

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Falk Auditorium

America's foreign policy: A conversation with Secretary of State Antony Blinken

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INTRODUCTION

CECILIA ELENA ROUSE
President, The Brookings Institution

MODERATOR

SUZANNE MALONEY
Vice President and Director, Foreign Policy, The Brookings Institution

FEATURED SPEAKER

ANTONY J. BLINKEN
U.S. Secretary of State

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ROUSE: Good morning, everyone. I'm Cecilia Rouse. I'm the president of the Brookings Institution. Thank you all who are joining us here today in Falk Auditorium and to the many more who are joining in online. It is my absolute pleasure to welcome you to a special conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken for a wide-ranging discussion of the challenges and opportunities for American diplomacy around the world.

Tony, thank you for – so much for making the time to be with us this morning. We are so honored to welcome you back to Brookings. Secretary Blinken has served as the 71st U.S. Secretary of State since 2021. He has had a long and distinguished career in public service, beginning at the State Department during the Clinton administration. Over the years, he has held important roles at the National Security Council, as staff director of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee under then-Senator Joe Biden, as national security advisor to then-Vice President Biden, and as deputy secretary of state during the Obama

administration. We are especially grateful to engage with Secretary Blinken at this time of immense international challenges and just ahead of the 75th NATO summit, to be held here in Washington next week.

There is a lot of ground to cover in the foreign policy landscape: the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, strategic competition with China, and the influence of our very own elections this fall. In this discussion, we look forward to getting the Secretary's perspective on how the U.S. can use diplomacy as well as other tools to build a more peaceful world and address threats to democracy and stability.

To help us navigate these issues in the next 45 minutes, I'm delighted to have Suzanne Maloney moderate the discussion. Suzanne is the vice president and director of the Foreign Policy program at Brookings. As a former advisor to senior department officials and a member of the policy planning staff, Suzanne knows well the challenges that the Secretary must confront.

So before we begin, I would like to recognize that today's event is part of Brookings' long-running Alan and Jane Batkin International Leaders Forum run by our Foreign Policy program. This program brings together world leaders and officials at Brookings for the thoughtful exchange of ideas on critical policy issues. Please note that we are streaming live and on the record. You can share your thoughts via social media using the hashtag #foreignpolicy. Following the conversation, we will have a brief Q&A and our staff will pass around mics in the room. For those viewing online, please send your questions to events@brookings.edu. Thank you, and I hand things over to Suzanne.

BLINKEN: Thanks. (Applause.)

MALONEY: Thanks, Cece, and thanks to all those of you in the room for waiting patiently as we got things underway here this morning, and especially to all those of you online. Secretary, it's wonderful to have you back here at Brookings again.

BLINKEN: Thank you.

MALONEY: It's been a little over a year since we last saw you in our halls, and you've been awfully busy since that time. The United States is playing a critical role in coordinating with partners and allies around the world and dealing with two major wars, navigating a complex –and at times turbulent relationship with China, and contending with a host of crises from Haiti, Sudan, North Korea and the South China Sea. I hope we'll have an opportunity to touch on some of these specific issues as we go.

But I really did want to start off at the 50,000-foot level around the state of the international system and the role of America in the world today. You and I both came of age at a time when the Cold War was ending, and we have spent the past 30 years at a – in a period that's been marked by many challenges: by horrific attacks on the American homeland, two major wars in the Middle East. But the world has also experienced significant progress during that period: lifting of large swaths of humanity out of poverty, reduction in the frequency and intensity of interstate conflict. And we seem to be building an order where cooperation and liberalization were bolstered by both economic interdependence and the waning of some adversarial ideologies.

And yet, as you have previewed in a number of the speeches and remarks that you've made since taking office, we're also now facing something of an inflection point. The Cold – post-Cold War era is giving way to something new. Can you describe the strategic landscape today and how the United States and the Biden administration have sought to address this complicated new era that we are finding ourselves in?

BLINKEN: Well, thank you, Suzanne, and thanks to everyone for being here this morning. It's so good to see so many friends, colleagues, familiar faces, in this place where I've spent a little bit of time over the past 30 years. It's always good to be back at Brookings.

So I think you're exactly right: we are at an inflection point. We are at a point where the post-Cold War era is over and there is a race, a competition on, to shape what comes next. We see that in the emergence or reemergence of great power competition. We see

that in so many global challenges that have come to the fore and are interconnected. There's a greater multiplicity and complexity of challenges and interconnectedness of challenges than any time since I've been doing this in the last 30 years. And the question is: How are we going to approach them? How are we going to try to shape them?

We come into this with a couple of premises. One is that when our country is not engaged, when we're not leading, then either one of two things. Either someone else is, and probably not in a way that advances our own interests and values, or maybe, just as bad, no one is, and then you tend to have vacuums that are more likely to be filled by bad things before they're filled with good things. So there's a premium on our engagement and on our leadership.

But the flip side is this: More than at any time since I've been doing this this last 30 years, there's also a premium on finding new ways to cooperate, to collaborate, to communicate. Because we do not have – as powerful as we are – the capacity to meet these challenges effectively alone. And so we've worked very hard to re-energize, to reinvigorate, and in many ways to reimagine these alliances and partnerships.

I think, Suzanne, if you step back and look at the road that we've traveled just over the last three and a half years, it's very easy to forget where we were three and a half years ago. Obviously, we had a global health crisis and a country that was quite literally paralyzed by COVID. We had an economic recession, the worst since the Great Depression – and not just here, of course, but globally. We had alliances and partnerships that were deeply damaged and frayed. We had China, that was moving forward in ways that were not being effectively addressed.

And I think what we've seen in the last few years is an extraordinary re-emergence here from – obviously from COVID, and putting that in the rearview mirror. Our own economy now, by far the most successful economy of the major democracies. GDP growth exceeds that of the next three countries combined. Major investments made – which I'll come to in one second – that are making a powerful difference; and, as I look around the world and

go around the world, alliances, partnerships that are much stronger than they were just three and a half years ago.

Basically, as we've looked at it, we wanted to do two things, and the president's been determined to do two things: Make these investments in ourselves, which we've done; but also make these investments in our alliances and partnerships, which we've done. And the basic idea is when you do that, as we've done, you can deal with the multiplicity of challenges from a position of strength, not a position of weakness. We live in a very dangerous world. We've had all of these trends that have emerged – not just in the last few years, but over the last couple of decades, this move from the post-Cold War era into a new era, where of course you have extraordinary forces moving at a rapidity that we've never seen – technology, information technology. And it creates, I think, for a lot of people a sense of destabilization, not knowing where your North Star is.

But in order to deal with that, doing it from a position of strength, investing at home, investing in our partnerships – that's the foundation that we've set, and I think if you go through each of the different problem sets that we're facing, you can see how approaching them from a position of strength actually makes us more effective in delivering results and doing what the American people need us to do for them.

MALONEY: I want to drill down a little bit on that point. We've had on this stage both National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, and more recently Deputy National Security Advisor Daleep Singh, both times in conversations with Brookings economists, both times talking about industrial policy, about economic statecraft. And that has been a major element of the administration's approach to so many of the challenges that we face around the world. Can you tell us a little bit about how it is that the foreign policy bureaucracy has now really taken on economics as a core element of both strength at home and strength abroad?

BLINKEN: Well, we're seized with this because we have to be, for two reasons: One, yes, I see this every place I go. Our strength at home manifests itself directly and clearly

in our strength abroad. As country after country has seen the kinds of investments we've made in ourselves – whether it's in our own infrastructure, to make sure that our roads, our bridges, our communications are leading the way; when they look at what we've done with the CHIPS and Science Act, the investment in the most critical technology for the 21st century; when they look at what we've done with the IRA, which despite some early challenges now I think is seen incredibly positively by most countries around the world; the investments we're making in the kind of technology and the kind of manufacturing that's going to dominate 21st-century economies – that is seen as a very positive proof point for the United States. And it increases the desire of countries around the world to work with us.

What have we seen in the last three and a half years? We've seen more foreign direct investment coming into this country than at any time in our history. And in three and a half years, we have more than a trillion dollars in foreign direct investment, which exceeds by almost a quarter of a trillion dollars what we saw in the previous four years. That's a sign of strength, that's a sign of attractiveness of the United States.

But as we're going around the world, we also have to make sure that we get the flip side right. So one of the challenges that we have right now – I was in China recently. We have deep concerns, as you know, about China's overcapacity, trying to export their way out of their own economic challenges, and doing it in a way that saturates our market in critical industries, in critical sectors, where we're investing right now in goods that are underpriced and designed basically to price out our own manufacturers from these sectors, from these industries – whether it's solar panels, whether it's electric vehicles, electric vehicle batteries, et cetera. Our job, our responsibility is to make sure that we're defending our workers, defending our industries, and defending our communities. And that's exactly what we're doing.

But here's the difference: It's one thing when we're doing this alone. It's one thing when the United States is carrying that fight as 20, 25 percent of the world's GDP. When we're aligned with others, when we're working with Europeans, when we're working with Asian

partners and other partners, all of whom have some – are facing some of the same challenges, and all of the sudden we're aligning 50 or 60 percent of the world's GDP against this problem, we're going to be a lot more effective. And that's the other big thing that I think we've seen over the last three and a half years: a much greater alignment, a much greater convergence between us and key partners in Europe, in Asia, and beyond on how to tackle some of these challenges, including some of the challenges posed by China, and of course, the challenges posed by Russia.

MALONEY: I do want to come to the question of alliances in just a moment to talk more about the upcoming NATO summit, but I did want to ask you about an issue that is much in the news these days, especially over the course of the past couple of days. Since the debate between President Biden and former President Trump, there has been a sense of strong discussion and lots of views being elicited. You have worked with President Joe Biden for decades. Can you tell us what you think friends and foes around the world should know about American leadership today under President Biden?

BLINKEN: Well, I think what the world knows, the world has experienced over three and a half years – not one night – is exactly the kind of leadership that he's brought to bear on problems that are common for so many countries, particularly so many of the democracies around the world. And as I've seen it, again, going around the world, there's a desire, there's a thirst for American engagement, for American leadership. Even when we have disagreements with countries, they still want us in this and even leading to try to get to a better place. And they've seen a president who has reinvested America – reinvested America in the world, reinvested in these alliances, in these partnerships, in ways that they seek and want.

If you look at surveys around the world for what they're worth, you see again and again and again that confidence in American leadership has gone up dramatically over the last three and a half years. That doesn't just happen. It's the product of choices. It's the product of policies that we pursue. It's the product of our engagement. And they see President Biden having led the way in all of those different areas and in ways that are

bringing people together and focused in the same way on the challenges that we have before us and that are common to so many other countries.

So what I'm – what I'm seeing, what I'm hearing is, again, people are looking at the last three and a half years. They're looking at policies. They're looking at policy choices. And for the most part, they like the choices and the policies that this president is pursuing.

MALONEY: Well, as we've talked about, alliances are critical. The NATO summit is coming up in just a week, celebrating 75 years of that Alliance, and we'll do it here in Washington. But there are also real questions about the future of NATO, about the place of Ukraine. And this administration has done an amazing job, I think, in foreseeing the crisis that was to come, mobilizing friends and allies around the world; but we are at a point where the Ukrainians don't appear to be making progress on the battlefield. The war appears to be ground to something of a standstill in terms of territory lost and gained. And the Ukrainians themselves are obviously quite frustrated about their – the level of assistance that they've received from the West – grateful, but also frustrated.

And there was an interview yesterday in which President Volodymyr Zelenskyy talked about the sense that he has that Ukraine and the West have different understandings of what victory means. Can you give us a sense of what you see as victory, what the NATO Alliance is prepared to commit to do in terms of ensuring that there is, in fact, a victory in Ukraine that preserves Ukrainian sovereignty and that positions the West in an advantageous way vis-à-vis Russia?

BLINKEN: Sure. And let's remember where we started, where we were – again, very important and easy to forget. In February of 2022, as the Russians attacked Ukraine, the real fear, the real concern was that they would succeed in their objective. And remember what Putin's objective was: It was to literally erase Ukraine from the map, to end its future as an independent country, to subsume it into the greater Russia. That hasn't happened and will not happen, and that's because of two things. It's because, of course, of the extraordinary courage and resilience of Ukrainians, but it's also because 50 countries, more than 50 countries, came together – led by the United States – in support of Ukraine,

in its defense. So that's already a huge success, because given where we were and given where this could have gone, where people thought it would go, it hasn't gone there and it's not going to go there.

But as we look ahead, I think we have to focus on, yes, this question: What is success? And for me, for us, I think success is very clear. It's a Ukraine that is a strong, successful country, increasingly integrated with the West, and a country that can stand on its own feet militarily, economically, democratically. And we have the policies in place to make it – to make sure that that's exactly what happens.

Militarily, yes, of course, Ukraine has to deal with the ongoing aggression right now. And again, we have so many countries that continue to rally to its side, to make sure that it has what it needs, when it needs it to continue to ward off the Russian aggression. But it's also critical that Ukraine develop the capability to deter and defend against aggression going forward over many years. President Biden led the way in getting now more than 30 countries to agree to negotiate bilateral security agreements with Ukraine over a decade.

And these agreements – now, I think nearly 20 have actually been negotiated and signed, including by the president and President Zelenskyy just a few weeks ago in Italy on the margins of the G7 – these are long-term commitments to helping Ukraine develop a strong deterrent and defense capacity. They also tell Vladimir Putin that he can't outwait Ukraine, he can't outwait all of Ukraine's partners. At the same time, Ukraine is developing its own defense industrial base in a way that will enable it to help provide for itself.

And we're trying to drive private sector investment into Ukraine to make sure that its economy can grow and thrive. We've already seen through the Black Sea that Ukraine is exporting as much as it was before February of 2022. There is extraordinary potential in Ukraine's economy with the right investment. Now, of course, for both its military capacity and its economic capacity, you've got to make sure that you have air defenses in place to try to protect the areas in which you're making investments. We're driving that. I think you'll see more news on that in the coming weeks as we get to the NATO summit actually next week.

And then finally, standing strongly democratically. The fact that the European Union has opened the accession process with Ukraine is the best guarantee that Ukraine will continue to make the necessary reforms to strengthen and deepen its democracy.

The end result is a successful country and a country that as it stands on its own in these three areas is the strongest possible rebuke to Vladimir Putin.

MALONEY: Well, you've obviously done a lot to both rely upon and invest in the transatlantic relationship in managing both the challenge of Ukraine and the larger challenge of Russia. That is a relationship that's underpinned by a long history, deep mutual interests, but also some sense of shared values. How do you sort of look at the future of that relationship at a time where we do see the rise of right-wing parties and their potential impact on the viability of that Alliance and the effectiveness of that Alliance? We've just seen the results of the first round of elections in France, a country that you know well. How concerned are you about changing trends of populism and right-wing governments that might come to the fore in Europe?

BLINKEN: So I think first, again, to put things in focus, just looking at the state of the alliance itself, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, we'll have a 75th anniversary party here in Washington in a week's time. And, of course, we want to celebrate 75 years of the most successful defensive alliance in history. But the main purpose is to focus on the way forward for this alliance, and I think it's a very opportune time to remind people of why NATO matters, why it's so important, and why the investments that we and so many other countries are making in it make a difference.

And it really comes back to something very basic that was at the heart of the formation of the alliance to begin with, and that's the power of collective defense. The power of Article 5 that says an attack on one is an attack on all is the strongest possible deterrent to aggression, the strongest and most effective way to prevent war in the first place, to avoid conflict in the first place, because any would-be aggressor knows that an attack on any one member means they're going to have to deal with every member of the alliance. And so I think reminding all of our citizens of the importance of that and how it's been so

successful for 75 years and how it remains foundational to our security going forward is an important moment.

We have an alliance that is bigger than it was just a few years ago, now 32 members – Finland and Sweden – that I think for most people that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago. We have an alliance that's stronger and has greater investment in it than it's ever had. We now have 23 countries that are meeting the 2 percent of GDP committed to defense mark that was set at the Wales Summit back in 2014. There were just nine countries in 2021 that met the mark. We're now at 23, an 18 percent increase in defense investment by the allies across the alliance.

And also, a thing that – things that people in this room know very well but that may be a little bit harder to translate for so many of our citizens, a very deliberate and effective effort to make sure that the alliance in its plans, in its programs, in its posture was effectively positioned to deal with the threats of this moment. And you'll see more of that at the summit. Those plans are now in place. They're being resourced and the alliance is moving to make sure that we have the right defenses across the Alliance where they're needed, where they're mattered.

So this has been a clear trajectory for the last three and a half years. I don't actually see that changing irrespective of the politics of the moment in Europe. We have very strong allies, very strong partners. We just came from Italy, where Italy has played a major and very effective role in continuing to strengthen the alliance. I think you've heard affirmations from various political parties in Europe of their ongoing commitment to it irrespective of where they're coming from. So I have confidence that we'll continue to carry that forward. And the reason, again, for that is because it's manifestly in the interests of the people that all of us have to represent.

MALONEY: I'd like to shift now to China. Obviously, this has been a big focus of the administration's attention over the course of the past three and a half years. There have been moments of profound tension – the spy balloon amongst them – and there have been at least some efforts to try to stabilize the relationship, to invest in improving and

strengthening the high-level communication channels that have existed and that have been expanded. What is your sense of how long that relationship can be stabilized? Are we – we are in a competitive situation with the Chinese. We are going to find moments of friction all over the world. Are we able, in fact, to sustain that kind of stability, or are we likely to cycle through in a kind of erratic phase of crisis to stabilization and back and forth?

BLINKEN: So I think that there's an expectation, both from the American people and from people around the world, that we'll do everything we can to manage what is arguably the most complex and consequential relationship of any in the world, manage it responsibly. And that means a few things. It means being very clear and standing up effectively to the areas where we have profound disagreements and would take the world in different directions, and that's what we've done. It also means trying to find wherever we can areas of cooperation where it's clearly in the interests of our people, Chinese people, people around the world for us to cooperate. We've done that too, and I'll come back to that in a second.

And it means not only recognizing but embracing the fact that, yes, we are in an intense competition, an intense competition to shape what the international environment looks like over the coming decades. And for Americans, there's nothing pejorative about the word "competition." It's actually at the heart of our own system, provided it's fair and provided that we approach it effectively.

And this comes back to the basic foundational propositions that President Biden had coming in. Whether it's China, whether it's any of these other challenges, we're going to approach it from a position of strength. We're going to approach it having made investments in ourselves that put us in a much stronger position in dealing with some of the challenges that China poses. We're going to approach it having reinvested in our alliances and partnerships and having reimagined some of them in order to be genuinely fit for purpose, because we know we're so much more effective in dealing with these challenges if we're doing it with others. And that's exactly what we've done.

So I think we're in – we're at a place now that we were not at three and a half years ago, four years ago, where we can approach this with tremendous confidence, acknowledging the difficulties, acknowledging the challenges, but knowing that we've made the right investments in ourselves and that we've made the right investments in allies and partners. As I'm looking at Europe, as I'm looking at critical partners in Asia, as I said before, the convergence in the approach – both the shared recognition of what the challenge is and, increasingly, a shared view on what to do about it – that's much greater than it's ever been.

There's something else that's changed, and I think, again, you'll see this at the NATO summit. We have four partners from the Indo-Pacific coming to the NATO summit, as they have for the last three years: Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea. This is one manifestation and one recognition of something that really is new, which is that increasingly partners in Europe see challenges halfway around the world in Asia as being relevant to them, just as partners in Asia see challenges halfway around the world in Europe as being relevant to them. Prime Minister Kishida put it best in the wake of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. He said what happens in Europe today could happen in Asia tomorrow.

And, of course, you see the relationship between Russia and China that has profound repercussions for Europe, when unfortunately you have China making in effect investments in Russia's defense industrial base in ways that are allowing it to continue the aggression – not providing arms directly to Russia, but providing all the inputs necessary for it to sustain this war: 70 percent of the machine tools imported by China – excuse me, by Russia – coming from China; 90 percent of the microelectronics being imported by Russia coming from China; a massive production now that we've seen of tanks, of munitions, of missiles, again, enabled by this defense industrial base despite the important impact that sanctions and export controls have had.

Well, for Europe, that means that one of the – arguably the biggest security threat that they face, the biggest since the end of the Cold War, China's playing a role in fueling that. Our

partners in Asia, again, understand that if you allow aggression to go unchecked anywhere, it becomes a greater threat everywhere. A would-be aggressor who sees that Russia's being allowed to proceed with impunity in Europe may get their own ideas in a very different part of the world. So we now have – and, of course, we have the relationship between Russia and North Korea that's evolved, as well as with Iran.

So you now see – and this has also been a very deliberate part of our policy – a breaking down of the silos between European alliances, Asian alliances, and even more broadly as we work in countries – and not just countries – other partners from other parts of the world. I think that's going to create a very powerful edifice with these fit-for-purpose coalitions – different sizes, different shapes, focused on different discrete challenges where different countries may bring specific things to the table. That's part of the new landscape, the new geometry that we've put in place.

MALONEY: I want to ask you just a little bit about the – how you assess Chinese intentions. They're obviously working to sustain the Russian war effort in Ukraine. They have invested in a huge military – conventional military buildup as well as a nuclear buildup. You said that the United States is approaching the relationship from a position of strength and confidence, and we're prepared to compete. Are the Chinese looking to compete or are they looking to dominate?

BLINKEN: Well, look, I think China's objectives are clear. Over time, over the coming decades, they would like to be the leading country, the dominant country, in the international system militarily, economically, diplomatically. That's clear. And if their vision for the world actually matched ours or matched many other countries, that would be one thing. But they have a different vision, a different vision of what that future looks like. And so we disagree, and we're going to compete very vigorously to make sure that we're the ones who are effectively shaping that future.

Now, again, this is something that's – that defies being put on a bumper sticker. You can't simply put it on the back of your car. The complexity of it, the fact that our countries and

so many of our societies are so intertwined, means that, again, there are going to be areas where we're in vigorous competition. There are areas where we're clearly going to be contesting. But there are also areas where we're going to be cooperating because, again, it's in our mutual interest. And there's a demand signal from countries around the world.

One example, and we're – we'll see where this goes. The number one killer of Americans aged 18 to 49 is fentanyl, a synthetic opioid – not car accidents, not heart attacks or cancer or guns. Fentanyl. And of course, we know that much of the fentanyl that's coming into this country is the product of perfectly legal chemicals, or precursors, being manufactured halfway around the world in China, being sent close to our borders in Mexico, and then being diverted and synthesized into an opioid that comes in and kills Americans. Forty percent of Americans – 40 percent, nearly half the country – knows someone who has died from an opioid overdose. That's the magnitude of the problem.

So there are two ways of dealing with this. One is to simply go as hard as we can to stop, disrupt, disable, these networks, the companies that are engaged in this practice. And of course, we've done that and we'll continue to do that. But the other way is to try to elicit greater cooperation, and that's also exactly what President Biden has done. When he met with President Xi in – at the end of last year, San Francisco, on the margins of APEC, one of the big subjects was exactly this, fentanyl, synthetic opioids.

And one of the propositions that he put to President Xi was this: Look, this problem that we're facing, where America's been really the canary in the coal mine, is now spreading to many other parts of the world. Markets are so saturated here that the criminal enterprises that are engaged in this have worked to make markets in other places – in Asia, in Europe, in Latin America. And you're going to have more and more countries insisting that you engage responsibly in dealing with this challenge. So whether you want to do something with us or for us almost doesn't matter because so many others are going to be insisting that you do.

And what we're seen – and so we want to work together on this, and we'd like to see Chinese leadership on this. And we have seen real progress, not yet sufficient. We have

to see over time if it's sustained and it makes a difference. But in terms of putting forward new regulations, in terms of taking down some of the companies that were illicitly engaged in the diversion of these precursors, these ingredients for fentanyl, prosecuting people who are engaged in this practice, setting up a working group with us to try to make sure that we're focused on it day in day out – that's happened and that's good. That's progress.

We also put together, and this gets back to these coalitions that we're trying to form precisely because this problem is spreading around the world and more and more countries are concerned about it, as well as with other kinds of drugs – ketamine, methamphetamines, others that are afflicting so many societies. We know we have to deal with this collectively because it's the definition of a transnational problem. The United States put together a coalition that now includes more than 150 countries and organizations where we are meeting almost day in day out, developing best practices, developing common approaches, and working to make a difference to stop the flows of these precursors and other things that are going into what is a devastating killer.

So I cite that only because I think it's so important that we don't lose sight of the fact that the complexity of the challenges, the complexity of the relationship, is such that we have to be able to act on it in each of these different areas: the competition, the contestation, the cooperation.

MALONEY: Thank you. I want to switch to another part of the world and to another transnational threat, that of terrorism. You've spent an awful lot of time in the Middle East since October 7th and the horrific attacks that killed more than 1,200 Israelis and took another 250 Israelis hostage and dual nationals. You've been deeply involved with the diplomatic effort to try to bring an end to the war and to bring about the release of those still held against their will in Gaza.

President Biden put forward an announcement just about a month ago of a plan that would have – that would lead to a durable ceasefire over phases and in the release of those remaining hostages. What is your sense of the likelihood that that plan can in fact come to fruition? And if it cannot, is there a plan B?

BLINKEN: I think the proposal that President Biden put forward is achievable, doable, which doesn't mean it will be achieved, doesn't mean it will be done, but it can be and it should be. And what we saw after he put out the proposal is quite remarkable. We've seen virtually the entire world come together in support of that proposal, country after country standing up, saying, yes, we support this; this is the way forward. This is the way to end the conflict in Gaza. This is the way to get the hostages home. This is the way to put us on a path to more durable security, more durable peace, a better future for Palestinians, for Israelis, and actually for the entire region.

And so everyone came together in support with one exception, and that was Hamas, which came back with a – most charitably a “yes, but,” trying to impose new conditions, moving the line, actually coming back on positions it had already agreed to and trying to – trying to get more. So we've been in an intense effort with the Egyptians, with the Qataris to see if we could close the gaps that Hamas created in not saying yes to a proposal that everyone, including the Israelis, had said yes to. And we're working that almost literally as we speak.

I believe that it is, yes, achievable and it would be the best play forward, the quickest way to end the conflict in Gaza, to stop the violence, to massively surge assistance, to get everyone home, including American hostages. But it's also true that one individual, likely buried hundreds of feet underground in Gaza, has the decision-making power to say yes or no. And right now, in not saying yes, Mr. Sinwar is not only holding on to the Israeli, American, and other hostages; he's continuing to make a hostage of Palestinian children, women, and men who are caught in a horrific crossfire of Hamas's making.

So the question that I can't answer for you is will he get to yes. The world is looking for it. The world is asking for it. The world is demanding it.

Now, if not, of course, we're looking at what comes next, and I think what's critical is this. We'll see. We've heard the Israelis talk about a significant downshift in their operations in Gaza. It remains to be seen. We do know this: One way or another, when this conflict ends, it cannot and must not end with a vacuum in Gaza. It has to end in a

way that makes sure that there are clear, coherent, achievable plans for Gaza's governance, for its security, and of course to start to help people to rebuild their lives that have been so decimated and destroyed.

We've been working over the last months with partners throughout the region to develop those plans, and as I said a couple of weeks ago when I was last in the region, a lot of that work has now turned into concrete ideas, concrete proposals that we're sharing with partners in the region – again, as we speak – to try to flesh things out and to try to make sure that we have the broadest possible agreement on what the right way forward is.

So the post-conflict plans are critical because if we get to a moment where the conflict really does shift dramatically, and hopefully the best possible thing would be the ceasefire, if we're not ready, if the region's not ready, then you're going to have a vacuum. And as I said before, vacuums tend to get filled by bad things before they get filled with good things.

And we know that there are three things that are unacceptable for Gaza's future: an Israeli occupation; Hamas perpetuating its leadership; or chaos, anarchy, lawlessness, which is what we're seeing in big parts of Gaza today. Absent concrete plans to have an alternative to that, that – one of those three things is going to happen. And given all of the extraordinary suffering that we've seen to date, that should be unacceptable, and it's unacceptable to us.

MALONEY: And the plans that you've been discussing with regional partners and others, are they ready to go? If for some reason Sinwar were to suddenly have a flash of humanity and accept the plan for a ceasefire and release the hostages, would we have – be able to move immediately to put the security, the governance, and the start of a reconstruction program in place? Or are we likely to be outpaced by other adversaries in the region who in past conflicts have moved more quickly than the international community?

BLINKEN: Well, we're determined not to be outpaced, which is exactly why we're leaning into this. It's exactly why we've been calling on so many of the concerned countries to engage in this effort. We really started back in January with many Arab partners on this. We've told the Israelis that we expect them to develop their own plans, their own ideas. And we've not seen enough of that from Israel. But no, precisely because we don't want to be caught off guard by this. This is exactly what all of our diplomats are deeply engaged in as we speak so that we are ready when we get the moment, and we need to get that moment as quickly as possible.

MALONEY: One last question before I turn it over to the audience for just a few questions before we unfortunately will have to let Secretary Blinken go back to his very busy day. We have with us in the audience former U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Jeff Feltman. We were speaking before the festivities began here about the prospects for significant action in Lebanon. The Israelis seem to be signaling that quite heavily right now, particularly as they downshift in Gaza, that they will have more capabilities to apply to dealing with a threat that is posed by Hizballah that has forced at least 55,000 Israelis out of their homes in the north. How imminent do you rate that threat, and what is it that the United States is doing to try to develop diplomatic alternatives to a military solution to Hizballah, which we know has been quite elusive over the decades?

BLINKEN: One of our primary objectives from day one – since October – was to do everything we could to make sure that this conflict didn't spread, didn't escalate, including and notably to the north, to Lebanon, to Hizballah, and then maybe beyond. And so this too is a place of intense focus. And I think you have a paradox in this moment, which is that at least in our judgement none of the main actors actually want a war. Israel doesn't want a war, although they may well be prepared to engage in one if necessary from their perspective to protect their interests, but they don't want one. I don't believe Hizballah actually wants a war. Lebanon certainly doesn't want a war because it would be the leading victim in such a war. And I don't believe that Iran wants a war, in part because it wants to make sure that Hizballah's not destroyed and that it can hold onto Hizballah as a

card if it needs it, if it ever gets into a direct conflict with Israel. So on the one hand, no one actually wants a war.

On the other hand, you have forces – momentum that may be leading in that direction and which we are determined to try to arrest. You have as you said, Suzanne, 60,000 or so Israelis who have been forced from their homes in northern Israel. Israel has affectively lost sovereignty in the northern quadrant of its country because people don't feel safe to go to their homes. You have many Lebanese in southern Lebanon who have also been chased from their homes. And absent doing something about the insecurity, people won't have the confidence to go back. And that requires two things. It requires first and foremost, of course, stopping the firing across the border that's endangering people, but it also requires an agreement reached through diplomacy to try to deal with some of the elements that are causing this ongoing insecurity, including making sure that forces, for example, are pulled back so that they can't endanger people every single day and that people have the confidence to proceed.

Here, again, the United States has been deeply engaged in trying to advance this diplomacy, but it also underscores why a ceasefire in Gaza is so critical. Hizballah, of course, has tied what it's doing to the situation in Gaza and has said that if there's a ceasefire in Gaza, it will stop firing into Israel. Now, that's – it shouldn't be firing to begin with. It's wrong in and of itself. But it's also a reality. So it only underscores why getting that ceasefire could also be critical to further enabling the diplomacy to try to create conditions in which the diplomacy can really resolve this problem, get people back to their homes in Israel, in southern Lebanon, and have something that's more enduring in terms of keeping things calm.

By the way, Red Sea – the Houthis – same thing. Iran, Iranian-aligned militia groups – so much of this is tied to Gaza, and I think it underscores why it's clearly in the strategic interests of Israel as well to effectively bring this to a close.

MALONEY: Thank you so much. We have just two minutes so I'm going to try to take two very, very quick questions from our audience here in sequence and then leave it to Secretary Blinken to close us out.

If I can give my colleague, Lynn Kuok, our Lee Kuan Yew Chair for Southeast Asia Studies here at Brookings, the first question.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, Suzanne, and thank you, Secretary Blinken. You mentioned several times the greater convergence with Asian partners. That, I think, may well be the case for northeast Asia – and you mentioned how Japan and South Korea are joining the NATO summit, and of course, there's strong recognition that the two theaters – the Indo-Pacific as well as Euro-Atlantic – are linked. But I would suggest that the picture is rather less clear in Southeast Asia. Many of the countries there have not taken a strong stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and in a recent poll China for the very first time ever has edged past the United States in being the region's choice of partner. If the region were forced to choose, how do you think the – how do you think the U.S. losing ground to China in Southeast Asia hurts U.S. goals in the broader Indo-Pacific region? And what is being done about it? Thank you.

BLINKEN: So I'm seeing something different. And I acknowledge the complexity of it. And you're right, it's not a uniform picture, but I'm seeing something different. Look at the relationship – again, just over the last few years – that's evolved between the United States and the Philippines. Look at the relationship that's evolved between the United States and Vietnam – and in different, sometimes quieter ways, relationships with other countries in Southeast Asia. I think we're in a very different place, and I think it's the product of a recognition on the part of a number of countries at some of the challenges that China poses to them, and that they have a real issue with – notably, China's action in the South China Sea, which affects the interests of many countries. We see that most prominently with the Philippines, but it's of course not just the Philippines.

I think countries also recognize that the number-one provider of foreign direct investment in those countries is actually the United States. We understandably talk a lot about trade – that’s important – but countries also see that the FDI that’s going to them and coming from the United States is making a huge difference in the kinds of investments they can make in their own future. And this is something that they not only want to sustain, they want to build.

And look, we’ve been very clear with many partners and many countries: We’re not asking countries to choose, we’re simply trying to make sure that we’re providing a clear choice, and what I believe in most cases is actually a better choice. The more we’re able to do that, the more they see that, I have no doubt where they’ll go. Now, again, you – sometimes that’s a little bit more quiet. Sometimes it’s a little bit more vocal. But the trajectory is clear.

The last thing I’ll say on this is this: There is also room for everyone, which is to say if there are investments that are being made in infrastructure, in connectivity, in the future, that investment is desperately needed. As long as it’s – it’s the kind of investment that creates a race to the top, not a race to the bottom, not piling debt on country after country, not bringing in your own workers to build a project, not doing something that turns out to have really shoddy standards so that it falls apart in a few years, not ignoring the environment, not ignoring the rights of workers – if that’s the kind of investment that’s being made, then bring it on, it’s great – from anywhere, including from China.

I think countries, though, are also eyes-wide-open about the fact that when it comes to China, there is a fusion between the military and civilian sectors, and anything that quote/unquote “civilian investment” does automatically becomes the property of the state and the property of the military. And that’s of concern to countries as well.

So I see us, again, in a very different place than we were just a few years ago in these relationships, in these partnerships – both individually with a number of countries, but also with some of the critical institutions like ASEAN, where we’ve had extraordinary ASEAN summits, including here in Washington, that President Biden has hosted, to continue to

build those relationships. And then individual countries in the region are also part of different collections of countries and organizations that we put together to deal with discrete problems.

Many of these countries want support, assistance with their own maritime domain awareness – a fancy way of saying what’s happening in the seas around them, upon which they’re so dependent. We see many countries afflicted with the scourge of illegal, unregulated fishing, where industries are being decimated. We and other countries have provided assistance there so that they can gain control of their own seas and their own waters. All of these things are making a difference every day, and of course, climate’s a whole other subject where so many countries are looking for partnership and the kind of partnership that we’re working to provide.

MALONEY: I think we have time for one more question. I’m looking for someone from our early career staff here at Brookings, perhaps. I see a hand up right there, and I’m sorry, I can’t call on you by name, but a mic will be coming to you in just a moment.

QUESTION: Hi. Sopiko, a research analyst at Brookings, originally from Georgia. Thank you for the discussion. And Secretary Blinken, as we approach the 75th NATO summit in Washington, D.C., South Caucasus remains a region of strategic importance. In the light of the recent developments, including ongoing tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia’s upcoming election in October 2024, so-called foreign agent law, infrastructure deals in the Black Sea with China, and shifting geopolitical dynamics – meaning reduced Russia influence and increased Western engagement in Armenia – how does the U.S. view the influence and interests of the global powers in the region? Thank you so much.

BLINKEN: Thanks. Well, you’re very right to point to the region and to point to a tremendous amount of movement in the region. And we have, I think, both real concerns but also real opportunities. You mentioned the foreign agent law in Georgia. We and many other countries have not only expressed our deep concerns about it, especially its passage; we’ve taken action to manifest those concerns. And I think you’re likely to see

more of that. I think it's clearly antithetical to the European direction that Georgia wants to take, and that clearly the majority of the Georgian people want to take.

Armenia and Azerbaijan – there is an extraordinary opportunity, potential to realize a peace agreement between the countries that ends decades of conflict and actually creates in the region, I think, a tremendous opportunity for economic connectivity, for economic growth, for connecting countries both east, west, north, and south. Azerbaijan has a critical role to play in that. We have invested intensely in our own – with our own diplomacy in trying to help bring Azerbaijan and Armenia to a peace agreement. We've done that in very close collaboration, coordination with the European Union, and I think that that's something that really is within reach. I was speaking just about a week ago to President Aliyev on this. I think that's achievable, and it's manifestly in the interests of both Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as the broader region.

So we're attuned to the challenges, including some of the ones you've expressed in Georgia. We're also very focused on some of the opportunity, and the opportunity is real. Thank you.

MALONEY: Before I close out our conversation today, I want to ask all of you to help us by staying in your seats while we bring Secretary Blinken and his colleagues to their vehicles, and so if you could just stay put in just a moment. But first let me – please join me in thanking Secretary Blinken, his amazing team, and the amazing team at Brookings that made this possible. (Applause.)

BLINKEN: Thank you.