ANCHORAGE, ALASKA—Nicholas Burns, a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and former adviser to four U.S. presidents, thinks the world is in pretty bad shape right now. That’s a sobering thought considering he began his career in public service during the height of the Cold War.

“Given the whole trajectory of the last 30 years, I don’t think we’ve faced anything like we face right now,” said Burns, who spoke Aug. 13 at the CSG West/CSG National Conference in Anchorage, Alaska.

Burns rattled off the multiple problems President Obama is facing in international affairs these days. Europe is in negative growth due to aftershocks caused by the Great Recession, as well as a slowdown in the economic growth of India and China. Iran is still trying to get a nuclear weapon, while North Korea already has one. Iraq is in flames and Syria is in the continuing grips of a civil war.

“If you go through the inbox of the president, he’s got war and revolution in the Middle East, problems in Asia with the North Koreans threatening Japan and South Korea with nuclear destruction, remaining economic problems and that doesn’t even reach the heart of the inbox of the problems that are facing the United States and America overseas,” Burns said. “In the 21st century, in the global world, all these problems are right on our doorstep. …

“Those transnational problems require that we be involved and we lead as a matter of self-interest, not just because we’re good hearted—we are. Not just because we’re charitable when other people are suffering—we are. But because it’s in our own best interests as well.”

Burns said there are three issues state leaders, and all Americans, should be paying attention to—the burning Middle East, the possible return of a Cold War with Russia and a rising China.

The Middle East, Burns noted, isn’t any less important to American interests now that the U.S. is set to become an oil and gas exporter in the next few years due to oil drilling in the Marcellus shale.

“We have 27 allies in Europe that are still dependent on Middle East oil and gas,” he said. “Japan and South Korea are as well and they’re our allies. What happens to Israel is important to us. And we don’t want problems produced in the Middle East exported to the United States. That’s what happened on 9-11.”

The rising terrorist group ISIS, Burns said, is a major threat to Middle Eastern security.
“They are more virulent and more hateful, some people believe, than Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaida,” he said. “They’ve beheaded people they’ve captured. They have been killing people by the thousands. ... What you have now is tens of thousands of refugees fleeing east, fleeing north in northern Iraq, western Iraq, trying to get away from this group.”

Despite the threat caused by this new terrorist group, Burns said, he doesn’t think Obama will recommit American combat troops on the ground in Iraq.

“What we will do,” Burns said, “we will use American air power to try to strike at ISIS and try to roll back ISIS military advances. If we don’t do that, then I think Iraq is gone. This country that was established 100 years ago at the end of World War I is going to disintegrate into three pieces—a Kurdish Iraq, a Sunni Iraq, which will be a terrorist state, and a Shia Iraq in the south ... aligned with Iran. The politics of this region are perilous.”

Only slightly less perilous is Russian President Vladimir Putin’s increasingly aggressive stance in the Ukraine. Burns said he doesn’t believe it will lead to a new Cold War, but it is concerning.

“... He’s drawing the dividing lines,” Burns said. “He’s saying to the Ukrainians, the Belarusians, the Moldovans, the Armenians, ‘You can’t have a relationship with NATO, the European Union, United States and Germany. ... If you do, I’m going to make life difficult for you.’

“We do have to use our economic and political power to try to stop him, deter him and drive up the costs. So we sanctioned Russia ... and the Russian economy is going to suffer. Hopefully, he gets the message there’s going to be a big cost and he’s going to stop.”

Burns said America also has to keep an eye on developments with China. What’s worrisome, he said, is Chinese leaders seem to be making more “extravagant” legal claims to territory owned by other neighboring countries. Because we are treaty allies with some of those neighbors, like Japan, any action China may take against them potentially could drag the United States into a conflict.

Burns said America’s developing relationship with China is unique, as the U.S. wants to retain international influence and China seeks to increase its influence on the world stage.

“For the next 50 years, China is going to be the most important country to us economically,” he said. “We need each other and we need to have a good relationship with them. We need to understand them; we need to be involved with them.

“At the same time, they’re going to be our biggest adversary and competitor for power. This is an unusual position for the United States to be in. Normally, our biggest trading partners are our allies. ... How do you be someone’s greatest trading partner and greatest competitor?”

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