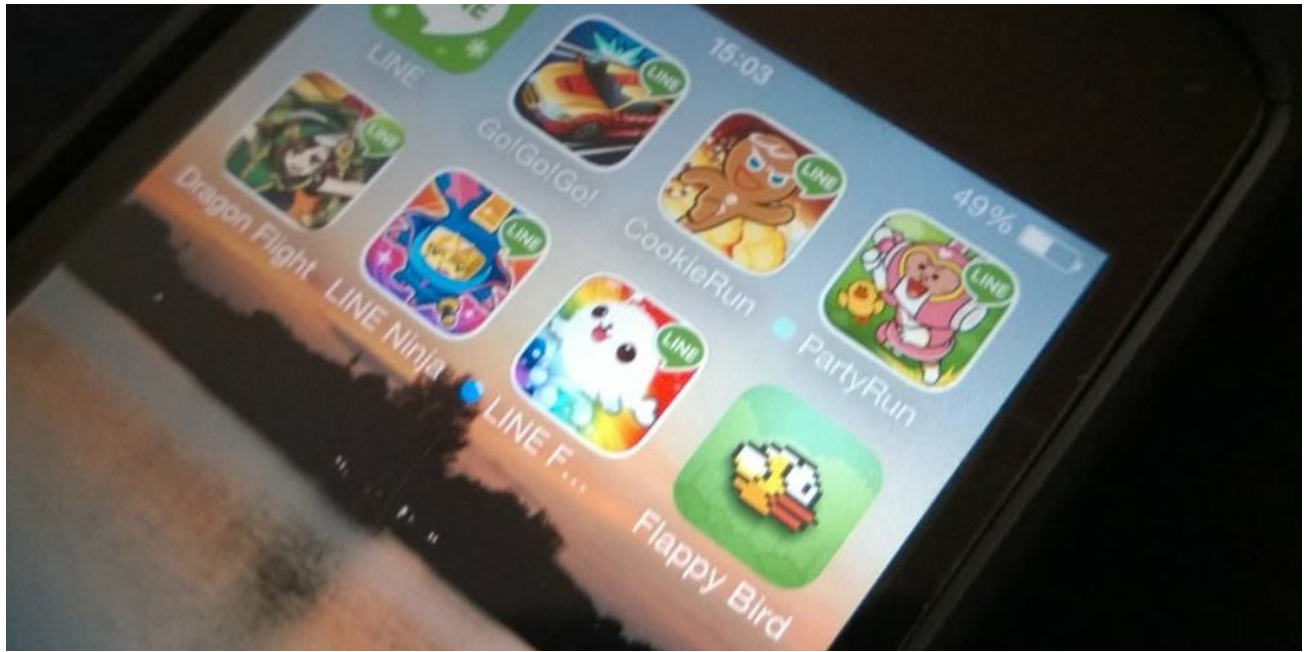
**GS:** It's a tough call. For years, they've decided not to pull Hong Kong's special status because doing so will affect not just the leadership of Hong Kong, but the people as well. On the other hand, one of the things I've learned over the years is that you should ask the people who are protesting what they want. Their response has been that you have to make it clear to Beijing that there is a cost, and even if it costs their life, they're willing to accept that cost. It's not easy to fathom a policy where we're in a position to do much more than make it clear that there will be some costs. So there are a lot of things that have happened over the last 20 years that the people of Hong Kong feel and understand; it's not just the extradition law. The only way they think they can turn back some of that is by having a say in who governs, but that's something Beijing fundamentally doesn't want.

**FSR:** It sounds like a "clash of civilizations" is hard to avoid because the national identity of Hong Kongers has been emerging over the past 20 years.

**GS:** So many people, like Samuel Huntington, associate civilization with ethnicity and religion, whereas for Hong Kongers it's arguably developed by political order.

**FSR:** Let's talk about the information war and the interference of elections from China and Russia. The Chinese government has been intensifying its cyber operations against Taiwan, Hong Kong, the U.S. and the rest of the world, staging information warfare against Taiwan's recent elections. How





The LINE application and its games on a smartphone screen. (Jon Russell / CC BY-SA)

and through what channels does it work? What can Taiwan do to better address this problem?

**GS:** Again, that's a big question. Chinese information warfare is not new. There are two key problems with this. The first is the on-and-off use of the Chinese military to threaten Taiwan; showing Taiwan, in theory, that it can't protect itself. So before elections, you'll sometimes see the Chinese military not doing anything; they'll call off exercises. Then, after the election is over, they'll begin exercises again.

**FSR:** The Chinese military also did the same thing to Japan, right?

**GS:** Yes, it goes up and down. That's one issue. The second big issue is feeding into Taiwan's social media, which is pervasive. It's one of the most active countries in the world on social media. Everybody is on Facebook, everybody uses LINE. It's a massive social media market. Feeding false or misleading information into that system which gets picked up by social media and then—because of the competitive nature of Taiwan's traditional media—it often gets used by newspapers, TV, or radio before people can respond to misinformation. So that's been a real problem. I guess a third problem is just the fact that some traditional media outlets are owned by Taiwanese with business interests in China. You can look at headlines and compare, for example, when the first massive protests began in Hong Kong. Some of the Taiwanese newspapers with business interests in the mainland buried the story, while those that didn't have business interests in China made it a front-page story. So what can the government do? Well, it could do a few things. One, it has already done. It's set up response teams in each of the ministries, with the goal of responding to misinformation or disinformation within the hour. Next is that there has been a lot of non-governmental activity to provide fact-checking. So when there's disinformation or misinformation, there are a lot of private sector citizens who will investigate an issue and then Facebook might not be good about taking the misinformation or disinformation down, but they provide links to where people can go find

out what they think.

A third thing, which I think is probably underestimated, is that the population as a whole became much more aware of this issue after the local elections in 2018 when there seemed to be so much more Chinese interference. So this is a coin whose value decreases the more people are aware that there may be bad information out there. I've also seen this, for example, in Europe, where the circumstances surrounding the U.S. election in 2016 has made Europeans more aware of information efforts by the Russians. In France and Germany, for example, Russian efforts against the countries' post-2016 national elections were less successful because people had eyes in the backs of their heads. We need to be aware that some stories may not actually be true. This is not the perfect solution, but it's a big help when the population is a little more aware of these possibilities.

**FSR:** I think Chinese disinformation campaigns have been successful in one way by influencing the attitudes of more elderly people.

**GS:** Yes. This is complicated. I mean, the elderly in Taiwan grew up under a one-party system, right? The game was the one party, so there was a heavy ideological component to their own education. They also use social media only for family purposes, and they spend a lot of time listening to local radio.

**FSR:** The DPP revised several national security laws last year. The final leg of these efforts was an anti-infiltration act, criminalizing those who help external hostile forces organize political activities or lobby government officials in Taiwan. The law, however, doesn't include a registration process like the Foreign Agent Registration Act in the U.S., so some might be concerned it may hurt Taiwan's freedom and democracy.

**GS:** Yes, the DPP, because they were the dissonant party, has been very reluctant to do anything that smacks of curtailing free speech. They eventually passed that law right before the elections, because, I think, even though they had this funda-

mental concern about free speech, they were also aware they may not keep the majority in the legislature. And so this might be the last time. If Tsai won, but the opposition parties were in control of the legislature, then nothing could be done.

I think that was a political tactical matter. I think they move forward with the law. Having said that, I'm sure there will be a need to figure out how to implement the law in a way that's sensible and practical. It's also not going to be an easy law to enforce because so much mainland money can move from under the table to over the table in ways that are hard to track. But it's still a useful thing to tell people it's illegitimate to do this. It makes businessmen and media journalists have to be more cautious. Now, it may also drive things underground even more, but that's fine. Right now you just have kind of an open system, so by at least putting down the law in principle, you're saying, "Hey, there are certain things you can't and shouldn't do." Before, if you're the average businessman, you didn't have to think twice about doing something. Now you have to think a bit about it, about your reputation and maybe potential consequences for your family and the like. It's not the perfect law, but there is a need for that kind of law.

**FSR:** Meanwhile, as Taiwan works to implement its anti-infiltration legislation, it seems the United States, its partners, and allies have not come up with a systemic way to cope with China's "sharp power," or its interference and disinformation campaigns.

**GS:** Yes, I think people are more aware of the issue. Everybody is always a little slow to respond until they see a crisis and then they respond. I think there is more work being done and I think there's going to be more money from the U.S. government funneled to friends to help them address this issue. I think the other side of the coin that has to be thought about is the fact that sharp power is power, but it ultimately does rest upon the reputation of China, and the soft power under-

belly of sharp power is where China falls short. When you look at poll numbers in the region and globally, it's not like China really is this great, friendly country. Responding to sharp power is necessary, but we shouldn't overestimate its power.

**FSR:** 2019 marked the fortieth anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act. Over the past three years, we have seen a substantial change in U.S.-Taiwan relations, from the Taiwan Travel Act to the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2019. How do you see the future of U.S.-Taiwan relations, especially under the worsening relations between the United States and China?

**GS:** It's hard to say. I think this administration's team is probably the friendliest to Taiwan since the Taiwan Relations Act. They've done a lot in terms of making more defensive weapons available to Taiwan and they've been more open about consultations with government officials. That's all positive. I think that has put a new baseline in the relationship, and I think that's reflected, for example, in the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), the quasi-embassy, building a new building. There's been considerable progress. Now, whether it is sufficient is a different matter. If you take the Chinese military threat seriously, it's very hard to understand our reluctance to involve Taiwan more in our exercises and training efforts. At the end of the day, Taiwan is a democracy and we should want to protect as many democracies as we can. But it's also just a strategic necessity not to see Taiwan come under the thumb of the mainland. Moving in that direction, I think it's still uncertain how far the United States is willing to go. Of course, we don't know if we will have a different president in November and how this president will think about Taiwan.

**FSR:** Hasn't President Tsai been strengthening Taiwan's defense capabilities?

**GS:** Yes, Taiwan is spending real money and the United States



**Taipei, Taiwan.** The American Institute in Taiwan's office complex in Taipei. (Fabian Ortiz / Public Domain)





**Kabul, Afghanistan.** Afghanistan Minister of Defense Abdul Rahim Wardak gives a speech during a NATO training mission. (Senior Airman Kat Lynn Justen / Public Domain)

has made a lot of things available. The question isn't whether the United States is helping Taiwan, the question is whether it's sufficient.

**FSR:** In recent years, China's rapid military modernization has had a destabilizing effect on regional security. What has this meant for Japan?

**GS:** There are a lot of things happening in Japan right now. I think Abe was interested in making the change and he may want to do so before he leaves office. He's also being pushed by his commercial sector to reduce tensions with China because of the market. So Abe would like to settle relations with China, but he's also been friendlier to Taiwan than many Japanese prime ministers. There are a lot of balls in the air.

**FSR:** Japan has also been increasing its defense budget over the past 14 consecutive years, especially in air defense, cyber, and space.

**GS:** It also increased its amphibious capability to protect the islands.

**FSR:** I've heard that they want to maintain a balancing act between the United States and China and to serve as a bridge between both sides.

**GS:** No, I don't think they would serve as a bridge. Particularly with this administration, the president doesn't think he needs a bridge. But I do think it's true that there are conflicting interests in Japan. There is the security problem, which they take seriously, but there's also the commercial end of things. Again, the Japanese economy is stagnating. It's doing better than it once was, but it still depends on the Chinese market like Taiwan, more so than one might want. Nevertheless, it exists, so there are conflicting interests between the security and the commercial world in Japan.

**FSR:** Let's now turn to Europe. The rising military threat

from China has also become a strategic concern for European countries. Do you think NATO is still relevant under such uncertain times? What should its role be in countering the perceived threat from Russia and China?

**GS:** Yes, NATO is still vital. People always said after the Cold War that NATO was dead. But then the Balkans happened. NATO responded and changed, and then Afghanistan also happened. The United States has never been a large enough force to be able to conduct multiple major campaigns. It may well be that we didn't think the Europeans did as much as they potentially could do, but we certainly would have been in even more dire straits if we didn't have NATO to help us in Afghanistan, Iraq, and now in the Gulf. There's this inevitable tension, in which the United States is preeminent while its military is still not capable of being everywhere as a deterrent. So NATO, in the context of dealing with the Russian threat, is absolutely essential.

NATO may not be as fast and big as one would want, but to its credit has made substantial changes to address the Russian problem. I think it would be completely foolish to think that somehow our security would be better off if we didn't have that. People don't quite understand that a stable Europe is in our interests, both economically and politically. An unstable Eastern and Central Europe becomes a much bigger problem for all kinds of reasons. People have just become so used to that stability that they don't fully appreciate the value of NATO.

**FSR:** After the fall of the Berlin Wall, I think NATO had a hard time figuring out who its enemies were.

**GS:** Yes, I mean, this has multiple dimensions. Despite what the president says about NATO's obstacles, the truth is NATO—even going back to the 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s—has constantly been changing. The United States is constantly telling Brussels that we've changed our strategic posture and NATO has had to figure out how to catch up. We've done

that to them repeatedly every decade. Again, it may never be as perfect as one would want, but the truth is that they keep making these changes because we keep asking them to change. After 9/11, we said you've got to have these expeditionary light forces to deal with wars in places like Afghanistan. Now you've got a Russian threat, which is a conventional military threat, and people are now buying tanks and air defenses and things like that, though again, maybe not as quick as we would like.

**FSR:** Most European NATO members are still falling short of the two percent GDP defense spending goal.

**GS:** Yes, but if you look at the total amount of spending it's increased. I've been just like everybody else and complained about Germany's lack of spending, but nevertheless, Germany is spending more. This helps deal with the Russian threat.

**FSR:** Speaking of Germany, it's interesting to me that the German government and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have been trying to chart a middle course between China, the United States, and Russia. It seems hard to maintain that kind of balance.

**GS:** Yes, and it's a little more complicated because Merkel herself maintains sanctions against Russia in a way one would have never predicted. At the same time, she finally caved on the broad threat too. The German economy is a trade economy, so they want the market and try to sell to it at the same time as the Germans have been leading the effort to be more wary of Chinese investment in Europe. There are different principles and interests at stake here and the German government is trying to square circles. It's not so easy to do.

**FSR:** How about Merkel's possible successor, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer? Is her attitude more outright and confrontational?

**GS:** I don't think she's as deeply invested in foreign policy. One reason I think she accepted the defense ministry was precisely to get that on her resume, so to speak. I think her last major speech in Munich is particularly noteworthy. I read about it because it was more forward-leaning about the value of U.S.-German relations. It was more forward-leaning about the threats that Germany faces, so it stands in marked contrast to what the foreign minister was saying at the very same time. Again, there's a kind of a split within Germany.

**FSR:** What did the foreign minister say?

**GS:** Well, he gave a speech about the celebration of the wall coming down in which he basically didn't mention NATO and the United States. It's pretty offensive just because Germany wouldn't be unified today without American and NATO assistance.

**FSR:** When it comes to security policy in Europe, European countries seem divided between strategic autonomy, which has been supported by French President Emmanuel Macron, and a broader Atlantic military alliance. Can you discuss this division?

**GS:** Yes, I think there are two levels here. The French are always talking about strategic autonomy, the problem is that they can't do it. The French could only push European strategic autonomy if the European Union really had this institutional capability to have a coherent foreign defense policy. But institutionally, it's not capable of that. It's not a normative issue, it's a practical issue with the way the EU was set up. So, I understand what Macron is saying because it's very hard to know exactly how the Trump administration will think about Europe in the future. So it makes sense to talk about autonomy. On the other hand, they just aren't institutionally set up to pull it off. Below that level, there's all this cooperation that is going on in NATO because, as a practical matter, people understand they've got to do things. That's the vehicle that is capable of getting things done. So you have two levels: you have this very, very big rhetorical level among Macron, Trump, and Merkel and below that you have this existing system of security cooperation that goes on every day. Germany made complaints about U.S. cyber intelligence collection, yet German intelligence is crucially dependent upon U.S. cooperation on intelligence for its own counter-terrorism at home.

**FSR:** Even though Germany is not a member of the Five Eyes?

**GS:** There's a lot of cooperation. Merkel, even after the Snowden revelations, was very cautious about not breaking those ties because a lot of major conspiracy plots that were taking place on German soil were only frustrated because U.S. intelligence was being passed to German security.

**FSR:** Dr. Schmitt, thank you for your time.

## Gary J. Schmitt

Gary J. Schmitt is a resident scholar in strategic studies and American institutions at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where he studies national security and longer-term strategic issues affecting America's security at home and abroad. Dr. Schmitt also writes on issues pertaining to American political institutions, the Constitution, and civic life.

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