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TAI Bookshelf Podcast – The Arctic Through the Eyes of the US Congress with Lillian Hussong

Full Transcript

Liuba Timonina:

Lillian, thanks so much for accepting our invitation to talk with us today. And welcome to The Arctic Institute podcast.

Lillian Hussong:

Thank you so much for having me. It's my first podcast, so I'm excited to be here.

Romain Chuffart

Thanks, Lillian. As a way to make our conversation a bit more casual, and we've done this with other guests, is to ask them to describe the room in which you are and the view from your window as accurately as you can. Would you like to give that a go for our listeners?

Lillian:

Sure. That's a good question. I am currently in Absecon, New Jersey, which is where my parents live. I'm visiting for the weekend, because my four-year-old niece is here. The room in which I am currently is my bedroom. To describe it, you would see a whole bunch of medals from the various races that I've completed: 10Ks, 5Ks, half-marathons, triathlons, and a lot of the bibs that you have for the competition. There's a huge tapestry on the wall. You would normally find a couple of degrees on the wall, but I had to take those down, because some of them fell off. If you were to look out the window, it's beautiful here. I live right near the bay, right near Atlantic City. I'm very close to the Atlantic Ocean. If I look out, I just happen to see a huge tree in my front yard. If you walk down the street, you'll see the entire bay, all of Atlantic City and the gateway to the Atlantic Ocean. It's a beautiful spot to be in.

Liuba:

This sounds really great. I didn't actually know that you were a runner. That's quite exciting. To give a little bit more of a personal context, could you tell us how, and maybe where, your Arctic research started, and why you chose it in the first place?

Lillian

Sure. I came to Arctic research, really, rather untraditionally. I have a master's degree in Holocaust and Genocide Studies, which I earned at Stockton University, which is not far



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from where I am currently, in Absecon. I had applied to Rutgers University with the intention to continue studying genocide. I entered the Ph. D. program in 2015, and it was right around the height of the Syrian refugee crisis and hearing about ISIS in the news every single day. So I applied to Rutgers because I was really interested in what I perceived to be the intersection between genocide and terrorism. It's very different from Arctic studies. I had taken a couple of classes with now my dissertation advisor. I had taken two classes with him in one semester, so I had him twice. In one class, I was working on the Syrian refugee crisis, but I was expanding my research. I wasn't really looking at genocidal-like conflict. Instead, I was looking at asylum policy in Scandinavia. In order to make my work, at least geographically similar, when I took another class that same semester with the same professor, he told me to look at the Arctic. This was for a class on grand strategy, so to learn about American grand strategy, specifically. It turned out that I was not so interested in the intellectual discipline of Immigration Studies – that didn't really resonate with me, despite my interest in genocide. But I absolutely fell in love with the Arctic. I loved what I was studying from a strategic point of view, and I thought, this is an area in which we're going to hear more about the Arctic, we're going to hear more about strategy, and we're going to hear more about US engagement in the region, especially as climate change starts to open up the waters up there. That's how I got into it. It's probably not the answer that most people would expect, but I will say that even from the time that I was a teenager, I was fascinated by the Arctic. My favorite author is Philip Pullman. He wrote a trilogy called, *His Dark Materials*. I got that first book, *The Golden Compass*, when I was maybe about 13. The protagonist is a young girl who was about the same age as when I was reading, and she was about 13. She travels to Svalbard, and so that was actually my first interest in the Arctic. It's kind of come full circle because I never thought that I would get a chance to study the Arctic region formally. It's been a really cool opportunity. I've had the interest, but now I get the chance to actually do something with that interest, and I love it.

Liuba:

It seems like a very interesting pathway into Arctic research. I would say also quite unusual, like academically. This is really unique, I would say. When it comes to books that we get to read when we're kids, the fascination with the Arctic and the northern regions, I can agree with you here.

Romain:

I can totally relate with liking, *His Dark Materials*. I think it's a wonderful series of books. Now we all work for The Arctic Institute, which is a prominent part of the *His Dark Materials* book series as well. I don't mean the real Arctic Institute. By switching gears a little bit, talking of grand strategy and Arctic policy and US engagement – you've just published a book chapter with our director, Victoria Herman, on US Arctic policy through the eyes of Congress, "No UNCLOS, No Icebreakers, No Clue?" You highlight



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five themes of American Arctic security. Could you talk us a bit more about these five themes, and why you say, despite sustained interest in these, the US seems to have no clue and no strategy.

Lillian:

Sure, this was a really interesting piece of work that Victoria and I were able to do. I'll say that we wrote this in 2018 and 2019. It's been really interesting to see what has come since we've published this article, and I'll talk about that probably a little bit later. To just set the scene, why did we even decide to work on this at all? Well we wanted to look at Congress, because I don't know that people have really been focusing on Congress, specifically as it pertains to the Arctic. Because the US Congress has the imperative to propose, to fund, to enact laws and activities that steer US activities, we thought this is a really good starting point for us to understand what exactly is going on in the United States as it pertains to the Arctic. In our research, we decided that we would look at the Library of Congress's Digital Archives. We put in just one term – we just put in 'Arctic,' and we wanted to see how many times it appeared between 1973-2018, the last session of Congress that we could study. We chose 1973, I should say, because it was around that time that President Nixon had proposed the first Arctic policy. The Arctic appeared 986 times in our search between 1973 and 2018. It was really interesting, because there were 459 pieces of legislation alone, which were proposed between 2007 and 2018. That was 46% of 986 times that the Arctic showed up in our results. Broadly, we had identified about seven themes in which the Arctic appeared, and that was wilderness, oceans, climate change, security, energy, and policy more broadly. Interestingly enough, we added a non-Arctic designator because it seemed sometimes the Arctic was included in legislative pieces that either nominally had something to do with the Arctic or perhaps not at all. That's where your question comes into play, because we had narrowed it down to five themes that we wanted to look at, specifically. Those five themes were energy security, UNCLOS or the United Nations Convention on the Law of Seas, US leadership more broadly as it pertains to the Arctic, climate security, and icebreakers. Did you want me to say a little bit about those five things?

Romain:

Sure, yes.

Lillian

Okay, I'll just walk through the article a little bit. With our first of the five themes, which was about energy security, this we had identified as being the most legislated Arctic issue in our research. 306 times, we found that the Arctic was tied to bills related to energy. 306 out of 459 times. Most often, what we found was that ANWAR, or the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge, was in the middle of this energy debate. The Senate had refused to open the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge, and by the time the Obama



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Administration came to be, President Obama didn't make any attempts to open the refuge. What we saw in this most recent presidential administration was that President Trump wanted to reopen it in late 2017. That has been a controversial move. It's been welcomed by many, and it's certainly being challenged. That's the little bit of work that we did on energy as one of our five themes.

The second was UNCLOS, and I should really defer to you here, because you are certainly the UNCLOS expert. You have far more to say about this with your expertise than I do. We were looking at UNCLOS, because since about 1984, under the Reagan Administration, there have been some fears that exceeding on costs would cede American sovereignty in the face of international law. This attitude still persists today. The United States, as of September 24, has not acceded to UNCLOS. Typically those fears come from either Republican officials or conservative officials who are concerned about these fears of losing American sovereignty. But the United States does adhere to UNCLOS at least through customary law, which means that the US supports it, but does not accede to it. What I found in both the research that I've done for this article, as well as for my own dissertation research, is that there is in fact, a lot of bipartisan support in Congress, and there's also a lot of support from federal officials and from military officials. Perhaps later on, if you want to talk about my dissertation research, I can get into that a little bit. It is interesting that there is a tremendous amount of support for acceding to UNCLOS, but it still has not been ratified in Congress.

The third issue that we investigated was icebreakers, is a really interesting topic, because the US Coast Guard acts as America's Arctic surface presence. What is so challenging about this, as I'm sure you're aware, is that the Coast Guard is really struggling with the icebreakers that it has. I'm sure you've heard over the summer that there was a fire aboard one of the icebreakers, and it was just kind of emblematic of the struggles that the Coast Guard has had to really exercise its mission in the Arctic. I think it's demonstrative of the fact that in spite of America's increasing interest in the Arctic, especially in the past couple of years; the US doesn't seem to be able to fully exercise this interest. If you don't have a surface presence that is able to functionally operate in the Arctic, this is a big problem. In our research, we found that there were numerous obstacles to the coastguard getting the icebreakers that it needs, and those included high price tags, sequestration, budget cuts, as well as the purpose of emission or to look at opportunity costs. That is especially an interesting point, because – and again, I look at this in my own dissertation – if you are going to spend somewhere between 850 million to a billion dollars, which are some of the price tags that were floating around, if you look into this from the past couple of years, if you're going to spend that much money for a ship that has essentially one purpose, that's a lot of money that could be spent on other investing and other assets that could have dual use capabilities, or could function in other parts of the world. If you're going to spend that much money for a surface presence in the Arctic, you're not going to



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send that down to perhaps the Caribbean or somewhere where the Coast Guard also operates. That's a real obstacle. What's interesting about that is that in 2018, the Coast Guard renamed its icebreaking project to Polar Security Cutter. Since then, and this is simplifying things a bit, but since then we've seen more interest in procuring funding for icebreakers. Of course, now the US Coast Guard is going to build its first new icebreaker, which should be operational in a couple of years. Maybe we could talk a little bit more about that as well.

The fourth theme that we investigated was leadership. This has changed quite a bit since we published the article, because at the time of publication, there was no US Arctic leader. In 2017, the then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, he abolished the position within the State Department of the Special Representative for the Arctic, I believe it's called. That was held by Admiral Papp at the time, and that office was abolished in 2017. That's where we were at the time in our writing. We identified that this was a gap in US Arctic interests. There has been some congressional action to appoint a US ambassador to the Arctic region, but that never came to fruition. What's notable now is that in 2020, in fact, the State Department now has a US coordinator for the Arctic region, and that is now currently being led by James DeHart. That's an example of something that has changed since our article was published.

A final theme that we identified was climate security. This one sounds like it could be a really great avenue of discussion, because, of course, climate change is such an important consideration when we think about the Arctic. There are about 20 bills a year that are related to climate change that are advanced in Congress, but they only mentioned the Arctic in passing. We found that there wasn't too much more that we could elaborate there, because the Arctic might have been used as, I don't want to say a plug or lack of a better word, but it was just kind of nominally mentioned as an area. There wasn't a congressional bill that actually dealt with the Arctic or with climate change in the Arctic, specifically. Hopefully, I haven't spoken too much there, but those were the five themes that we investigated.

Romain:

Thanks for such a detailed account. You mentioned the 2020 US coordinator. Do you know what the scope of their mandate is?

Lillian:

That's a good question. I think that will probably be determined in the future, since it is essentially a new position. Because it's under the purview of the State Department, this is not necessarily going to be a position that will look domestically at US Arctic interest. This is really about representing the US in an international setting, as it pertains to the Arctic. While the Arctic is both a domestic site and an international site of interest for the



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United States, it appears that this will really be an externally facing position, not so much dealing with the US Arctic issue.

Romain:

Okay, thanks. Perhaps as a follow up on this: what do you think Congress can do to strengthen US engagement and and work towards more Arctic security for the US?

Lillian:

That's a good question. Let me just mention here are a couple of these key congressional Arctic actors. It might be, as expected, that the Alaskan politicians are some of the biggest Arctic advocates. It should be expected. The late Senator Ted Stevens, former Senator Mark Begich and current senators, Lisa Murkowski, and Dan Sullivan, these are all some of the big Arctic advocates, as well as Representative Don Young. What's also interesting, though, is looking at who else is supporting Arctic-related legislation in Congress. That includes the US state of Washington, as well as the US state of California, and this is primarily because of the tremendous Coast Guard presence. It is in the interest of the political representatives of the states to support especially Coast Guard-related issues. Here's what I'll say about Congress and about perhaps what Congress could do. There is a senate Arctic caucus, and there is a congressional Arctic working group. We have an Arctic body on each side of Congress. What I found in my research with Victoria, as well as my own dissertation research, is that the there is really not much transparency in what the senate Arctic caucus and what the congressional Arctic working group do. In the book chapter that we've published, I note that the congressional Arctic Working Group website has not been updated since 2016. I checked again this morning, just to make sure, and it still has not been updated. When you look for the Senate Arctic caucus, the first search result that comes up is the announcement of the senate Arctic caucus, which came to be in 2015. I think if we want to look at what Congress could potentially do, or what the US needs to do in the future, to look at US Arctic interests, we need to see more transparency, and if it comes down to simply having a website with accessible information for people who are interested in what Congress is doing as it pertains to the Arctic, then I think that's a really good and simple starting point. Update your presence so that way people can learn more. That's a very simple and an easy challenge that one can accept is to really reinvigorate the online presence, so that way people can learn. Does that answer your question?

Liuba:

Thank you, yes. I've been wondering – this transparency issue is a very interesting one. Do you think that this happens, that the lack of transparency comes from the fact that the US Arctic policy is solely focused on the notion of security, climate security, energy security, whatever security it is, but do you think that this can be the root cause of this lack of transparency?



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Lillian:

That's a good question. I'm not really sure. In the book chapter, we mentioned that the US Arctic activities are taking one step forward, and two steps back in terms of how things are classified. Victoria and I did look at energy security, the security involved with icebreaking, and looked at hard security and soft security issues. We applied those terms in order to better contextualize some of the issues that fall underneath of those categories. I don't know if that really is determinative of the lack of transparency. As far as the websites go, I think the issue there is how committed are you? If you have the senator caucus, or the congressional Arctic Working Group, and if you're not regularly posting when a congressional delegation is going to Norway or Greenland or Canada – if those kinds of announcements are not being made somewhere that's easily accessible, what does that tell you about interests more broadly about America in the Arctic? I don't really know how to answer that question. The United States and the various entities that represent federal Arctic interest – this really needs to be seen as an interest. Not just something that's nominal, not just thinking about the Arctic as being part of America's backyard, but really looking at this at the forefront and recognizing that this is not just, a side issue, but this is a critical issue for the United States. What I will say is that in other parts of US interests in the Arctic, that is very much there. For example, if you were to look at the US Arctic Research Commission, if you were to look at the Arctic Council, and then specifically the State Department's Arctic lead in the Arctic Council, that information is there, and that I'd say is transparent. As far as it pertains to Congress, I think there definitely needs to be some more work done.

Liuba:

With commitment – with the Arctic, you have to be pretty much committed on all possible levels and on all possible topics. It doesn't really work if you're committed to security, but you're not really committed to climate change. The environment is so international, there are so many actors on so many levels, that you really have to be committed.

Lillian:

Let me just add first, if the United States is not, whether it's federal officials or something more broadly, if the US isn't raising attention of Indigenous issues of Alaska Native issues in the Arctic, whether it pertains to welfare or jobs, economy, infrastructure, up in Alaska, that needs to come first and foremost. We have American citizens, and we need to be inclusive of that conversation. The other thing that I want to mention, which is interesting, and I'll link this a little bit to transparency, but we're talking about Alaska here, but I'd also like to direct the attention over to the US state of Maine, over on the East Coast of the United States. Maine, of course, it's not an Arctic state; that only belongs to Alaska. The state of Maine has done some really interesting work in the last



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couple of years to position itself as perhaps the US's near-Arctic state, but in this case, a US state. What they've done is really interesting. Senator Angus King is part of the senate Arctic caucus. He's one of the co-founders with Senator Murkowski. You can look at that, and you can also look at what the state of Maine is doing at the economic level. There are some really interesting things to be seen there. I was in the state of Maine – oh, this would be last May 2019. I went up there, and just in one day, I had met with members of Maine National Guard, and I toured the Eimskip, which is an Icelandic shipping company. I also attended a conference, and it was for Arctic economic investment. All of this in one day; it was all focused on what Maine is doing to position itself as a player in this Arctic game. If you want to look for transparency, really fascinating, and perhaps a little bit off topic from this conversation about Congress, but if people are interested in looking at other ways that the US is articulating its Arctic interests, I think looking at that is a really interesting.

Romain:

I think it's super interesting. I was at the Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik, I think it was in probably 2015 2016, when Angus King and Lisa Murkowski were there announcing this new partnership, and that there was not a new partnership, but Maine seeing itself as a Nordic player. There was huge delegation from Maine as well at the Arctic Circle Assembly that year. They were talking about having a deep seaport and commercial links, too, with Eimskip, to Iceland, and also potentially to Greenland. Definitely what Maine is doing to place itself as a Nordic player, so to say, even though the term is an a bit cliché, definitely could be a role model for future US engagement towards the Arctic. Looking at the future now, what do you think are the next steps or how the situation could be improved? And perhaps to run this conversation up, where do you see the US Arctic engagement in 2030 and 2040?

Lillian:

That's a tough question. Where do I see the US in 2030 and 2040 is another question you could ask, in addition to where the US will be looking specifically at the Arctic. I can say a couple of things about this. If we're looking at why the US is suddenly so interested now as perhaps a way to determine how the US might be interested in the future, there's a lot of ways we could analyze that question, especially as we consider the connection between climate change in international relations. Is US interest right now about the Arctic itself? Is it about this narrative of great power competition? Is it a resurgence of great power competition? Or is it about perhaps domestic political interest, which is something that we were looking at in this book chapter? Is it about opportunities in the Arctic in the future? I would kind of want to evaluate those questions first, before I think about what might happen in 2030, or 2040. What's going to happen with the next elections, where US citizens will elect the next president, and Congress in respective states. That's something to consider. We have to consider what the interests might be,



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presently and going forward. Of course, that should include Indigenous welfare. Looking at the issues that Alaska Natives are facing up in Alaska, we have to think about environmental conservation, natural resource exploitation, and increasing commercial interest in Alaska, as well as maritime interests in the broader circumpolar Arctic. We have to think about threats. Threats can be climate change, or perhaps the perceived legitimacy of climate change, the perceived credibility of great power competition. Looking at transnational threats, whether they're state based or collective action problems. Then how will the US come to address those issues? Is it going to be multilateral cooperation? Is it going to be unilateral action? How important will the Arctic Council be going forward? Will there be a pivot to other types of security institutions or creation of new security institutions? There's a lot of talk in the media about conflict, and whether great power competition is a concern or a threat in the Arctic, or whether it's a spillover of tension elsewhere. There are so many things to think about, at least with how the US is assessing its interests and threats in the region, and how that will continue in 2030. I can't see into the future, of course. What I will say is that US Arctic policy hasn't actually changed since 2009 on paper. That was National Security Presidential [Directive] 66, and that came out in the very last days of the George W. Bush Administration. So that hasn't changed. We've seen continuity through the Obama Administration, and we've seen that continuity through the Trump administration. It could very well be that in the next couple of years, that that will endure: we'll still see that national security presidential 66, which is what the US Arctic Region policy is. We could see that that will continue to be in place. It's a matter of what a presidential administration will do with that, or what federal entities or the military will do. I'm not sure what's going to happen in 2030, but my hope is that US officials will continue to use the Arctic Council as a multilateral institution in which to work with the other Arctic members, as well as observers and Indigenous groups who are represented in the Arctic Council. Really my hope is that we will see that the Arctic Council endures in the next decade or two.

Other than that, one of the things that I really wanted to see and has happened was the reinstatement of some sort of US Arctic leader, and that has happened. I hope that that will not be taken away as it was in 2017. Hopefully, no, this office will be here to stay. Another thing, and again, this sort of touches more on my dissertation research in the book chapter, but if we're looking at what the US will do going forward, we also have to think about the military. There have been Coast Guard—well, there's been Defense Department Arctic strategies, there's been Coast guard Arctic strategies, Navy, and the Department of the Air Force just released its first Arctic strategy for the Air Force in the Space Force. Going forward, my hope is that we'll see more of this. We'll see that all of the services, including the Marine Corps and the army will provide their own strategic vision for the Arctic, because if we want to talk about having a coup, for the Arctic region, I think everybody needs to be thinking about their role and what they could do



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going forward, because that's really important for transparency. That was a very long answer. I don't know if it was an answer to your question. I hope it was.

Romain:

I think it was perfectly fine. Thanks a lot. You talk about contiguity between the Obama Administration since '09 and Trump Administration. I guess this is a view from the inside as a US Insider. From the outside, when we look at other bodies, like the Arctic Council, we see a lot of discontinuity. Do you think this could change with the election? Or do you think that there will be this continuity discontinuity discourse, even outside the US?

Lillian:

That's a good question. You bring up a really interesting point, looking at the US from the outside and not looking at it from American eyes, so to speak. You bring up a good point, because on paper, this 2009 policy has remained the same. But when we look at the actions of the Obama Administration, in comparison to the Trump Administration, we do see quite a bit of difference in the ways in which the US articulated its Arctic interests at the times. For example, to put very simply, the Obama Administration really focused on environmental conservation in the Arctic region. With the Trump administration, we see more of an interest in opening ANWAR, the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge, as well as talking about great powers, specifically Russia and China, in the Arctic region and what they're doing. With Russia, I think back to 2018 when US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo spoke before the Arctic Council in Finland, and he called out Russia and China as I believe aggressive powers in the Arctic region, or that they had interests that might run counter to some of the other Arctic states. That was really the first time that we've ever seen, at least in my research, the first time that we've ever seen in the post-Cold War era, this high level of a calling out of Russia and China in the Arctic by a senior American official. You're right, there absolutely is this sort of discontinuity between what we see on paper, and then the administrations that continue to exercise those interests from this 2009 policy. Going forward, will we see more of this continuity or discontinuity? It's an interesting conversation to have, and the various sort of circles in which I get to participate or observe conversations about the Arctic in the future— China does seem to occupy quite a quite a large part of those conversations. It could very well be that with President Biden in office, we might see more of the same of looking at China and Russia as potential cooperative partners, but if they continue to exercise interests that the US administration finds contrary to this idea of low tension in the region, then that could change. I'll just also say, just thinking back to President Obama and his intentions to keep the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge closed, we might see continuity there, since Biden was vice president at the time. The continuity discontinuity dilemma is an interesting one.



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Romain:

You mentioned Mike Pompeo's speech at the Arctic Council meeting, who do you think this rhetoric is for? Because the Arctic is very much a niche area of US engagement, it's not at the front of US foreign policy. Who do you think it's for when Pompeo says those quite aggressive and, could be characterized as outlandish, statements about China and Russia? Is it more for its domestic audience or for the Arctic Council, do you think?

Lillian:

I would say it's not necessarily for the other Arctic Council members, because the reaction to Secretary Pompeo's statements—it was quite vocal on Twitter, I'll say. Just looking at how everyone responded to that in Arctic academic community, as well as the policy community. I don't necessarily think the statements were made for the other Arctic Council members, and I don't know that I would even say it's for an American domestic audience, in the sense that very few Americans actively consider what the US is doing in the Arctic. I don't think that occupies a lot of attention for most Americans.

But I do think it might resonate to certain American audiences that are also concerned about this rhetoric of great power competition, or people who are wary of Russian activity, along the Russian coastline, as well as Chinese activities, whether it's in Russia, in Greenland, in Iceland, or even in the United States along the Alaskan or Maine border. It could be that it's speaking to that, because certainly if we were to look at the national security strategy or national defense strategies that were published under the Trump Administration, which really articulate this rhetoric of great power competition, then it certainly fits within that audience and the people who would be reading that.

To answer your question, definitely I don't think it was as receptive on Arctic Council ears.

Liuba

Let's hope the future brings a change in this rhetoric, and it will somehow go into a more friendly way and more cooperative, even though you never know what will happen, as this year has taught us. Whatever the changes are, I hope that they will be positive rather than negative, especially in regards to your research and your future work. It will be really exciting to see where your academic path leads you and where you end up after your dissertation is done.

Lillian:

It could be exciting!

Liuba:

We're all looking forward to reading it. Thank you so much for your deep insights and for such a nice conversation, Lillian.



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Romain:

Thank you so much!

Lillian:

Thank you for having me!

[Transcribed by TAI Research Assistant Mariel Kieval]