

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

RUSSIA, CHINA, AND BEYOND: KEY US FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES

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PARTICIPANTS:

FRED DEWS
Multimedia Project Manager
The Brookings Institution

MICHAEL E. O'HANLON
Director of Research, Foreign Policy
Co-Director, Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology; Africa Security Initiative
Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology
The Sydney Stein, Jr. Chair
The Brookings Institution

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

My guest on this episode first joined me nearly eight years ago. We talk about a range of foreign policy, defense, and security issues around the world. Of course, he's been my guest or host of the show many times since, but now I'd like to go on a similar journey through today's most important foreign policy challenges with Michael O'Hanlon. He's a senior fellow and director of research in Foreign Policy at Brookings and holds a host of other positions which will come to in a moment.

But first, the Brookings Cafeteria is produced by the Brookings Podcast Network. Learn more at [Brookings.edu/podcasts](https://www.brookings.edu/podcasts) and follow us on Twitter @PolicyPodcasts to get information about and links to all our shows, including Dollar and Sense: The Brookings Trade podcast, The Current, 17 Rooms and now Foresight Africa, a new podcast about Africa's dynamism and strategies for broadening the benefits of growth to all people of Africa. Here's the host of Foresight Africa, Aloysius Ordu, with more.

ALOYSIUS ORDU: Welcome to Foresight Africa, a podcast that celebrates Africa's dynamism and explores strategies for broadening the benefits of growth to all people of Africa. I'm your host, Aloysius Uche Ordu, senior fellow and director of the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution.

I'm excited to be with you on this journey—a journey that will take us from Cape Town to Cairo; from Dakar to Lagos to Mombasa; as well as to the heart of Africa—DRC Congo.

In this podcast we will interview experts, and policymakers from the public sector, the private sector, civil society, and Africa's youths. We will talk about the key trends affecting people and the nations of the African continent.

I will encourage you to follow the Brookings Podcast Network @policypodcasts and visit us online at brookings.edu/ForesightAfricaPodcast.

DEWS: And now on with the interview. Mike, welcome back to the Brookings cafeteria.

O'HANLON: Fred, thank you. It's great to be with you. You're an amazing colleague and you've done a great thing with this podcast, so it's a privilege to be back on.

DEWS: Thank you. It's great to hear that. Appreciate that. I'd like to start this discussion by hearing about the new Strobe Talbott Center and your role in it.

O'HANLON: Well, first, I want to say how thrilled we are that our center has Strobe Talbott name associated. You and I were lucky enough to work for him for many years. He was the president of Brookings for, I believe, 14 years or maybe 15. He was a great American diplomat and journalist. Before that, all of us have a special place in our hearts for Strobe, not least. Phil Knight, the trustee and founding CEO of Nike, who gave this gift to Brookings and I think had the idea for the Strobe Talbott Center to be named as such. And we were all overjoyed. I only heard very enthusiastic responses to that proposal, and so that's what we are now.

It's the previous Center on Security, Strategy, and Technology. So it's the part of the Foreign Policy program that does not have a geographic specialization and also does not include our energy colleagues. But it otherwise includes most of the free rangers, big thinkers, grand strategists, non-state actors specialists like Vanda Felbab-Brown, the military fellows, as well as the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force Fellow, who join us usually for several months at a time. So that's the broader group.

And we're hoping to use this concept of Strobe Talbott Center on Security Strategy and Technology and Phil Knight's generous gift, including his chair that I now hold, in order to catalyze some new kinds of work at Brookings that may involve setting up some working

groups that are cross-functional on certain big issues of the day. For example, European security architecture, or how climate and energy really do intersect and overlap and how we should think about that in the future. Or maybe what Secretary of Defense Austin's concept of integrated deterrence should mean for Asia, where perhaps the Strobe Talbott Center and the East Asia specialists at Brookings will collaborate. These are some of the ideas where we're looking at. We haven't yet made a lot of commitments but thank you for asking about what the Strobe Talbott Center will mean. That's the main point is we're going to try to think big to honor what we think is the tradition of Strobe Talbott, who did so much for Brookings, but also in his own writings as a scholar and his own work as deputy secretary of state, ultimately, had a very global and forward looking view on integrating many aspects of foreign policy together and even linking them up with domestic policy considerations. So I hope we'll partially do service and honor the name Strobe Talbott and the traditions that he embodies and exemplifies.

DEWS: Well that sounds really cool. Listeners can find more information about that on our website. And also to second what you said, Mike, I always enjoyed collaborating with Strobe on the communication side on some projects, especially the Brookings Essay that he led for a number of years, so that's terrific.

So let's start our journey around the world. Let's start first with Russia and what's happening in its so-called near abroad. And I know it's a fast moving situation. It could change by the time this airs in a few days. But what is the state of affairs between Russia and Ukraine and in Russia and Kazakhstan?

O'HANLON: Yes, well, I think that Vladimir Putin is interested in menacing Ukraine rather than invading it, so I'm making a prediction—that is always dangerous, as Yogi Berra said keep your predictions about the past, not so much the future, you're on safer ground. I'm paraphrasing. But I am going to predict that Putin is more interested in making us all worry

that he could do something to Ukraine than in actually owning a big chunk of Ukrainian territory and meeting the resistance of the Ukrainian army and also the resistance of the Western world, not so much on the battlefield, but in the economic realm, and really changing U.S. NATO's relations with Russia permanently or at least for decades to come.

I think it would be a huge mistake on his part to do that. It's not just the sanctions that are now being threatened that would be imposed. I think you'd start to see more of a decoupling. Europeans would start to wonder if they really want to depend on Russia for so much of their energy, for example. And this would be such a blatant violation of international law that if he's interested in taking a big chunk of Ukraine above and beyond what he already did in 2014 when he grabbed the Crimean Peninsula, this is going to be even more consequential. Taking Crimea back, in a sense, just reversed Premier Khrushchev's decision back in the 1950s to give Crimea from Russia to Ukraine when they were both part of the same country anyway. So it didn't matter. It was an administrative convenience. And yet Crimea was always the place where Russia had a big part of its navy, where a lot of Russians, high profile navy and other military would retire. It always had a very Russian feel. And of course, Putin found a way to grab it back with his so-called little green men without causing bloodshed. And then he stoked separatist violence in the East starting in 2014, and that did have a lot of tragic consequences. Fifteen thousand people, a Malaysian airline shot down accidentally, but almost in a way as a consequence of the mischief that he was causing there.

But still to move major Russian armored forces into the main part of Ukraine would be such a huge escalation that unless Putin wants to sit on a failing Russian economy for the rest of his leadership, I don't think he really wants to do that. I don't think he will.

I'm actually, in this vein, disagreeing with a number of people in and out of government, the United States today who think that he may just be serious, because after all, he doesn't really see Ukraine as a truly separate country, as he himself has said in the past.

He considers Ukraine and Russia so intertwined historically that they can't really be divided. Now, that might sound like an act or sentiment of brotherly love towards Ukrainians, but in fact, for the Ukrainians, they tend to see it as an act of threatening and bullying from their Russian Big Brother next door. So I don't really think that Putin's going to meet with a positive response. I think he would meet violent resistance if he tried to, let's say, slice Ukraine in half and take the eastern part. He may try to create a small corridor from Russia and the Donbass region in the east over to Crimea. That's not out of the question entirely, but I think even that would lead to bloodshed and would be a blatant violation in a way that he has tried to avoid up until now, even if we all know he's behind a lot of the aggression in Donbas.

So I really think that he's more interested in creating a psychological climate in which his views are addressed more seriously than he thinks they are right now. And he said he doesn't want NATO to expand Ukraine and Georgia. I don't think NATO should expand to Ukraine and Georgia myself, but unfortunately, when you have Vladimir Putin on your side of the argument, you're in a little bit of a weaker position than you were before. You can't really, as an American president or even as a Brookings scholar, easily say that you agree with Vladimir Putin on something. So if Putin's really trying to get Biden and other NATO leaders to change their mind in policy, this is not going to work in the short term. What it could do, however, is remind everyone of the dangers of actually getting serious about bringing Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, which at the moment we're not really doing on any particular time schedule, even though since 2008 we have said we will someday. So maybe Putin will be content just to remind people of all the things he could do if we really started to get serious about bringing Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, and hope that will persuade a number of policymakers in the Western world and NATO's existing 30 member states not to do that.

And then he's sending a message to Ukraine, if you really want to protect yourself don't cozy up to the West, don't ask for NATO's membership on an expedited schedule the way President Zelensky did last year because I, Putin, have tools up my sleeve, I can get my forces onto your territory faster than NATO can make a decision to bring you in.

And so again, I don't really think Putin wants to force the issue with an invasion, but I think he wants to make everyone worry that he might, and then change the psychology and the decision-making and the future conversation. And on that one, maybe he could be successful as long as he doesn't use violence now. Maybe he could encourage some people to think whether there is a new European security architecture that would better protect Ukraine and Georgia without bringing them into the Western alliance system. That's what I hope for. I don't approve of any of Putin's methods, but I still hope that there may be that potential benefit if we can get through this crisis.

DEWS: I've heard the term "Finlandization" being used in this context. Is that an appropriate way to think about this in terms of Putin's outlook or is that really not an applicable metaphor?

O'HANLON: I think it's a good metaphor. Finland has been neutral for a long time. It was a victim of some World War II aggressions and of course fought the Russians in 1939, 1940. Got involved in World War II. But otherwise it's typically been independent for most of the last few centuries. And Ukraine has not been in the same way, and Ukraine is a lot closer to Russia in its history, its culture, its religion, its people, and its being part of the Soviet Union. So there are a million differences. But the short answer is yes, if it's good enough to be autonomous, independent in your foreign policy decision-making as long as you don't choose NATO, and just as Finland didn't choose NATO during the Cold War, when the threat was more acute, arguably. Potentially prosperous—Finland's a rich country and a very successful economy, much more so than Ukraine. But for Ukraine, it would be, I think,

wonderful if they could wind up being anything akin to a Finland model. They're way behind Finland in so many ways, but in pure security terms, yes, some kind of a neutral status that's respected by everybody, I think, a Finland model, an Austria model, these are the kinds of ways we should be thinking.

DEWS: So, looking ahead, barring an actual invasion of Ukraine by Russian military forces, what do you think U.S. foreign policy toward Russia should look like, especially with respect to NATO, with respect to European security?

O'HANLON: Well, this is the crux of it. So in that sense, I can just summarize really what I've been trying to draw upon, but I'm glad for the chance to try to crystallize it in a shorter answer and basically say, I think we need to look at the former Soviet republics that are not currently in NATO or in Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization, CSTO, and ask if some kind of essentially permanent non-alignment, but maybe a strengthened pan-European security structure that builds on the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which already exists but has been sidelined and weakened in some ways—maybe envisioned strengthening OSCE over time. Maybe someday OSCE can be just as important as NATO. Maybe in some future date, NATO is not as needed, at least not for the classic purposes. So some kind of a vision for European security, then short-term codifies non-alignment—at least on the condition that Russia not attack anybody in that group. And then over time envisions that whole sector of Europe really becoming part of, again, much more of a bridge where a peaceful east and west can meet in a broader collective. That's the kind of vision that I would favor. Some of it really is informal and doesn't have to be written down on paper. Other parts of it, like the short- to medium-term non-alignment piece, might benefit from a three-page treaty of some kind or at least an executive agreement. But that would have to place demands on Russia, too—verifiable elimination of your forces on Ukrainian and Georgian and Moldova territory. And recognition those countries can join any other

organization they may want to, as long as they agree not to join NATO. So these are the kinds of stipulations that I would personally welcome.

DEWS: Well, let's move geographically east to another major region of the world, the Asia-Pacific. In the episode that you were on eight years ago, your first appearance on Brookings Cafeteria, which I will link to in the show, notes you said, and I'll quote, "the rise of China is the number one most important historic transformation happening in real time right now," unquote. How would you characterize where China stands now on the world stage, Mike, and also relative to the U.S.?

O'HANLON: Yeah, 2014, of course February was a fraught month because that was the month that after the Sochi Olympics, Putin went and grabbed Crimea. And so Russia then, a revanchist Russia, a vengeful Russia, became for a while and maybe still today an equally concerning development, even if it wasn't so much of a positive trajectory that Russia had embarked upon the way that China, with ten times the population, has been going gangbusters for decades. But Russia's willingness to threaten or even tear down some of the existing structures of today's global order became an equally important development, I think, along with China's rise. And I think it still is.

So I guess if I was going to grade my own homework from 2014, knowing what I know now, I would add Russia to the top of my concerns. And I'm unusual in this because most American strategists will say China is the bigger problem. China's the pacing threat. Certainly over time, China is the bigger issue. That may be true, and I'm not going to take my eye off China, but I also think that Russia seems to me to have more interest in disrupting the existing order. I think China wants to take that order and put more Chinese characteristics on it and take more of a leadership role in shaping it and throw in a certain amount of Chinese mercantilism and nationalism into the mix, but still preserve large chunks of what we've built

since 1945. I think Russia is more interested in dismantling, especially things like NATO. And I think Putin also sort of enjoys playing geopolitics games and using his military.

China has gotten more assertive, to come back to your question, but I think they have more of a sense that their long-term trajectory is pointed in the direction they want to go. They don't have to be in a hurry because the forces of time and history in their mind at least are on their side. I'm not sure it's quite so clear cut. But in the eight years since we spoke first on this podcast, in terms of China capabilities, the Chinese military budget has doubled again. Chinese GDP has doubled again. China has become, by some measures, the world's number one economy if you convert by purchasing power parity. Regardless, it's the world's number one manufacturing center. So all this has happened over roughly the last decade.

And of course, China has become more assertive. And as our colleagues like Ryan Haas and Andrew Yeo and Patty Kim and others—Cheng Li, David Dollar—can document better than myself, it's done a lot of things that we weren't quite so sure before that it would do, like pushing Indian troops off a disputed border in the Himalayas and killing some of them. Or sustaining its threatening actions around the Senkaku Islands that are claimed by both China and Japan. Or being a little more aggressive towards Taiwan without actually firing a shot but still menacing. And then, of course, its decision to declare this Nine Dash Line in the South China Sea, which when I talk to Chinese friends I say in some ways this is the most concerning of all, because we Americans, we all knew you cared about Taiwan. You see that as part of your country, we see that as an important democracy that doesn't necessarily want to be gobbled up by China, especially the way Hong Kong has now being gobbled up. But we understand that's an issue to handle very delicately and a special issue for you.

But when you say the South China Sea is basically yours or that you should be able to regulate the movement of other countries' shipping through the South China Sea, or at least

be asked for your permission before people use those sea lanes, that is a different level of assertiveness, which actually challenges the core of today's rules based order. The freedom of movement, essentially the Law of the Sea Convention, which everybody respects, even if the United States itself hasn't ratified it. So China has become a little more concerning in that regard as well.

So I guess to summarize, China's twice as strong as it was eight years ago, twice as big of a military budget, has been twice as aggressive. But the good news is they're still not engaged in major overland or overwater attacks against other countries or territories or interests. They haven't killed a lot of people since 2014. Probably killed more Chinese, you could say, with some of their domestic repression. Xi Jinping has become more assertive as a Chinese leader and clearly has an agenda for being one of the most important long-term Chinese leaders. Whether that translates into an even more militaristic foreign policy we don't yet know. Our former colleague, Rush Doshi, said that around 2016, when China saw the United States struggling with its own internal politics and divided politically and otherwise, it started to get more ambitious about dominating the Asia-Pacific and maybe even beyond faster than they might have otherwise preferred. But I'm still going to stay hopeful because what Rush didn't really say in that book was what measures China would be willing to risk or take to pursue that vision. And I still think if we are confident and stronger, to quote Ryan Hass in his book, and work with our allies that we can persuade China that it's not worth the risk of war, it should try to keep emerging peacefully. It should try to be content with modest impact on the existing global order and not also force the Taiwan issue, which is probably the most single concerning matter of all. And I think we have a good chance to channel China or to remind China to channel itself in those directions because the Chinese are getting a lot out of this current global order. They got a lot to lose from war. They've got a lot to lose from a fundamental break with Western consumer markets. And in the end, I

think we can probably persuade them not to make the wrong decision on that front because of the consequences that would ensue. So a lot of people are a lot more nervous about China than they were eight years ago. I guess I'm a little more nervous, but I still think we've got the right tool kit if we stay confident and united as a country to manage what's by any account, as you said earlier, an historic rise.

DEWS: I want to take this opportunity to plug those Brookings books that you mentioned and more. A lot of great books around these issues. Ryan's book that you mentioned. Rush Doshi's book. Also your book, Mike, "The Senkaku Paradox: Risking Great Power War Over Small Stakes," that was the subject of a Brookings Cafeteria podcast a few years ago. Also, I learned a lot from Bruce Jones' book, "To Rule the Waves." He was on this show last year. So a lot of great books from foreign policy scholars.

But broadly thinking about the Asia-Pacific, about eight years ago when we were talking about President Obama's policy. It was then the so-called rebalancing from the Middle East toward the Asia-Pacific. Now we're a year into the Biden administration. How would you describe U.S. policy toward the Asia-Pacific region now? And is there some name that we should be giving to it?

O'HANLON: By the way, yes, I agree with all your endorsements of our colleagues' books, and I'm sure you and I would both want to add Cheng Li, who writes so many darn books that it's hard to keep track, but he published a great book in 2021 that compliments the sort of overall portfolio. So I'll mention it, which is "Middle Class Shanghai"—

DEWS: — Absolutely —

O'HANLON: —And what he basically did in that book at a strategic level was to say there is a Chinese intellectual class, middle class, middle to upper class that benefits from China's rise. And that probably doesn't want China to start picking fights all over the world just to flex its muscles the way, let's say, the European powers tended to do in previous

centuries, whenever one of them thought they had arrived at a greater level of status and power than they had before and wanted to show it on the battlefield.

And the middle class Shanghai, the middle class in China is sort of up for grabs in terms of whether they would sanction and support a more nationalistic and aggressive Chinese foreign policy or not. And Cheng Li's basic message, I think it's fair to say, is they would prefer not to see China become more aggressive because that would disrupt a lot of what has become their much better life than they used to have. So that doesn't guarantee a good outcome here, but it certainly gives something to work with within the Chinese society itself.

And I won't even start going on Evan Osnos, the great writer for *The New Yorker* who's written on China and is one of our colleagues too, but certainly recommend his book "Age of Ambition."

To your question, finally, about where we go next with China and how we respond to China at this moment, the main thing that I would suggest is that we not overreact to a lot of the problems that have been developing in the Western Pacific. We stay strong. We still have the \$770 billion military budget, which is three times China's. So even though theirs is double, ours has actually grown even more over that same period in dollar terms; it hasn't doubled because ours was so big to begin with. It's hard to make ours double. Our alliance system is still strong despite four years of a Trump presidency where the previous president was not so persuaded that alliances served American interests, and we'll have to watch and see if he campaigns again for president and what he would do with alliances if he were elected. But in terms of the rebalance or the pivot or our overall posture in Asia, that term was always a little bit of an overt dramatization of what we were likely to do. But that's okay, sometimes you've got to think big to even achieve half of what you're aiming for. And so therefore, I like the rebalancing frame in particular, but it really hasn't yet achieved its own

purported central plank, which was the Trans-Pacific Partnership economic arrangement that our colleague David Dollar knows so much about. And until we get that kind of a renewed economic arrangement back on the table and into effect, and the United States part of it, then we are going to be forgoing the most powerful and least dangerous tool that we can use in our overall grand strategy.

So I like what we've done on the military side. The alliances are still in pretty good shape. I do fear the possibility of another Trump presidency because he is somewhat contemptuous of alliances and perhaps the alliances would not do so well in a second Trump term. But at the moment, I think the Biden team has at least brought a more matter-of-fact and less disruptive approach to alliances, which is generally smart because the alliances on balance are in reasonably good shape.

I don't know if I have a buzzword or a slogan to describe what Biden's done. They have the term for what they're doing with China, cooperate when you can, compete otherwise, and confront when necessary. So, I don't know if it's meant to be in equal measure, but I think the confront part you want to minimize unless you have to get in China's space. So that's sort of left to Beijing to decide in a way how much we're going to have to confront them. But the cooperation and competition pieces can be in roughly equal measure and can coexist simultaneously. That's the framework the Biden team is coming up with, at least on China. And I tend to agree with them.

DEWS: I'll just mention here, since you mentioned David Dollar, that he just interviewed on his podcast, Dollar and Sense: The Brookings Trade podcast, he interviewed Peter Petri about all things Asian trade, CPTPP and other big trade agreements. So it's very interesting. I put a link to that in the show notes. Let's move west again. Mike, what are America's continued interests in Afghanistan?

O'HANLON: Well, twofold—counterterrorism and humanitarian concern for the Afghan people. On the first one, on the first matter, I'm hopeful that even though it's going to be harder now that we're not there, that we can still help persuade the Taliban government not to condone terrorism emanating from its own soil. Even though there are al-Qaida affiliates within the Taliban movement and government, I think they know what we can do to them if we uncover evidence that they are planning attacks against us. And so I'm hoping that they can be persuaded to not only clamp down on ISIS, which is in their own interest, but to avoid any kind of operational planning with al-Qaida, which would lead to American military retaliation. And even if we can't or wouldn't try to occupy the whole country again, we can still go after a lot of specific Taliban targets, including places where they now live and work inside of Kabul, that we know the addresses and we still have very potent long range strike capability. So I'm not trying to be overly threatening to the Taliban, but they know this already, and I think they have pretty good reason to want to cooperate with us just as they cooperated, albeit imperfectly, in August in allowing us to fly out more than 120,000 people from Kabul when they had already seized the city, and certainly could have interfered with that operation if they had wanted to. And the 13 Americans who were tragically killed on August 26th in the truck bombing, I don't think that was the Taliban's fault except that it reflected the limits of their competence to prevent any and all uses of violence. We don't really think that was the Taliban doing that.

So the Taliban want to be left alone by us militarily, but they also want our help economically. And this gets to the second major priority, which is the humanitarian disaster that's now unfolding this winter in Afghanistan, because the Taliban are not good at running anything except maybe a terrorist network and some rural court systems. But they don't have practical competence in the education sector, in the health care sector, in the agricultural sector, in the financial sector. And moreover, the whole world is basically treating them as a

pariah. So even countries that were not happy with what NATO was trying to do in Afghanistan are also not happy with the Taliban. They don't have any international recognition right now that I'm aware of. They probably are hoping for some soon from Pakistan and/or China. And I think we should try to get on top of that issue ourselves and try to create a common front with all of NATO and Pakistan and China and Russia and basically say to the Taliban, if you will verifiably allow us to certify that you're respecting basic human rights standards, then we will gradually provide access to your international bank accounts, some economic development aid. We can accelerate humanitarian aid even now without waiting for that, as Rory Stewart and I wrote about in a column a few weeks ago. And I think with 23 or so million Afghan civilians at dire risk this winter from starvation, from the cold, from COVID, we have to be humane.

And the politics of this, unfortunately, are difficult in the United States because if Biden is seen as trying to do some kind of a deal with the Taliban, it's just going to reignite the whole issue that he wants to forget about. I think he made a big mistake in deciding to pull out of Afghanistan—I'm still upset about that decision. But there is one silver lining so far, which is there hasn't been that much bloodshed in the transition to the Taliban. However, that silver lining will be quickly ripped up to shreds by the winter of privation and starvation if we don't allow a major humanitarian relief because we're somehow politically afraid of being seen as dealing with the Taliban.

So the Biden team is going to have to get over that. And I think they can take solace in the fact that most Americans don't care that much about Afghanistan. And they could also take solace in the fact that if they're able to save lives in Afghanistan, they can still argue this is a major benefit of the policy that they adopted, even if the rest of the policy didn't lead quite to where they had hoped, that nonetheless we found a way to build a live and let live

relationship with the Taliban that care most Afghan civilians alive. And that, by itself, I think, is probably the least bad outcome we can aspire to now in Afghanistan.

DEWS: Well, let's move a little bit further west again. In that podcast in February of 2014, Mike, we were talking about possible civil war in Iraq. We were talking about the unfolding tragedy in Syria, and also about the movements associated with the Arab Spring. What are the issues now in the Middle East region that you think America's leaders should be paying attention to and that Americans should be paying attention to?

O'HANLON: 2014, while it was already a sad moment—the Arab Spring had essentially failed in most places where we hoped that it could produce political reform in the Middle East, and of course, ISIS was on the march, and by spring of 2014, they had taken good chunks of Iraq to complement what they already held in Syria. And then we began roughly a half decade long policy under both Obama and Trump to build up indigenous capability and provide American air power and intelligence to ultimately defeat ISIS. So in that sense, we achieved that goal by midpoint roughly of the Trump presidency. And that's good because ISIS really was thriving and was mounting attacks on Europe and exacerbating civil wars in both Syria and Iraq. And they've lost momentum in most of their sanctuary, and much of their leadership, including al-Baghdadi, who was killed a couple of years ago. So in that sense, there's been at least partial headway.

But the broader context of the Middle East is still not all that good. The Arab Spring did fail by most of the standards that would have been proposed for it. I don't think that Arab political reform has moved along very well. There are some countries that are relative bright spots, even if they're not democracies for the most part, like Oman, Tunisia, Morocco, which is, of course, not really in the Arab world per se, but Jordan, which even though it's a kingdom, it still has elements of openness and elements of democracy. I'm still not happy with Egypt and what's essentially become another Mubarak-like autocracy under President

Sisi. And clearly, Libya is still a mess. Syria is maybe the number one tragedy of all along with Yemen, and each one of those requires its own analysis about what available options and tools we really have.

But I'll try to finish on a happier note on this general part of the world by saying I'm somewhat encouraged about where we stand in Iraq, which is an unusual thing to say. But my standards in life and in international politics and certainly in Middle Eastern politics are relative. And in Iraq, there's no Saddam Hussein ruling the country. There's no high scale, high-end civil war. There's no major terrorist movement that's using that sanctuary to attack a lot of other places violently around the world. And yes, there is a lot of Iranian influence. But the Iraqis have a certain amount of nationalism and a good deal of national pride, and they're Arabs, not Persians. So even where they have close ties to Iran, even where Iran is trying to be influential or use Shia faith to insert its tentacles into Iraq, there are limitations on how far that will go. And the Biden team, like the Trump team, has figured out a way to keep a small U.S. presence in Iraq, even after President Trump took an action that surprised many of us, although I can't really criticize it, which was the killing of Qassim Suleimani, the Iranian terrorist mastermind, on Iraqi soil two years ago and leading to a crisis in political relations with Iraq and its parliament. But we've managed to walk back some of that anger and mitigate some of the retaliatory measures that Iranian militias have attempted against us and our friends in Iraq since then.

So, you know, there's a lot to still watch and be nervous about inside of Iraq. But I think that I give a lot of credit to the Iraqi people. They've started to build a semi workable democracy. They've got a long ways to go to make it really successful for the majority of their people and bring up the living standards to where they should be and really integrate Sunni-Shia-Kurdish political cooperation across sectarian lines. It's a very fragile state. But I'm seeing some hopeful indicators and it doesn't necessarily justify previous big decisions

like the Iraq invasion, but it certainly gives some reason for hope that not all of the Middle East is completely falling apart.

DEWS: So, in this episode, we've talked about Russia, China, Afghanistan, and now some issues in the Middle East. I mean, we could have a separate podcast episode about every single one of these issues and so many more. So thinking very generally, Mike, what are foreign policy and defense issues that we haven't covered that you are tracking and that you think people should be paying attention to?

O'HANLON: Well, let me just add two and then a broader thought—two specific points: Iran and North Korea. On both of them we have to get more practical about nuclear diplomacy. With Iran, I do think that Republicans have had a point that President Obama's Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015 had some major limitations, especially the 10-year time horizon, after which many of the restrictions on Iranian nuclear activity would be lifted. Not all, but many. And so I think the natural way to try to engage with the Iranians, although it's going to be hard, is to try to go back to that kind of a deal that makes the timelines indefinite, and not necessarily try to stop the Iranians from doing each and every bad thing that we don't like around the region or the world but trying to make the nuclear part specifically more durable.

So on North Korea policy, I sort of half liked what President Trump did with his meetings with Kim Jong Un, but then President Trump failed to get realistic about what kind of deal he should really pursue. He forgot the art of the deal. And in North Korea, we're not going to completely denuclearize them because they see their nuclear weapons as the family jewels that keep them from being overthrown, that honor the father and grandfather of the current leader. And so if we go for a complete denuclearization, as Trump ultimately did and as other presidents have done, we're going to fail. But if we say to the North Koreans, let's verifiably dismantle all of your production capability, so we're essentially capping your

arsenal at the size it is today. We're not going to bless that arsenal. We're not going to condone it. We're not going to recognize it. But we don't have to go after it right now. We don't have to know where it is. We'll even give you small little storage areas that each military base that we're otherwise going to inspect with international inspectors where we don't have to go in, don't have to look. And that's where you put your nuclear weapons for now. So be it. And if you do that, then we will limit our sanctions. We will lift some of the sanctions, especially perhaps the international sanctions that have been imposed on North Korea over the years. I think that's the deal to go for. And it would give North Korea a stake in better relations with the outside world. It would reduce, I think, their tendency towards threatening behavior, and reduce the chances they're going to try to create a big crisis again that leads to a danger of war in Northeast Asia.

So those would be my two recommendations on nuclear related diplomacy. But, you know, just stitching all this together, Fred, maybe that's the best way to begin to end because in my book that I published last year, "The Art of War in an Age of Peace"—

DEWS: —which I had the pleasure of interviewing you about last summer, terrific book!—

O'HANLON: —well, thank you. And the subtitle is "U.S. Grand Strategy and Resolute Restraint," and if there is an advantage to me speaking about all these different parts of the world—in the same way that some of us at Brookings with probably Bob Kagan being the most prominent and maybe the smartest, or certainly a remarkable scholar who thinks in grand strategic terms, but a number of others as well, maybe a half dozen of us who like to think in these terms—the benefit to trying to think about grand strategy in an integrated way is it gives you some perspective. When you look at a problem in one part of the world, you're comparing it in some ways to problems in other parts of the world, which sometimes can be calming in a strange way. But what it reminds you of is that as bad as things may be, they

can often get worse. And so if you have a part of the world like East Asia, where there are some disputes over uninhabited islands, that looks a lot better than an all-out civil war in Syria.

And also, if you think historically, you can then compare today's world to previous periods where we really did see the great powers not just competing at the edges and periphery but fighting right in the core of where they overlapped and where they existed. You know, the world wars, et cetera. And so when I take a grand strategic approach to the world and look at all these different problems, it helps me remember not to get overexcited about most of them. Most of them, we only have certain influence and ability to deal with. Most of them are not going to produce World War III. And frankly, in some cases, the likelihood of a big war, it's higher if we overreact. And especially because we have already strong allies and a strong military and we should keep those. And so I want to make sure that we do retain our resoluteness, but I also want to see restraint in not overreacting to crises. And maybe recognizing the rise of China and the return of Russia as big events that are challenging, but they make the world more complicated, they don't necessarily make it more threatening or dangerous. And that's a framing that Kathy Warden, the CEO of Northrop Grumman, whom I interviewed this past fall for a Brookings event, she used that framing that the world is complex, and sure, it's fragile and sure, it's dangerous at some level. But I like the word complex better than I like the word fundamentally dangerous.

And I think we still have a lot of tools, including the strongest alliance system in the history of the planet, nuclear and conventional deterrence, and international economic order that's beneficial to most countries that participate. Economic sanctions tools for those that don't go along with the rules that can give us instruments of response short of the need for force in the first instance. This is a good tool kit in a world that's still fragile, but overall has never been more prosperous or democratic really than it is now. So it's unusual to end on a

positive note, especially in this time of ongoing COVID crisis around the world. But I still feel like structurally speaking, the international political and strategic order has a lot going for it, largely because American power and American alliance systems have continued to help shape it and uphold it. So that's the note I would propose finishing on, Fred.

DEWS: Mike, I think that's a great note to finish on, a hopeful note. And I appreciate all the work that you do. I'll put a link in the show notes to my interview with you on your terrific book, "The Art of War in an Age of Peace." It was one of my favorite interviews in recent times. Mike, I want to thank you as always for sharing your time and expertise with us.

O'HANLON: Fred, it's fantastic talking with you and best wishes to everybody out there. Happy 2022! May it be a happy and safer and healthier year, and also may it be a more peaceful year.

DEWS: You can learn about Michael O'Hanlon and his research on our website, Brookings dot edu.

A team of amazing colleagues makes the Brookings Cafeteria possible. Gaston Reboredo is the audio engineer; our audio intern this semester is Skylar Sutton; Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews; my Communications colleagues Adrianna Pita, Chris McKenna, Chris Peters, and Colin Cruickshank are key collaborators. And finally, Ian McAllister, Soren Messner-Zidell and Andrea Risotto provide guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.