

# Briefing Transcript: Republicans Make the Case for Admitting More Refugees

**Matthew La Corte:** Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you so much for joining us today. My name is Matthew La Corte. I am the government affairs manager for immigration policy at the Niskanen Center, and I will be your moderator for today's conversation, titled Republicans Make the Case for Refugees. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Niskanen, we are a five-year-old think tank that's based in Washington, D.C. Our work focuses on market-based solutions and the promotion of an open society with policy departments that are devoted to immigration, climate change, poverty, regulatory reform and much more.

Today's briefing will explore the policy and the politics of improving and expanding our refugee resettlement system and how to rebuild bipartisan support for refugees. Last month, the Trump administration announced a fiscal year of 2021 refugee ceiling of 15,000. It was the lowest ever on record. For some context, from 1980 to 2016, the average annual ceiling was 95,000. And among Republican presidents, the lowest for President Reagan was 67,000, for George H.W. Bush, 125,000, for George W. Bush, 70,000. Our discussion today will examine why the historic reductions in resettlement upend decades of bipartisan support and ultimately hurts our country.

Before we begin, I will introduce our wonderful panelists. Speaking first will be Dr. Kori Schake, the director of foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. Before joining AEI, Schake was the deputy director general of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. She has had a distinguished career in government, working at the State Department, the Department of Defense, the National Security Council at the White House as well. She's also taught at Stanford, West Point, John Hopkins, the National Defense University, and the University of Maryland.

Our second speaker is Kristie De Peña, the vice president for policy and the director of immigration at the Niskanen Center. De Peña focuses on the intersection of immigration and national security. And before joining Niskanen, she consulted with the Department of State on immigration, healthcare, and security-related issues. Third, we have Olivia Enos, the senior policy analyst in the Asian Study Center at the Heritage Foundation. She focuses on human rights and national security challenges in Asia, and her research interests include democracy and governance challenges, human trafficking and human smuggling, religious freedom and refugee issues. Enos briefs members of the executive branch at the State Department and the National Security Council, as well as members of Congress and their staff on various issues related to Asia.

And finally, we have former Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, who served for almost three decades as a member of Congress representing South Florida. She was the first Hispanic woman in Cuban American to serve in Congress and the first

Republican woman ever elected to the House from Florida. She was chair woman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee from 2011 to 2013. In Congress, she was an influential leader at key issues such as advancing democracy, international trade, national security and defense, and of course, immigration.

It's time to turn it over to our panelists and we will begin our discussion. Dr. Schake, we'll start with you. Some view refugee resettlement as inherently risky. You have worked at the Pentagon, at the State Department, at the White House, and in the past have argued that the risk from refugees is minimal, but the upside to resettling refugees in the US pays off big for our country. So can you start with walking us through your thinking and why national security officials for decades have recognized the importance of resettlement for both Republican and Democratic administrations?

**Kori Schake:** Absolutely. First, I want to say thank you to the Niskanen Center for the research they do and the advocacy they do on behalf of refugee issues. You guys are an enormously consequential resource for me in my work. I go to your work to find the data on which to build my arguments and I very much admire the advocacy work you do on behalf of refugees. So thank you, Matthew, and thank you, Niskanen Center. To answer your question, there are two terribly pernicious myths that have always had some currency on the issue of refugees, but it's been exacerbated in the Trump administration. And the first is that refugees are dangerous, that they will commit acts of terrorism, because they are new to the United States, they won't understand or respect American law.

All of that is nonsense. Refugees commit markedly less crime and no terrorism. If you look at the last time a refugee committed a terrorist act in the United States, I believe it was back in the 1960s. So we have nothing to fear from opening our borders to people who are yearning for the political liberty, the religious liberty, the safety from persecution that Americans enjoy from their government. And the second thing I would say about immigration is that far at... excuse me, not about immigration, about refugees is that immigrants, in general, Americans are in favor, you would not know that from the Trump administration, which has undertaken more than 400 executive actions to restrict immigration and has dramatically increased what was already a roughly 18 months time of vetting for refugees.

So you wouldn't know how secure America is in taking in refugees by the Trump administration's actions. But refugees also have a particular pull on our conscience because they're not just immigrants, they're immigrants who are fleeing terror, who are fleeing oppression, who are fleeing religious persecution. And one of the things I'm proudest of as an American citizen is that our policies are more than just expressions of our power, they're expressions of our conscience. And that's why the United States has played a particularly noble role in the last 40 years in refugee resettlement. And I very, very much hope that we can rebuild the consensus in favor of it, particularly among conservatives.

**Matthew La Corte:** So the argument that refugees don't pose security risks is compelling, and then the fact that we are called by our conscience to resettle refugees. What would you say to people who say, "Okay, but what is the affirmative

strategic case for resettlement?” Obviously, we understand the compassion that should drive us to want to resettle refugees, but is there more of a concrete, tangible case from a security perspective in resettlement?

**Kori Schake:** Well, there's the immediate practical case that people who are given safe harbor have an enormous amount of gratitude to the society that would provide it to them. So they become loyal Americans, not just Americans. They believe as much and possibly more than we believe in the truths we hold to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal, that they're endowed by their creator with inalienable rights. And 40% of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants in the United States. They have lower crime rates, they have a higher community engagement rates, all of the good things by which immigration refreshes the lifeblood of American political community, immigrants, in general, but refugees in particular embody and practice.

**Matthew La Corte:** Our panel today is not really going to get into economics, but just on that front, Dr. Schake. Our friends at New American Economy have put together some numbers. They found there are 175,000 refugees working in essential healthcare positions during the pandemic, including 15,000 physicians and surgeons. So I think there is an economic case to resettlement. But just that, obviously we have to address COVID and its role in our world right now and the fact that refugees are some of the ones that are helping us on the front lines.

**Kori Schake:** I think that's wonderful data for us all to have. Can I add one other thing, Matthew, because my particular area of expertise is in defense policy? And there, the refugees' case is scandalous, what the Trump administration has done. In 2016, the United States welcomed 9,800 Iraqi refugees to the US and there was a particular category for Iraqis who had assisted the American war effort. 4,000 Iraqis have permission to enter the country on that basis. Last year, the Trump administration only admitted 161. In 2019, it only admitted, overall among Iraqi refugees, 465. We have a moral responsibility that we are shirking in the Trump administration for those people who helped advance the American war effort. And it not only is a moral disgrace, but it will be harder to get others to help us achieve our war aims if we prove this cruel and this stingy towards those who help us.

**Matthew La Corte:** Thank you so much, Dr. Schake. We're going to come back to you in a little bit, but that's a perfect transition to Niskanen's Kristie De Peña, who's going to tell us a little bit more about what the administration has been doing on resettlement in the past two years and some of their plans moving forward. Kristie, the floor is yours.

**Kristie De Peña:** Excellent. Thank you, Matthew, and thank you again to our distinguished group of panelists today. We're excited you're joining Niskanen and we're excited to have this conversation. I know that Matthew wants me to keep this brief, but there is a lot going on in refugee resettlement. So I will try to be succinct. But I do want to highlight a couple of things that I think frame the importance of this discussion really well. So, for my part, I'll talk about where resettlement really stands

right now and what we need to think about moving forward. For this year, we are keeping in line with the declines and resettlement numbers that we've seen since 2017. We allowed in 30,000 refugees in 2019, 18,000 in 2020, and we are capped this year at 15,000.

We did hit the caps in 2019 and allowed for the entrance of 30,000 refugees. But last year, primarily due to coronavirus, we resettled just 11,800-ish of our 18,000 cap. But of course, as you all know, there's a lot more going on than just the sheer numbers here. So I want to spend some time talking about our consultation process and how that should be shaping our refugee policy, given all of the emergent issues that we've seen even in just the past year. By way of a little bit of background, the INA, the Immigration Nationality Act, authorizes the president to set an annual refugee ceiling. And he is supposed to do so after appropriately consulting with administration officials, usually cabinet level officials and members of the House and Senate Judiciary Committees.

As part of that process, the president issues a preliminary report, which we have seen come out this year. Prior to the start of the fiscal year, they're supposed to meet, talk about it, make any changes they think are relevant, and then get ready for the start of the fiscal year. So that is generally speaking due by the 30th of September every year. Of course, that doesn't always happen in a timely and thorough manner. And although the Trump administration is guilty of that, there are a number of other administrations who have also been guilty of not complying with that timeline. This year, however, the administration issued their proposal just a few

minutes before midnight on the deadline, but it didn't leave any room for consultation prior to the start of our fiscal year. So they got the proposal in on the 30th, but there hasn't been any time yet to consult. And Matthew, you might know better than I, but I think they might be consulting this week, if I'm not mistaken.

**Matthew La Corte:** I believe they're consulting today actually.

**Kristie De Peña:** Great. Perfect timing.

**Kristie De Peña:** What this means not only is obviously a delay in the consultation process, but it also means that the final determination is delayed. And in the interim, we're not resettling any refugees throughout October, potentially through November, depending on how quickly they move on the consultation process. But then we're forced to make up that difference in fewer months throughout fiscal year 2021. And of course, we all know that that is going to be complicated a little bit further by the fact that we are in the midst of a pandemic.

I think it's really important to stress that this isn't a perfunctory requirement or exercise. The delay here has very real life consequences for people. Right now, I think that the most current estimate there are about 1,000 refugees who are ready for departure to come to the US, who will not be able to travel in 2021 under the restricted categories. A third of those people have plane tickets, they have fast

approaching “must travel by” dates. That means that they have to travel in order to maintain compliance with all of their security and health checks that Dr. Schake alluded to earlier. So not surprisingly, leadership is frustrated by the dismissal of the consultation process. And this is by no means partisan.

In 2017, Republican Senator, Chuck Grassley, expressed his concern over the fact that they weren’t consulted in the process. He said that the process is effectively meaningless at this point. Last year, Republican Senator, Lindsey Graham, wrote a letter to the State Department and he wrote, “The executive branch simply cannot continue to repeat these mistakes and must take steps to ensure that the consultation process is both consistent with federal law and meaningful.” So it is important to both sides of the aisle that this conversation happens. And we’ve been advocates of that policy for a long time. But more so than ever, I will say that I think that this year it’s especially important to have a really robust, timely discussion for several reasons that I promise I will try to briefly highlight.

So the first big change is that in previous fiscal years, the presidential determination included regional allocations whereby the entire cap was split among different regions of the world. Africa would be allotted 11,000 refugees, East Asia would be allotted 4,000, etc., etc. While we did meet that cap, like I mentioned, the discrepancies in the regions were a little bit alarming. While we accepted over 167% of the European category, we were woefully below our levels in Latin America and Near East South Asia regions. And in the last four years, we averaged fewer

than 800 refugees for the entire Northern Triangle country areas. So El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras combined fewer than 800 refugees a year.

So when we see these big drops in averages from specific regions, obviously refugee advocates started asking some questions. And allegedly in the face of that, the 2020 PD stopped allocating the ceiling among regions of the world. So instead, we are now allocated by populations of special humanitarian concern. And that carries forward into the proposal that was issued this year, although they did make some tweaks to those numbers. So all adding up to 15,000, it's 1,000 from refugees from Northern Triangle countries, 4,000 for the Iraqi refugees that we previously mentioned, 5,000 for refugees fleeing religious persecution, and then 5,000 for all other refugees around the world.

There are a lot of things to discuss about those allocations, but I want to just note one important thing. Asylum seekers, generally, and refugees are treated separately for lots of good reasons, not least of which is that they are legally very distinct populations. They have very distinct processing requirements and adjudication, they have very distinct timelines for coming to the United States. And as we know, asylees are usually coming to the United States now from our Southern border. The way that they've done this conflates those two populations, and it wasn't intentional by any stretch of imagination. The 2020 report actually referenced the asylum system and mentioned that because of the surges that they're seeing on the Southern border, they need to ramp up the number of refugees from that area.

And while in and of itself, that's not a bad change. It seems that the administration is potentially using the refugee resettlement structure to supplant the asylum process, which is problematic, and I'm happy to talk about that moving forward. Obviously, we know that the pandemic requires a conversation between the administration and Congress that is very important. Since the US closed our borders, I think, on March 20th, roughly, we've sent about 150,000 people, including almost 9,000 unaccompanied children back to their countries of origin without the due process that is normally afforded asylees who are coming to our border. And of course, by and large, the global pandemic and the recession associated with it have led to huge cuts across the board in refugee camps all over the world. There's food shortages, the access to soap, clean water, food, obviously is impacted by the shortages. And there are limited employment opportunities for the increased populations of displaced people that we're seeing. Now, I think the number is around 80 million worldwide today.

The last thing that I want to highlight and I know that my time is short here is this burgeoning idea around consenting to resettlement. Last fall, President Trump issued an executive order that required state and local leaders to opt into resettling refugees, which is a pretty significant departure from any refugee policy that we've seen before. This past January, a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction against that part of the order. Legally speaking, although it may be decided in future months, it also may be moot in a few months. But what I think is really interesting about it and what I hope will be discussed in the consultation process was the response to that EO. 43 states, nearly half of which are led by Republican governors, made affirmative statements after the release of that executive order saying that they would continue to resettle refugees.

And I think this is really important because it demonstrates that we're not only seeing bipartisan support for refugee resettlement from members of our community, but we're seeing it from lawmakers on The Hill. We're seeing it from our state and local governments. And even if we're not seeing it necessarily translated in policy that's coming out of the White House, it's clearly evidenced by engagement from both Republicans and Democrats on the state and local level. I'll end there. I know that Olivia is going to talk a little bit about the great import of having a discussion on currently persecuted populations, Venezuelans, Hong Kongers, and the fact that in this proposal, at least, there was no special designated carve-out for these populations. And I think that's an important conversation to have. So I'll stop there and I will let someone else take the floor.

**Matthew La Corte:** Thank you, Kristie. Olivia, there are two specific populations of concern that are facing persecution from the Chinese Communist Party, first, Hongkongers, and second, Uyghurs. Can you take us through what is happening with these two groups and what you think the US should do to help?

**Olivia Enos:** Yes, absolutely. Thank you, Matthew, and thank you to Niskanen Center for hosting this event today. It's my pleasure to be here, although I wish that there were not so many persecuted populations that are equally worthy of attention. As Matthew mentioned, I'm going to focus on two groups that have been especially affected by the increases in persecution that we have all born witness to under Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party. I think everyone around the globe has just been absolutely arrested by the developments that we continue to see coming

out of Xinjiang. Today, there are an estimated 1.8 to 3 million Uyghurs that are currently being held in political reeducation facilities there. Many of the things that are taking place inside of these facilities we thought were relegated to the history books. But yet again, history is repeating itself.

We hear Muslims have been historically targeted by the Chinese Communist Party, but the heightened persecution has led many, including individuals in Congress and all across the globe to suggest that Uyghurs may even be facing genocide or crimes against humanity. I have actually put out a paper at Heritage urging the Trump administration to call a spade a spade and to say whether genocide and crimes against humanity are in fact taking place. And I would say one of the most shocking elements of the Chinese Communist Party's persecution has been the ways in which we hear Muslims have been targeted in order to restrict the number of births and to ultimately limit the size of the next generation of Uyghurs.

Adrian Zenz, a researcher with the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, found that the Chinese Communist Party has a stated goal of forcibly sterilizing between 80% and 90% of weaker women of childbearing age in certain provinces. If you have Uyghurs already being separated from family members inside the political prison camps and then those left behind as well as those in the prison camps being subject to forced sterilization, the big question becomes what will become of the next generation of Uyghurs? This is truly a shocking, shocking development, and it's only one of the many reasons that Uyghurs are eligible for refugee resettlement, particularly those who have fled the camps. But

Uyghurs are far from the only group that has been targeted by the Chinese Communist Party. We have witnessed also how the Chinese Communist Party has undermined and essentially undone the one country, two systems framework that has governed Hong Kong since the British handover. And now, what we're seeing is with the introduction of the new national security bill, is the elimination of all hope that Hongkongers will one day enjoy full suffrage and the democratic freedoms that they have otherwise been promised. And so as we saw these developments unfolding last fall, my colleagues and I issued a paper, one of the many recommendations was to extend priority to refugee status to Hong Kongers particularly in the case where Beijing decides to engage or intervene militarily.

But I think a lot of times when you are looking at situations like what is facing the Uyghurs or like what is facing the people of Hong Kong, it's easy to sit back and wonder, "Is there anything that we practically can do?" And I think that this is where the US Refugee Admissions Program really does come in and where Priority 2 refugee status is an answer to inaction and to the difficulties that are faced, not just in the case of addressing China, but in other situations where the US government can't actually change the system that is leading to the persecution of those individuals. I think the question though for many people may be, "Why Priority 2? Why is P-2 status the right direction?"

The first answer, I think, applies just more generally to the US refugee program. One, it's a practical, prudent, and possible way to alleviate suffering when there aren't a ton of policy options out there. So it's the US doing what is possible in the

midst of an intractable crisis, and it's an opportunity for US leadership. The second, and I think this is a unique benefit to P-2, is that it does not require UNHCR, embassy, or NGO referral, which means that any individual, whether they're inside or outside of the country, can apply directly to the US system in order to be considered for resettlement. And the third benefit of P-2, and I do want to underscore this, is that even though the process is expedited because they skipped that initial referral process, the same stringent vetting and determining their eligibility for resettlement is still present in the Priority 2 case.

And I think circling back to point number one, I think that it is a possible and practical solution that isn't just something that we, at Heritage, have been talking about. It actually has some political momentum on The Hill. We saw with Hong Kong, the introduction of the Hong Kong Safe Harbor Act. But we've also just seen comments, in general, from members of Congress who were supportive of that. And I think if you saw actions also from the administration, for example, the push for an atrocity determination saying whether genocide and crimes against humanity are taking place with Uyghurs, follow-on actions like the extension of Priority 2 may actually be possible. And I do want to say one other thing on the Hong Kong issue, which is just that actually when the US revisited the status of Hong Kong, it also included in their aligned for potential refugee resettlement, though not P-2 itself, which does present an opportunity for folks in the refugee community to consider what is possible and practical.

So just to conclude very quickly, I think that extending party to refugee status to both Uyghurs and HongKongers and of course other eligible populations is in US interests to do so. It demonstrates one US leadership. And in the Asian context specifically, it advances the values component of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, which is the Trump administration strategy towards Asia. Second, it allows the US to respond in the midst of intractable crises. And third, it strengthens US public diplomacy, including soft power for us to be gracious and extend safe haven, particularly to those who share our values. And I think in the Chinese context specifically, and I'll conclude here, it sends a really clear message to the people of China that the United States cares for them even and especially when the Chinese Communist Party does not. So with that, thank you so much, Matthew, for having me today.

**Matthew La Corte:** Thank you, Olivia. Now, Dr. Schake, I was wondering if we can go back to you because Olivia makes a really good point about the power of images and symbolism and standing with people abroad who look to the US as a beacon of democracy, of freedom, of opportunity. How powerful is it when the US on the global stage can show solidarity and help others in a projection of both our humanity, but also the fact that we are taking actions to defend human rights abroad?

**Kori Schake:** It's an incredibly cost-effective way for the United States to build support for things that we care about in the international order. The US has two incredibly powerful tools, intimidation and inspiration. And the dirty little secret of the international order that the United States and its friends built after World War II is

that it's almost entirely voluntary because we created a mutually beneficial order. We didn't ring every last ounce of advantage for ourselves out of the rules and out of the structures that especially middle and small countries view the system as hugely advantageous for them, they participate voluntarily. And whereas president Trump likes to complain that allies don't do enough, another way to think about it is that no great power has ever had as much voluntary assistance and voluntary compliance as the United States has had. And that is directly the function of the fact that countries believe we stand for more than our power and more than our interests. We stand also for values about the universality of human dignity and the responsibility of governments to respect and support people's aspirations.

**Matthew La Corte:** Thank you. So we'll turn to Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen. Congresswoman, in 2017, you sponsored a bipartisan resolution that marked World Refugee Day and that document reaffirmed the US commitment to refugee protection. Throughout your almost three decades on Capitol Hill, you sought to work across the aisle to build support for various programs and initiatives. Can you talk us through your experience as a champion for refugees in Congress and the value in building a new bipartisan coalition in support of resettlement?

**Ileana Ros-Lehtinen:** This was a wonderful resolution that I had with Ted Lieu of California reaffirming what you said that it has to be bipartisan, that we're a better country when we embrace this refugee resettlement program in a bipartisan manner. And as been said by your panelists, sadly in recent years, boy, we have dramatically reduced the number of refugees resettled into the United States. And

why? Some people have thought, “Oh, they are a national security risk.” And as the panelists have pointed out, nothing could be further from the truth. Since this program was established in 1980, there’s not been one case of refugee resettlement, unless who has been any kind of national security risk whatsoever.

So the United States has accepted the refugees. We have a long tradition of doing so, except in these recent years. I was glad that I was born in Cuba, but was able to come to the United States when I was only eight years old, along with my parents fleeing persecution in Cuba. Now, we have Venezuelans who are in the similar situation, we have folks in the Northern Triangle who may have a political persecution as well as economic needs. But our country’s made strong because of recent arrivals. I’m glad that they let me in and my brother and my parents. And so I think that refugees bring political stability. Unlike what some of us may think, it really is true. Cubans, for example, help South Florida grow and create jobs. And we’re still doing well.

Refugees sometimes go to a first country of asylum, but that country can’t absorb them. They don’t have the infrastructure, they don’t have the jobs. So then the United States lets them in, and that’s a relief for that first country, but it’s a benefit to the United States as well because they do come with skills and they do help our country. So we take the heat off the first country because they can’t absorb them, and it’s positive for the US. It’s a positive win. It’s a win-win for the country because they can’t do it for the original country and a win for the United States. They’re useful tools. Refugee resettlement programs are useful for advancing US foreign

policy goals because we publish good relations with other countries and the one who can be helpful.

What can we do to, once again, build bipartisan cooperation? Well, Matthew and the panelists, I think that we need to showcase individual stories, look at this family, look at that family. And I think we need to make the connection locally, community by community to say, “These guys belong to a refugee resettlement program. Look how wonderful they have been for X community and Y community.”

But this resolution is so great, Matthew, because we reaffirm the bipartisan commitment of the United States to promote the safety and well-being of millions of refugees, recognize those who have risked their lives and uphold international leadership. We need to take that international leadership once again. We were the leaders and we should be a shining city on a hill and let everybody know that we want you here, we know that you're positive, and you're going to be great participants in our democracy. I apologize so much for my garbled mess. But anyway, we need to live the ideals of this resolution that we proposed in past years ago and let's not let go of that mantle. Once we grab it again, let's keep on being the best that we can be. There are a lot of Ileanas around the world and they would like nothing better than to be productive citizens and participants of our great representative democracy.

**Matthew La Corte:** Thank you so much for those remarks. And we are absolutely a better, more prosperous country because your family came and we resettled and welcomed and we should continue to do that for other refugees.

Olivia, I'm going to give you the floor on this question of the Republican task force on China and their inclusion of a need to help refugees from Hong Kong. So if you could just talk about the potential political traction of the issue and how you see in the next maybe year on the issue of HongKongers and Uyghurs, what is possible both on The Hill and also our administration, some inclusion, not a carve out, but some inclusion in the report to Congress for the new fiscal year?

**Olivia Enos:** Yeah. That's a great question. Thanks for directing it to me. Yes, as you mentioned, there is support in Congress for resettling HongKongers. I think there is this broad recognition that HongKongers we're really willing to take to the streets in order to defend the institutions and the freedoms that they held really dear, and that's a huge part of resettlement is being willing to advance and share in those values. And so I think a lot of people in Congress are sitting there wondering what can be done. And obviously, we saw the Hong Kong Policy Act, or excuse me, Human Rights and Democracy Act passed earlier or late last year.

And so I think Congress is looking to continue to have action on Hong Kong in whatever format that it can be. So I think that there should definitely be a seizing upon that momentum that does exist and it exists as has been referenced here in a

bipartisan manner. And I think that should continue to be encouraged. I personally was very encouraged to see that when the administration did issue their executive order on Hong Kong, that there was this reference to resettling Hong Kongers through various refugee avenues. And I think that too is an opening and an opportunity to press for the resettlement of Hong Kongers.

I think that the Uyghurs' Priority 2 designation is an idea that is great, but there isn't so much momentum around it in Congress. And I would hope that there will be some greater movement, both through the executive branch or through Congress to really seize on this. I think a huge way to build that momentum would be to issue an atrocity determination because I think that really is a mandate that gets more people working, not just here in the US, but even globally, because I think it's been really unfortunate how woefully silent many countries around the globe have been about the persecution of Uyghurs. So the US has got to lead the charge on that and hopefully other countries will follow as well.

**Matthew La Corte:** I want to transition back to Kristie. You mentioned the executive order from the administration last year, which required consent to resettle refugees. In total, 19 Republican governors consented before the court eventually came in and blocked the executive order. Recent analysis of resettlement found that four of the states with Republican governors that consented saw resettlement drop by 70% in 13 of those states. So it dropped by 60% in the last year. The number one state that had a drop was Iowa, a 79% drop after consenting to resettlement. You went to law school in Iowa. So I would like to hear from you because we have this idea that,

or some folks have the idea that refugees are resettled in blue states, they're in California. But actually, refugee resettlement happens all across the country. So just tell us a little bit about how you see the executive order, how the support from governors from both red and blue states, how you think about that and how bipartisan resettlement really is?

**Kristie De Peña:** Sure. One of the shifts that I think is really important to acknowledge is that previously when we talked about refugees, the image that is generally conjured is this one of desperate people crossing borders, their belongings are on their back. It's kind of this like cold war idea that comes to mind of people voting with their feet. And since then, the refugees that we're looking at are really different populations. Certainly, some of them have been seriously disadvantaged by the things that are going on in their countries. But I think Hong Kongers is a perfect case of the political, the economical, the strategic reasons that we want to bring new populations and different populations of refugees to the United States.

And I think what is happening on the state and local ground is that they're seeing this more and more. Obviously, for a long time, faith-based communities have been really involved in the resettling of refugees. But as we are building more of a community based model of resettlement, it's really engaging a lot more people in areas of the country where they may not have had access to those kinds of opportunities before. So what that does is that it makes it not just the sort of academic study of whether or not, these people are going to be good for America, it

allows people to really understand and feel the humanitarian benefits that all of us have talked about when we talk about refugee resettlement. But it makes it more personal.

And I think to the congresswoman's point, when she's talking about how we need to highlight more of these stories of refugees, it's because when we talk to some of these state and local communities and they have experience working with a refugee or a refugee family, they immediately understand this high-level discussion that is happening in Washington, D.C., and that previously hasn't really impacted their lives that personally. But now, they can see it. So I think what the response to that EO really was, was a greater understanding of our refugee program at large, a better understanding of what refugee policy really means for America. And I think it reflects the fact that we are being a lot more purposeful in engaging more people in the resettlement of foreigners abroad. I think that applies both to refugees and asylees. And the outcome of that is overwhelmingly positive. People want to continue to engage with these populations. They want to help them get used to their new communities in America. It's not just about a financial aspect for them. It's really about engaging with new people. And so I think that that's what we saw reflected last winter.

**Matthew La Corte:** Dr. Schake, can you take us behind the curtain a little bit? Tell us about how the Bush administration and your interactions and involvement with the administration, how they approached and considered refugee issues? We saw recently a letter from seven former leaders of the resettlement program from the

State Department side coming out and affirming the importance of resettlement and making a case to Secretary Pompeo to increase resettlement. Tell us a little bit more about your time in the administration and how you guys viewed resettlement issues and the importance of protecting refugees and providing assistance and financial support for refugees in other countries as well.

**Kori Schake:** Well, President Bush early on talked about compassionate conservatism, and I think that colored all of the policies that had to do with refugees and asylum and even immigration more broadly, that we have responsibilities. We have moral responsibilities in particular because we are an example, as Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen said. It really matters for how the United States navigates the world, that people believe we are a force for positive change in people's lives. And when we cease to be that, we're no different and no better than the alternatives. And that means we don't have the advantages of other countries wanting us to succeed at what we're trying to do, and we don't have the advantages of appealing past governments to people.

Our proper place in the world is on the side of people who are being oppressed by their governments. That's our natural role, that's who we are as a political culture. And that parallels standing alongside those people who are enduring persecution, who have been dishomed by violence or disaster, and that in particular refugees are victims. They're not perpetrators. And there's a hugely important difference, as Ronald Reagan said, right? There's a huge difference between people who impose

war on others and people who liberate others. And we want to be on the side of liberation, and that puts us naturally on the side of refugees.

**Matthew La Corte:** Thank you, Dr. Schake. We have a great list of audience questions. I'll start with this. I am curious about proposals to rebuild the refugee resettlement system as resettlement agencies' capacity to welcome refugees have been dramatically weakened by the drastic decrease in resettlement arrivals since 2017. So I'll open this to the panel. Obviously, there's been a conversation about some specific proposals or bills or ideas. I know Kristie, the Niskanen Center just put out a report on how to rebuild or restore the program moving forward. To all the panelists or anyone who wants to answer, any specific proposals on rebuilding the resettlement system?

**Ileana Ros-Lehtinen:** Well, I think it all starts in the local community. We need to build up all the damage that's been done, restore confidence that local communities will not be hurt when they have these refugees resettle in their areas. I think there's been a lot of mistrust and distrust and people think, "Oh my goodness, terrorists are coming from here. They're going to infiltrate our country." Yes, we need to do a lot in rebuilding the refugee resettlement program. But it all starts with you, with me, with our local areas. Let's highlight these stories, these success stories, and have people understand that, boy, this is the foundation of the United States. And we need to be welcoming once again.

**Kristie De Peña:** There is an immediate solution potentially after November 3rd. I think vice-president, Joe Biden, has talked about immediately upping the numbers. And that is certainly a positive change. But I think that we need to take care in how we move forward. There are a lot of other aspects to rebuilding the refugee resettlement and some of it is just reversing the status quo. But I also think that, in many ways, the status quo could be a lot better. And this provides a really unique opportunity for advocates of refugees to really think through and carefully consider how we want to rebuild the system. That includes conversations about a more robust consultation process.

I think given all of the comments about the strategic case for refugee resettlement that we need to loop in more foreign policy experts into that consultation process. Reflecting the congresswoman's comments, really thinking about how we can engage different kinds of communities moving forward and make sure that they are more hands-on with refugee resettlement is a no-brainer. I think it makes a lot of sense and it's something that, like I said, we've seen a lot of support for. And we really need to think through how we can protect against the dismantling of these systems, both at home and abroad, given the priorities of different administrations moving forward, and about how we want those to look and how we can protect them moving forward.

It's going to take a long time to rebuild some of the international infrastructure that we had in place to process refugees in the past. It's going to take a lot of funding from Congress to make sure that we are building up our refugee resettlement

structures here in the US. And I think at least for the position of Niskanen that it makes a lot of sense to include the community more in those efforts. So I know that everyone on this panel really wants to make these immediate fixes to undo a lot of the things that we've seen done in the past few years, but this is a really unique and incredible opportunity for us to look at what works and what doesn't and make this system exceptional moving forward.

**Olivia Enos:** If I could just build on that really briefly, I think in order to rebuild, there has to be an openness to reform as well. And I really love that message I think Kristie is highlighting there. Actually, two of my other colleagues and I at Heritage put out a paper that outlines a potential roadmap for refugee reform. But one of the solutions that we offered was to pile it alongside of the government-run refugee program, also efforts for private resettlement. And something that Representative Ross Leighton was highlighting is that the role of individuals and local communities in helping to alleviate the plight of refugees. And what better way to do that than to have individuals or communities or institutions coming together and privately offering resettlement options that have the same sort of stringent vetting requirements and everything, but that really involves community engagement. Because I think at root, for a resettlement program to be successful, there has to be buy-in from the American people and a commitment to be a good and a loving neighbor to the new refugees and those who are being resettled from within our own communities.

**Matthew La Corte:** We are almost out of time. Dr. Schake, I will leave you with some final closing remarks.

**Kori Schake:** I would say in conclusion that it's important to realize that the Trump administration's restrictions on immigration broadly and in particular on refugees are not shared by the vast majority of our fellow Americans. And in fact, what you can see in public polling data about American attitudes is that they have shifted even more strongly positively as the administration has shut down opportunities for refugees to resettle to the United States. There's huge, broad, deep American public goodness on this issue. And we all need to work to bring policy into line with the goodness of our fellow Americans' public attitudes about this. So I thank the Niskanen Center for its research, for its advocacy. I thank Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen for her excellent leadership when she was in Congress and her continued advocacy. And I'm super impressed, Olivia and Kristie, at how much you guys know that I didn't that I learned from you today. So thank you.

**Matthew La Corte:** Well, thank you to all of our attendees for spending your afternoon with us. I hope you found this conversation as informative as I did. And a big thank you again to our panelists for taking the time to deliver such thoughtful and insightful remarks on our topic. We hope that you will join the Niskanen Center for its next briefing. You can find more information about us at [niskanencenter.org](https://niskanencenter.org). Thank you again, everybody. Stay safe and healthy and we'll see you next time.