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WEBINAR

THE ART OF WAR IN AN AGE OF PEACE

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. COOPER: Hi, everybody. Welcome. It's good to be here this morning with Michael O'Hanlon and Michele Flournoy for the rolling launch of Michael's new book, "The Art of War in an Age of Peace: U.S. Grand Strategy and Resolute Restraint." Neither of these two need much of an introduction. So, I'm going to be very brief so that we can get to our talk.

Michael is a senior fellow and director of Research and Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution, where he specializes in U.S. defense strategy, the use of military force, and American national security policy. He has a bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D., all from Princeton in the physical sciences. He served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Congo Kinshasa, the former Zaire, from 1982 to 1984, where he taught college and high school physics in French. And I really kind of thought that was the coolest thing on your file, Michael.

Michele really needs no introduction. She is a former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, and one of the highest-ranking members -- women ever to work in that male bastion that is the Pentagon. She is co-founder and managing partner of WestExec Advisors. She also co-founded the Center for New American Security. She has a bachelor's degree from Harvard and a master's from Oxford. When I first started on the Pentagon beat, she was literally my first port of call to try and get smart on the issues.

So, welcome to you both. I am really happy to be here with you this morning. And I think, or at least I hope, that we are in the waning days of Zoom panels and soon we can all start doing things like this in person. Michael, given that you are on book tour, I am sure you definitely feel that way. What's it like talking about your book virtually for instance?

MR. O'HANLON: Well, with you two, it would be a lot more fun in person. Although I am thrilled that we, in this Zoom world, wind up getting people from all over the world in the various events that we do. And, of course, that's one of the things I'm sure we'll all try to continue even as we get back to face-to-face. Let me thank both of you, just two of my favorite people in the national security field and good friends. And, you know, you're both very kind to do this event. And, of course, it's not just about my book, but more generally, the question of U.S. grand strategy, national security strategy at a crucial moment. So, I'm very grateful.

MS. COOPER: Okay. So, we should just go ahead and get started. So, Michael, your book is both really high elevation and expansive, *The Art of War*, and quite detailed and specific. But one of the biggest themes appears to be this idea of resolute restraint, as you call it, in the American prosecution of war. Can you walk us through sort of some of the main arguments that you lay out here, and in particular, this idea that the United States must learn to limit its ambitions even while its defending core interests?

MR. O'HANLON: Yeah, thanks, Helene. So, just a word of explanation as to why I decided to write this book because it sort of, might feel like sort of a passionate defense of the middle ground, and maybe it is. But I also felt that it was worth doing because there are ideas out there reflected in high level political and policy dialog that I think would pull too far in one direction or another.

So, Donald Trump wanted to break off a lot of alliances. And even though he did it or proposed it in his very Trumpian way, there are a lot of academics who essentially agree with his view that the United States has too many commitments around the world. I want to take on that argument, that so-called offshore balancing argument.

But I also wanted to take on the argument that basically says the world is in such peril today, that we have to be hypervigilant and really try to meet very firmly and maybe even with military force, even the smallest potential aggressions by China or Russia because if we don't, we risk whetting their appetite the same way, of course, that Hitler's appetite was wetted by irresolute response in the 1930s. And I think we could make a mistake if we think that way too much. Especially if we wind up drawing first blood in a superpower crisis where there might be other means of walking back the hostilities or preventing them.

And I also, since we're doing this event while President Biden is meeting with President Putin and there's a lot of discussion of whether Ukraine should be in NATO as a way to protect it. My emphatic answer is no. I really feel that we have enough alliances and especially that NATO has grown enough. So that's an example of where I think we need to be restrained.

But I want to be resolute in defending the existing 29 NATO allies that we have in this alliance of 30 members. I want to be resolute and I know Michele does too. She's been a voice for this for a long time now. Resolute in defending our access in the Western Pacific, for example, where China

is trying to push back and push people out.

And so, when it comes to the core security of our allies when it comes to access to the sea lanes and airways, when it comes to preventing weapons of mass destruction from spreading, on those issues, I do want to be resolute. And I think there's a very powerful case for doing so.

I'll finish my opening spiel here by appealing to political scientists in the crowd who often create regressions based on a lot of data points. And now, those are often very good, but they sometimes treat every data point as equally important. And to me, there are three big data points that inform my world view more than any others. The fact that World War I happened when we were not engaged in Eurasia. The fact that World War II happened when we were not engaged militarily in Eurasia. And the fact that World War III did not happen largely because we were engaged. And we had formed alliances in East Asia and Western Europe. So, the resolute part of the strategy is essential. And I'm strongly in disagreement with the offshore balancing crowd, even as I believe that we've extended some of our alliances enough and need to look for some ways perhaps to respond to a security crisis with Russia and China that may in the first instance not require rapid military escalation.

MS. COOPER: This is so interesting. I have like a billion questions I want to like throw at you just from your opening remarks. And I do want to get to what's going on in Europe right now on Biden's visit and his meeting tomorrow with Putin. But one thing that jumps out at me in what you just said, and Michele, I would direct this at you. I mean, at the same time, Michael, it sounds like you're saying we shouldn't be getting involved in piddly stuff, but you're also saying that we should be tackling China and the South China and the East China Sea. Michele, do you see a discrepancy there or is that, I mean, because how can you -- can we make the argument that these South China Sea Islands are anything but kind of piddly?

MS. FLOURNOY: So, I actually really like the framework of resolute restraint because I do think, you know, given the last four years and the confusion it created internationally, and frankly, at home, we have to start by restating and clarifying to ourselves and then to others, both allies and potential adversaries, how do we define our interests? What is it that we are resolved to protect and defend? And I do think that that includes not only treaty allies, but also elements of international order that are really important to preserving the sort of -- our ability to trade freely. To, you know, make sure

that disputes over territory or access to resources are resolved peacefully, not just, you know, might makes right kind of, you know, Hobbesian world.

And so, in that context, those little islands do matter. It's not that it's territory, it's what they represent. And they represent China flouting, you know, just flagrantly violating the international rules of the road that are enshrined in a treaty. And sort of using, taking unilateral action to change the status quo in ways that are illegal according to international law.

Now, I think we do need to pushback on that. So, I like the idea of the resolute piece. But I also like restraint in the sense that, you know, when you look at the great power competition, particularly with China, but also with Russia, different case, but both are nuclear powers. You know, the number one objective here has to be trying to deter conflict in the first place. How do we convince them that we can deny their success in any aggression? Or have the ability to impose such costs that they really decide it's not work it.

That is a more restrained approach. It does require us investing to make sure that if it comes to it, we can prosecute a campaign to reverse that aggression or to impose those costs. But it is, you know, given the experiences of the last 20 years where we were very ambitious in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, fell short of our goals for all kinds of reasons that are for another conversation. But in the face of really competing with other nuclear powers, I think we have to be sort of clear in our intention and our resolve, very focused in our objectives, and then very ambitious in how we invest in the capabilities needed to underwrite deterrents and effecting our calculus.

So, I don't think we should be restrained in aggressively pursuing the transformation of the U.S. military, for example, but I don't think that's what Mike was saying. We need to be humble and restrained and informed by history in terms of how we actually employ force in future crises.

MS. COOPER: Well, this is great. Given that framework then and let me just insert a quick news question in here for both of you before we go back to the discussion of "The Art of War." We have Biden and Putin summit tomorrow in Geneva. Expectations are insane since this is the first with the two of them as leaders. But I think we all know that chances are we're not going to see something major coming out tomorrow. I think we've been conditioned by Trump, by the four years of the Trump administration, to expect craziness. But what sort of -- how should we look at this summit tomorrow

between particularly given the framing of your book, Michael. And I'd like to direct this question to both of you. How should we be looking at tomorrow? And what should we -- what's the best we could hope to come out of it?

MR. O'HANLON: Well, I think some of what is going to come out of it is going to be straightforward and we should keep expectations low. President Biden needs to be clear about what America finds objectionable in recent Russian behavior. Vladimir Putin needs to hear it face-to-face from Joe Biden. It's been said before. There won't be too many surprises nor should we expect Putin to accept blame or apologize or promise any different behavior in the future. So, that's going to be a matter-of-fact conversation. It would be a mistake to have high expectations.

But what I would hope is that the Biden administration would also recognize that it needs to think afresh about an integrated Russia policy, which I haven't yet seen. I've seen a clearer sense of a new emergent policy towards Asia where Michele's thinking continues to reverberate and benefit us going back to when she and others helped create the rebalance or the pivot 10 years ago. And where our good friend, Kurt Campbell and others continue to do excellent things at the National Security Council.

But I haven't yet seen the same integrated strategy towards Russia. And, therefore, you see little things take on disproportionate importance. Like when we lifted the sanctions on companies that are completing the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea. It seemed like a unilateral concession to Germany and Russia by the Biden team. And I didn't understand that. And then you get into the sort of name-calling exchanges about who's a bigger killer between President Biden and President Putin.

I want to see the conversation elevate. And what I'd like to see is a reconsideration of a security architecture for Eastern Europe that does not require further NATO expansion, but also makes Russia keep its hands off, and get out of places like the Donbas. The only way I believe to start that process going, realistically, is perhaps to consider what you might call a Track 1.5 Dialogue. And I would propose people like Sam Nunn, former Senator Nunn, and others on the Russian side who have an historical perspective on this relationship. And can talk and propose some ideas without it seeming like they're either speaking for their government or giving a unilateral concession or revealing some kind of weakness. Give some plausible deniability to the governments and see if a new idea for how to diffuse

the tension in Eastern Europe can be arrived at.

We know we're not going to have good relations with Vladimir Putin. He's just not a person that we can or should ever expect to trust or admire. But we can at least look for a new framework for security relations in that part of the world that would be less dangerous. And I think this kind of a Track 1.5 Dialogue may be the best way to start.

MS. FLOURNOY: Yeah, I would just add that I think that the President's trip is actually kind of laying the groundwork to potentially get to a more integrated or strategic policy towards Russia. You know, starting with some very frank behind closed doors conversations with our closest allies about what they've been experiencing, how they see Russia. Trying to build some alignment on how do we want to go forward vis-a-vis Putin and Russia together.

I think it's very clear there's no -- and frankly, expectation of or interest in a reset. And I think the second thing he's doing he's looking to engage Putin to do the resolve part or resolute part of Mike's suggestion. I mean, this is going to be a meeting where Biden spends a lot of time laying out, you know, how the U.S. views Russian behavior in various areas from Ukraine to cyberattacks on the U.S. that are affecting average Americans, to their lack of holding, you know, the cyber criminals operating on their soil accountable, to their treatment of Navalny, and now they're, you know, banning the opposition movement, and on and on.

So, and then, you know, but also raising, look, you know, there's some areas here where you're playing with fire. And through miscalculation, we could have a crisis erupt into something much more serious. Let's talk about, I think, in addition possibly to Track 1.5, I think they're going to propose formal strategic stability talks between the U.S. and the Russian governments to talk about things, not only nuclear issues and arms control, but potentially, you know, actions in space or cyberspace that could inadvertently escalate into some kind of larger crisis.

So, this is really a, you know, I think a very, you know, these are our concerns kind of meeting. I think there's very low expectations that, you know, Putin as the master of chaos and so forth are going to suddenly change his stripes. But, you know, any U.S. president has to at least try to reduce these tensions and get this relationship on a less unpredictable or less unstable kind of course. You know, because that's, you know, that's very much in our interests and those of our allies as well.

MS. COOPER: Well, you know, when you were talking just now about, you know, a quick escalation, a crisis happening, and that's the first thing I thought about was Ukraine when Putin sent all those, massed all those troops at the border a couple of months ago and we were pretty soon people at the Pentagon immediately starting talking about what happens if something goes wrong. You know, you could easily see this escalating.

So, for both of you then, I'm so intrigued by this whole idea of restraint. And I'm curious, Michael, about what the adoption of this kind of restraint would do to the overall idea of American exceptionalism?

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Helene. You know, a couple of things. First, let me give a nod to another school of thought in academia, because I criticized offshore balancing a minute ago. And offshore balancing basically means retrenchment, pullback from alliances, eliminate alliances. Restraint can mean a number of things. Sometimes it means the same thing in the academic circles as offshore balancing. Other times it just means be more careful about when and where you use force.

And I think a lot of academics that I know were understandably and perhaps presciently skeptical of the Iraq invasion in 2003. And I want to tip my cap to them. And I think the, you know, the element of restraint in a lot of their thinking is worth trying to follow through on. But American exceptionalism is still a concept that is real in the sense that whether we are smarter than anybody else or nicer or more ethical, and I, frankly, doubt it, at least in regard to other major democracies. I do think that we are exceptionally placed on this planet sort of the way Madeleine Albright used to say with the phrase of an indispensable nation.

We are a big democracy here in North America. Safe, more or less, within our borders because we have oceans and Canada and Mexico on our various sides. Most countries would, you know, be thrilled to have that kind of geostrategic positioning. We're big. We're still the world's largest economy by classic GDP measure. One of the two biggest overall. We are still the world's greatest science and technology innovator. Even if China's catching up and the European Union is strong as well.

We have far and away the largest military. We have a system of alliances, which I don't want to make any larger, but it's still good in the sense that it anchors us to keep pieces of terrain in Eurasia. And so, we are exceptional. There's no other country that can or does play that kind of a role

with amount of power and that kind of positioning. You know, we're close enough to Eurasia that we can go help solve its security problems. We're far enough away from Eurasia that nobody thinks we really have imperialistic designs on their territory. And if the worst thing they have to complain about is that we overthrew Saddam Hussein without enough caution, one of the world's worst dictators of the late 20th Century, that's not a particularly damning complaint in the, you know, scheme of history of how nation states behave towards each other.

So, we are exceptional. And there's no other organization on earth nor other country that can play this backstopping role and stabilize some key theatres. Another way to put it, by the way -- and I look forward to Michele's thoughts on this question as well, of course -- is that proximity does not necessarily breed familiarity or -- well, it does breed familiarity, but it doesn't necessarily breed problem solving, it can breed contempt.

In Northeast Asia, China, Japan, and Korea prove day in and day out they still have a lot of issues dating back to history. And I don't know that they would sort them out better without us. In Europe, Putin would welcome less of an American role on the continent because then he could start to divide and conquer and try to coerce smaller states near his borders into doing his way. I'm not saying he's going invade them militarily if we leave. But I think he would look for ways to coerce.

And so, the fact that we have this ability to anchor ourselves to the other -- to the opposite extremes of Eurasia with big alliances or important allies, and sort of uphold the rules of the road is crucially significant and it's only possible because of the attributes this country has. And American exceptionalism doesn't mean you have to think that we are better, smarter, more ethical or superior innately. It means that you recognize that because of our constitution, our location, our demographics, our melting pot and just who we are as a country, we can do things nobody else can. And that's going to be true, I believe, for quite some time.

MS. FLOURNOY: Yeah, I would agree with the premise that we still have a pretty unique leadership role to play. And that it's even more important in an era of transnational threats like climate change or, you know, preventing the next pandemic, or with the scope and scale of a rising China. A power coming basically rising in economic and military and influence, of power and influence, while also fundamentally questioning all of the basics of the rules-based order that have, you know, governed how

we work as an international community for the last, you know, 75 years.

So, I think it's really important. The thing that I think that's changed is that we can't just assume that we will remain that leader. I think the last four years have certainly shaken the confidence of our allies. We have to regain that confidence and trust. But given what China is doing, how they're investing and how they're playing their cards, we have to seriously invest in competing economically, technologically in key areas, and militarily to have the confidence that we can deter and defeat aggression if we have to in the future. So, we can't rest on our laurels.

And, you know, when I think about restraint, it's also it's more -- maybe I'm reading too much into your term, Michael, because I don't agree with the school that says restraint is about pulling away from your commitments --

MR. O'HANLON: Right.

MS. FLOURNOY: -- and staying at home. But I do think we have to really suppress our appetite in certain areas so that we can put more bandwidth, more resources, more energy on retooling, reshaping the military to be fit for purpose in the future. Because we're going to ask them to do very different things in very different ways even for deterrence than what they've honed and, you know, honed themselves and focused on for the last 20.

So, you need to, you know, you can't have troops meeting themselves, coming and going from CENTCOM everyday and expect them to develop new concepts, experiment and test with those, and then retrain to work in the Indo-Pacific in a largely maritime and air environment. You know, you have -- there has to be some risk management here. And I think that does, you know, call for a measure of restraint day to day and really focusing on where do we prioritize, and where do we accept and manage some risk so that we can be ready for that future, which is here.

MS. COOPER: I had to unmute. It's funny you guys both for a second there both sounded a little like Jim Mattis when he used to argue that what distinguished us from the Russians was that we have allies. But, Michele, you referenced the pandemic. Where does COVID fit in here? Michael argues that the pandemic had come to be seen as more significant than 911. And if that is the case, what kind of lessons should the Pentagon, for instance, the Department of Defense, take from that when they look at maintaining, you know, its own relevance, you know, in America's, you know, defense authority?

MS. FLOURNOY: Yes. So, I mean, the pandemic, I think, will go down in history as, you know, probably one of the most impactful, you know, events that, you know, in a century or more, certainly. And although we feel like we're sort of turning the corner in the United States. We still have more work to do but we're kind of, you know, getting to a new place. The rest of the world is just cycling through the worst of it. And it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. So, I do think there's an incredible leadership opportunity for the United States to try to muster, as we saw Biden try to do at the G7, you know, to muster donations from the developed world to the developing world in terms of vaccines and so forth.

I also think that we will need to make as, you know, the international community, much greater investment in our public health infrastructure, in strengthening our surveillance ability, our detection ability. We want to be able to prevent the next pandemic -- and there will be a next one -- much more effectively than we handled it this time around. And that's going to require investment.

But I do think that a lot of these investments that we need to make, whether it's in public health, whether it's in our own technological competitiveness. You know, it's setting the foundations for the U.S. to continue to lead in the world. And I think for our, you know, our ability to influence things and hopefully prevent, you know, conflict in the future.

So, yes, those things will compete for dollars, but right now I feel like the best thing we can do for our competitiveness internationally is invest in the drivers of our competitiveness at home while also maintaining the, you know, the foreign policy tools we need to be effective. And that includes a strong military.

MR. O'HANLON: Just to add a quick word.

MS. COOPER: Okay.

MR. O'HANLON: You know, going back to the Obama Pentagon and General Dunford, they talked about a 4+1 threat framework that you're both familiar with. And, of course, that was to get us away from just focusing on the smaller, more extreme states like Iraq and North Korea, which had to some extent been our first approximation of post-cold war defense planning. And so, the 4+1, of course, is Russia and China, North Korea, Iran, and then transnational terrorism or extremism.

And what I proposed in the book is, and it's no great huge insight, but it's just a useful

way for me to organize my own thoughts, is that we adopt a second 4+1. Keep the original 4+1 because those threats haven't gone away. Some of them may be exacerbated by the new 4+1, but the new 4+1 includes biological threats, whether manmade or a pandemic, includes nuclear proliferation, climate threats, digital threats. And then the last piece that Michele was just getting out, our internal strength or lack thereof, our internal fissures and centrifugal forces politically and otherwise, economically, scientifically within our society. So, strengthening America's foundations, I agree very much, has to be central not only for our own domestic happiness here, but for our national power and national security.

MS. COOPER: We are getting quite a few questions coming from the audience so I'm going to go to one of them. This is from Giorgi Antadze, who is the Georgian Parliamentary Research Center Acting Director, for Michael. You argue that the U.S. should avoid costly mistakes like expanding NATO to include new members. On the other hand, NATO promised Georgia that doors remain open and one day we will be a member. According to your vision, which really reminds me of some realistic geopolitical vision of international relations, a small state like us will remain alone against states like Russia. What is your solution then for countries like Georgia, and I would maybe throw Ukraine in there too?

MR. O'HANLON: Fantastic question. And I do think that we have some obligation to think about it here in the United States because going back to 2008 and the Bucharest Summit under President Bush, we promised Ukraine and Georgia eventual membership. We gave no timetable, no interim security guarantee, but we did say we would someday plan to include them.

However, I am going to say, first of all, I don't think that formal American alliances are something we have to feel obliged to extend to any country that might wish for them. We don't have enough power to defend everyone on earth. If I had been in the Bush administration in 2008, I would have argued against that promise. But I also believe that by making that promise, we've in some ways gotten the worst of all worlds. We painted a giant bullseye on the back of both Georgia and Ukraine because Putin knows we want to bring them in or at least that some Westerners would like to. And therefore, he tries to destabilize those countries to keep them ineligible for any near-term membership.

So, the only way out of this conundrum to mind is to enlarge the conversation and allow for some new kind of security order that would require Putin and Russia to pull their forces verifiably out

of places like northern Georgia and eastern Ukraine, if they want sanctions relief. And if they want our commitment to this new order that will not extend NATO further into the former Soviet space. I think if we have the right dialog and concept for that, we can actually do a better job of helping Georgia and Ukraine than we have the last 13 years where, again, I think we to some extent, created perverse incentives that have increased the likelihood that Putin would look to destabilize those countries.

So, I want a new concept for essentially nonalignment of the countries that are presently east of NATO and, you know, in that former Soviet space.

MS. COOPER: Would you formally tell them then that, okay, so, forget about what we -- forget about the promises this whole track for NATO membership, that's off the table? Or how do you -- how would that actually work out?

MR. O'HANLON: Yeah, I think you'd have to be very careful if you were in government doing this because you don't want to give that unilateral concession to Putin. That needs to be part of the equation, part of the framework. And the premise here is that if we are partially responsive to Russia's security concerns -- not that Russia has anything to fear from NATO -- but human beings are proud and there's a psychology about this too. And if we're going to try to be partially responsive, we expect that Russia will, in fact, be willing to compromise and work with us to assure the security of those countries.

So, to the extent that Russia invalidates that premise, we may have to reconsider. So, to me the idea of a new security order only makes sense if you get the whole thing, all the pieces, with compromise and an effort to work together from everyone. For Russia, that means verifiable pullout of its forces in eastern Ukraine and northern Georgia and recognizing that those countries have the right to join any other organization if they wish and if they qualify, including perhaps someday the European Union.

MS. COOPER: And but in return, Russia is going to want NATO not at its doorstep. I mean, that's why they're acting up. It's because we've gone from, you know, where we were back, you know, 25 years ago to right, literally on their border.

MR. O'HANLON: Part of it. I don't want to blame us too much. I mean, I agree with some of that, but I also think, you know, Russian pride and just human beings being what they are, you know, there is going to be a natural aversion to reaction to the alliance that was set up to compete with you in the cold war, now trying to expand right up to your doorstep. On the other hand, Putin didn't have to

behave the way he did. He didn't have to aggress against these countries. He didn't have to squelch opposition within his own country. He didn't have to threaten war against NATO. Michele has lived a lot of this, you know, and had to deal with this, you know, in a way where American and Western lives were at risk because of Russian behavior. I'm not going to get up here and defend Vladimir Putin just because we might have been slightly off-putting in his mind with expansion of NATO. But I do think that we should maybe ask whether 30 members is now enough.

MS. COOPER: Okay. This next question is from Genie Giao Nguyen, Voice of Vietnamese Americans, President. This is for both Dr. O'Hanlon and former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy. Your whole title is there, Michele. What is your most possible scenario in the South China Sea? What is the best strategic position for the U.S. to win more than has already been waged by the CCP?

MS. FLOURNOY: So, the scenario that I worry about most is some kind of conflict that comes from this fundamental miscalculation on the part of Beijing. I think right now if you were to turn on the nightly news in Beijing, you'd hear a constant narrative of U.S. decline. The U.S. mishandled COVID. You know, our economy's a shambles. We are tearing ourselves apart, you know, in terms of our own polarization and divisions. Look at January 6. They play that tape over and over again. You know, America's down. They're out. They're not getting up. And so now is our moment to really come into our own as the predominant power in the region.

And if that is your mindset, that is going to make you lean forward and possibly take some risks that you really shouldn't take. So, I think, you know, they are likely right now underestimating our resolve. They are underestimating our staying power in the region and our commitment to the region. They are underestimating our resilience that if one thing that the United States is, is resilient. We come out of crises. We pick ourselves up. We get stronger. We come back.

And so, I think the biggest risk in the near-term is Chinese miscalculation that they can get away with something through coercion or even use of force and not expect a response. And yet, finding they get a response. And suddenly you're in an escalating situation. So, again, it puts a premium on the relevance of deterrents, which is clear communication about our resolve and what we will defend. And clear investment in the capabilities we need to do that. Whether it's demonstrating how we could use

current capabilities to impose costs and deny their success, or whether it's clear signals in how we're investing in the budget and the capabilities we'll need to do that in the future.

So, I think, so, that's a long way of saying I think the biggest risk is one of miscalculation. And that there are things we can do to reduce that risk. And I'm hopeful that, you know, on the administration trips to Asia and its work with the quad, we will see more of that.

MS. COOPER: Okay. Then staying on the China topic. Michael, I suspect I know how you're going to answer this one, but I'm going to pose it anyway because it's provocative if nothing else from Kent Wiedemann. Do you think the U.S. should make Taiwan a formal ally and advance its independence from China?

MR. O'HANLON: No, I would not. But on the issue of strategic ambiguity, I do think there's an interesting point here that Richard Haass of the Council on Foreign Relations and proponents of eliminating the ambiguity have raised. I wouldn't go quite as far as they do in the sense that I don't want to embolden Taiwan to think that it gets, you know, a get out of jail free card. And I also don't think that militarily we can dominate China near Taiwan the way we used to have the capability.

And, therefore, the combat scenarios that it would ensue from an actual fight over Taiwan, get very complicated. And I think they get global. And, therefore, I think we're on the verge of all-out superpower war potentially if we fight over Taiwan. So, I don't want to do anything that would run the risk of increasing that kind of scenario.

But I think where strategic ambiguity could be reconceptualized. If China were to attack Taiwan, let's say with a blockade and cyberattack and who knows what else, I think China has to know that there's no going back to business as usual after that. And we will respond in some big way. And what I would submit is that the kind of economic punishments that the Trump presidency initiated, well, or intensified against China, those would be sort of small potatoes compared to the decoupling economically that would have to happen if China were truly to attack Taiwan with military force. And, you know, some of that you could -- some of that punishment strategy you could unwind if China were willing to relent and end the blockade. But there's no way that we can be indifferent to that scenario even if in some sense Taiwan causes it.

So, in that sense, Richard Haass, I think is right. That this notion that we might or might

not respond. Militarily, I'm not sure if we would respond to each and every scenario. But in some broader national power sense, including economic tools, we would have to respond, and I think we surely would. And China should know it. China shouldn't think that there is some way it can get this just so where America keeps the 7th Fleet out long enough that it achieves its military goals and otherwise we leave them alone diplomatically and economically. I think there has to be a severe economic punishment strategy if nothing else as a means of bolstering deterrence.

MS. FLOURNOY: Can I just add a point here, Helene? I mean, one of the challenges for deterring China is we really don't understand them and their strategic calculus very well. Nor do they understand us. I mean, with the Soviet Union we had delegates and, you know, hundreds, thousands of academics writing about the Soviet calculus in deterrence. And we had some sense of what they value and, you know, some of which was right and then as historical archives are open, some of which was wrong.

But with China, it's just it's a much more nascent stage. And I'll give you an example. I mean, their military doctrine starts with says, you know, we're going to stop the U.S. from projecting power into the region with massive attacks on cyber infrastructure around military bases and attacks on our assets in space. Well, guess what, if you attack critical infrastructure like electrical grids around military bases, you're going to affect power to hospitals. You going to affect -- people are going to, Americans are going, civilians are going to actually die in that case. And if they think that that's going to lessen an American president's resolve to respond as opposed to actually increase it? So, there's some fundamental misunderstandings and miscalculations baked-in to their approach. And I think we need to have some channels for dialog to make them aware of that and to get them to try to think twice about that because that, again, very real risks of miscalculation.

MS. COOPER: Well, staying on the China topic then, Michael argues in his book. Michael, you argue in your book that, for instance, if China attacks Taiwan, the United States should move quickly to help defend the island without then going into -- without believing that we need to then go into a wider war -- go into a wider war with China or we have to defeat China in a wider war. How do you do -- how can you even manage that?

MR. O'HANLON: Well, it all depends, of course, on the scenario. And what I was

postulating in that part of the book was the idea of a Chinese blockade that perhaps begins as a partial blockade and they tolerate a certain amount of traffic, you know, medicine or basics. But they try to basically say to Taiwan, listen, because we've caught you moving towards independence, hypothetically, we are going to make you pay a severe economic price that you cannot endure and you will have to rethink your ways to withdraw that pledge to declare independence next year. Whatever the scenario may be.

But I'm thinking of a naval blockade maybe backed up by cyberattack against Taiwan. And in that kind of a scenario, rather than have the United States go in and declare that we with perhaps the Taiwan and Japanese navies will open up those sea lanes by force, if necessary, which means that we might have to be the first ones to draw blood against the Chinese in the scenario where they might not have yet drawn blood against us. Rather than have that be our only plausible first step, I would like to have options that include putting pressure on the Chinese use of the sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. Maybe even having American military assets that could try to minimize any casualties onboard the crews of those kinds of ships and interfere with China's economic lifelines.

So, that's just the kind of capability. And then also combine that with economic punishment, which requires the kind of preparation for resilience that Michele perhaps was alluding to earlier on the part of the United States and its allies. We get into an economic war with China, we need to have prepared so that we're not so dependent on their rare earth metals or semiconductors or anything else that they can make us cry uncle before we can make them rethink their coercive strategy. That's the kind of scenario I was thinking about.

MS. COOPER: We just got a three-minute warning. So, I'm going to make this my last question. I find it really surprising given the last 20 years that we just had this entire discussion and Afghanistan has barely come up. So, I'd like to end this and this is for both of you and I'd like to, you, particularly, Michael, to put this in the framework of sort of this resolute restraint that you're talking about in your book.

How does Afghanistan in the next 10 or 20 years play out given what you are laying out? What happens? What do we do, for instance, if Kabul is about to fall? Is that the time to start thinking through what? How would you -- how would you in a real-world situation, which we may be looking at,

you know, in the next couple of years, how would you like to see this pay out?

MR. O'HANLON: Well, --

MS. COOPER: I could ask the same question of you, Michele.

MR. O'HANLON: It's a tough one to end on for this strategy because the strategy would seem to suggest that places like Afghanistan shouldn't matter that much and, therefore, should receive less emphasis. And I think that's true, but I also think we had managed to bring down our commitment to Afghanistan to a very sustainable level of a few thousand troops, which is why I was against President Biden's decision to go to zero. I thought he had put things in a place where we could actually sustain that and he had essentially balanced our commitment and our expenditure of resources with the strategic stakes that were involved.

For the hypothetical that you mentioned, Helene, which unfortunately may not remain a hypothetical very long, I don't know that there's going to be an American Rescue Plan at this point. I think we have a number of things we can do to try to reduce the likelihood of large-scale terrorist sanctuary from emerging in Afghanistan, including perhaps working with elements within Afghanistan if the country falls apart that protects certain parts of the country and maybe even have certain American assets someday in those parts of the country or in the neighborhood. Some of this may actually require more time and attention and effort from the Biden administration than the strategy they just decided to jettison. So, that's part of why I think they made a mistake. I think they may have made their lives harder, not easier.

But I do think we'll have options for protecting ourselves. They may not be quite as good as the option we're giving up. They certainly won't be as good for the Afghan people, in my judgment. But I hope I'm wrong. Anyway, we had brought the commitment and the expenditure of resources down to a level that I think was consonant with our strategic interests and I wish we had just stayed there.

MS. COOPER: Michele, do you have time to answer?

MS. FLOURNOY: Sure. Yes. I don't disagree with Michael's assessment. And I do worry that we're going to have a sort of downward spiral in Afghanistan that could end up looking like a full-blooded civil war or, you know, Taliban taking major cities back and so forth. And lots of very gruesome, horrific images, you know, on the nightly news in terms of, you know, innocent Afghan civilians

being killed. So, that, you know, pains my heart.

You know, I agree, you know, I'm sure there's planning going on to how do we protect ourselves in that? How do we, you know, either protect or extract our diplomatic presence, and so forth? But I do think that, you know, we actually by removing a very small force that sort of had its finger in the dike, we have lost our primary source of leverage. We can still try to use the prospect of international assistance to whatever government could emerge from further negotiations to sort of say to the Taliban, you know, if you don't cross certain red lines, the international community will still support a combined government, whatever that looks like. But I don't think we should be very optimistic about their willingness to negotiate either a cease fire or a new government, you know, as we depart.

So, I think its just going to be a very, you know, it's going to be a very difficult chapter to the end of our military engagement there.

MS. COOPER: I suspect your --

MS. FLOURNOY: (Inaudible) downer to end on.

MS. COOPER: I'm sorry. I suck as a moderator. I can't believe I ended on that. But this has been a really interesting discussion with both of you. Michael, congratulations on your book.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Helene. Thank you both very much.

MS. FLOURNOY: Everybody read Mike's book. It's terrific.

MS. COOPER: Everybody read Mike's book.

MS. FLOURNOY: Very provocative. Very provocative.

MR. O'HANLON: Thanks to everybody.

MS. FLOURNOY: All right, take care. Bye-bye. Thanks, Helene.

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