Bridging the Gap – Why Transatlantic Security Starts at the Local Level

Interview between Joshua Burgin (AGS) and Neele Henry Seifert (EPIS), 24 March 2026

Neele Henry Seifert: Joshua, thank you for taking the time to speak with EPIS. You've spent roughly 25 years working at the intersection of politics and international security—what were the defining moments of your career?

Joshua Burgin: I'd go back to the beginning. Two formative experiences shaped my path. The first was working on a political campaign at 15, which gave me a practical understanding of how political power is built—on the ground, through direct engagement. The second was living in Moscow in 1993, teaching English and American history. That experience exposed me to international politics in a very immediate way and challenged how I understood political systems and perspectives.

Those experiences shaped everything that followed. I became deeply involved in U.S. politics—campaign consulting, advising candidates, running for office—always grounded in grassroots work. At the same time, I maintained a strong international focus. I've worked in Russia and Kazakhstan, spent time across Central and Eastern Europe, and observed elections in countries like Ukraine, Georgia, and Romania. That combination—domestic political practice and international exposure—has shaped how I approach my work today.

Neele Henry Seifert: Was there a specific moment when you decided to build something of your own?

Joshua Burgin: I wouldn't frame it as building something for myself. It came from recognizing a structural gap—something that I encountered repeatedly over time. Americans and Europeans don't know each other as well as they should, and when I say that, I mean specifically elected officials, not just the general public.

The United States and Europe are deeply interconnected—historically, culturally, linguistically. There are shared traditions and shared political foundations. And yet, when you look at how policymakers actually interact, much of that connection is surprisingly thin. What we tend to see is that our understanding of each other is filtered through headlines and top-level figures—presidents, prime ministers, major political events—when in reality policymaking is much more diffuse and network-driven.

We measure things like foreign direct investment and trade flows, but we don't measure human connectivity—relationships, friendships, networks of trust. That may sound secondary, but in my view it is fundamental. The ability to pick up the phone, to call a peer in another country, to ask a question or share an insight—that is what actually sustains cooperation over time.

After years of working across both the U.S. and Europe and having hundreds of conversations, I found it remarkably difficult to identify elected officials who could name even a handful of counterparts across the Atlantic with whom they had a direct, working

relationship. In a world that is as technologically connected as ours, where communication barriers are effectively gone, that lack of connection is, to me, unfathomable.

So the vision was not about building something for its own sake—it was about addressing that gap, about creating structures and opportunities that enable those relationships to form and persist over time.

Neele Henry Seifert: You focus on state and local leadership, which is not the traditional entry point into global security. How does your perspective differ?

Joshua Burgin: I'll be a bit controversial here, because I think this is an area where assumptions don't fully match reality. There is a tendency to think of global politics as something that starts and ends at the national level, but in the U.S. system, that's not how leadership actually develops.

There is a very clear pipeline—individuals move from city councils to state legislatures and eventually to Congress. The vast majority of national-level leaders have spent years, if not decades, operating at the local or state level first. That's where they build their networks, where they form their perspectives, and where they develop their political instincts.

Some actors have understood this dynamic for a long time and have engaged that pipeline early—building relationships with future policymakers before they reach positions of national authority. Others, however, tend to focus almost exclusively on established elites, on think tanks, and on highly visible policy circles, particularly in Washington.

What I have observed—especially in the transatlantic context—is that there is comparatively little structured engagement with those who are actually on the pathway to becoming future leaders. That represents a missed opportunity.

Neele Henry Seifert: What do you think current systems are getting wrong when it comes to security policy?

Joshua Burgin: There's a disconnect between policymaking and execution. Many policymakers operate at a strategic level without sustained exposure to how systems function in practice. But policy only matters if it can be implemented.

At the same time, the threat landscape is becoming more complex—greater coordination between authoritarian states, cyber capabilities, hybrid threats. Yet local leaders—those closest to infrastructure and implementation—are often not integrated into these discussions.

That creates a structural gap. These leaders are directly affected by these threats and will often move into higher office. If they're not exposed early, the system is less prepared.

Neele Henry Seifert: What can local officials gain from these connections?

Joshua Burgin: It's about moving from abstraction to personal relevance. If something is distant, it remains a headline. But once there is a personal connection, it becomes real.

That changes behavior. It increases engagement and can translate into political action. Relationship-building isn't just a soft factor—it has concrete implications for how decisions are made.

Neele Henry Seifert: And how does the Alliance for Global Security address this gap?

Joshua Burgin: We're building a structured set of engagement opportunities that create continuity. First, the AGS Frontiers Forum in Tampa. Second, engagement with major conferences like the Warsaw Security Forum. Third, a transatlantic study visit to Taiwan.

The Taiwan program is particularly valuable because it places participants in a strategically relevant and unfamiliar context. They engage with government actors, learn about cross-strait dynamics, and explore crisis preparedness.

But the most important outcome is the network. Participants leave with lasting connections—across the Atlantic and on the ground in Taiwan—which they can draw on in the future.

Neele Henry Seifert: We are talking a lot about creating cross-national ties. Was cutting funding for USAID a mistake?

Joshua Burgin: It's a complex issue. There were real concerns about inefficiencies and mission creep, and those concerns have existed for quite some time. At the same time, the way the changes were implemented led to the loss of valuable programs and expertise.

From my perspective, a more targeted and gradual reform might have preserved some of that capacity while still addressing the underlying issues. But I also understand the argument that incremental reforms often struggle to take hold.

What matters going forward is whether some of that capability—particularly in terms of engagement and relationship-building—can be rebuilt in a more focused way, because the need for it remains.

Neele Henry Seifert: What do you see as the most underestimated threat today?

Joshua Burgin: It's less about a single threat and more about fragmented awareness. A lot of relevant information—especially in the cyber domain—is already available, but it's not fully integrated into decision-making.

We are seeing signs of actors gaining access to systems, potentially preparing for future disruption. A coordinated event affecting infrastructure, communications, and information systems is entirely plausible.

If it happens, it will likely be framed as unexpected, but many indicators are already visible. The real issue is that responsibility has not kept pace with how widely these risks are distributed.

Neele Henry Seifert: Where do you see students and young leaders stepping in?

Joshua Burgin: Young people are already stepping into this space. There's a clear shift—students today are far more aware of security issues than even a few years ago.

These challenges will define the coming decades, which means this generation will ultimately take responsibility for addressing them.

That makes early exposure and relationship-building critical. These are not issues that can be tackled in isolation—they require cooperation, and cooperation depends on networks that take time to build.

Neele Henry Seifert: Thank you so much, Joshua, for taking the time to speak with us.

Joshua Burgin: Thank you, Neele. I've had the chance to look at your work, and I'm genuinely impressed by the leadership you and your colleagues are demonstrating. It's meaningful, especially at this moment in time.

Neele Henry Seifert: Thank you, we really appreciate that.