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OPENING REMARKS AND MODERATOR

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KEYNOTE

THE HON. ADAM SMITH (D-WASH.)

U.S. House of Representatives

PANEL 1: THE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT AND U.S. NATIONAL
SECURITY STRATEGY

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MODERATOR: JEFFREY FELTMAN

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KEYNOTE

THE HON. ELISSA SLOTKIN (D-MICH.)

U.S. Senate

MODERATOR: MELANIE SISSON

Senior Fellow, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology,
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PANEL 2: THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND THE U.S. NATIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY

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O'HANLON: Greetings everyone. Welcome to Brookings. I'm Michael O'Hanlon with the Strobe Talbot Center on Security Strategy and Technology. We are hosting our fourth annual Knight Forum today, and we're thrilled to have you here with us. We're gonna spend the afternoon talking about the state of the international security environment, as well as American defense strategy, and we'll do that first with a keynote conversation.

I'll be privileged to have with Congressman Adam Smith, whom I'll introduce in just a second. And then we'll have a panel, a coffee break, and then Senator Elissa Slotkin will be interviewed by my colleague Melanie Sisson. Then we'll have a final panel to cap off the day, and the first panel will focus more on broad, big picture international security trends, the second panel a little more on defense.

So that's just to give you the lay of the land as we proceed. Without further ado, I'm gonna introduce Congressman Smith, and then we'll bring him on stage and look forward to a conversation followed by your questions towards the end.

Congressman Smith is serving his 15th term in the great state of Washington. He had a brief foray in his life in the great city of Washington and then moved west where he's been with his family ever since, except for a stint at Fordham University en route to a political science degree, and then a law degree from the University of Washington. He worked in public service and in the law for a number of years in Washington State, but was already running for state senate from an early age where he won his first office and took his seat in 1991.

So he is one of the very young-looking yet very longstanding public servants in our country, and one of the most senior Democrats now in the Congress. And of course, as you all know, he has been both chairman and ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee. So, without further ado, please join me in welcoming Congressman Smith to Brookings.

So, congressman, again, thank you for being here and we're now a month into the shutdown, but you've still been maintaining a busy, bi-coastal kind of life. Maybe just as a warmup to ease into heavier conversation. What's this month been like in Washington?

SMITH: Ease into it. No, it's been unprecedented and very difficult. I mean, I've been through shutdowns before. Sadly, I've never been through one where we shut down the House. I mean, it is, it is a weird, weird situation that the United States House of Representatives has not been in session since September 19th, particularly during a shutdown. I mean, we usually are in session more often than expected during a shutdown

'cause we're trying to resolve the crisis. To essentially have, you know, the Speaker of the House, you know, silence the United States House of Representatives and, you know, shut it down is, is unusual. Troubling, but also juggles the schedule in terms of where you have to be and what you have to do.

O'HANLON: Well, let me ask about the world now. And, uh, that hasn't slowed down too much, even as the House has slowed down this month, and I thought we could begin in Northeast Asia where the president is concluding his trip. He's been to ASEAN, he's been to Japan. I, I was in Japan until yesterday morning, and I saw Air Force one on the tarmac.

He then went off to Korea. He's meeting with Xi Jinping next. And I, I wondered if, if we could start with that region and just ask for your overall impressions of how things look to you in Northeast Asia. And you can cover as many countries as you want or focus on one or two that are most important.

SMITH: Sure. Yeah. Actually I was just, last month I was in China. I was in Beijing and Shanghai, and then went to Cambodia after that, which was the first congressional House delegation that had been in China since 2019. There had been one Senate delegation. So there's been this, you know, sort of break in communications partially because of COVID, but also because of the increasing tensions between the US and China and the approach both countries had taken, which was basically, I don't need you. You're gonna go away and I'm going to be on top. So let's just separate. And I'm deeply troubled by that approach. So I'm encouraged that the president is there. I'm encouraged that they let our delegation in and opened up that dialogue because we really need to talk with China. We need to communicate with them.

And so, get into the other countries in a moment. But I think the relationship with China is the most consequential bilateral relationship in the world right now, and will be for decades to come. Two most powerful economies, increasingly pretty close to the two most powerful militaries as China has ramped up. And I think we need to find a way to get along with China. The focus in Washington DC is very much, how do we beat China? And that you see in Congress all the time. You certainly see it from the China Select Committee. What I want to know is what is our plan for coexisting with China? Because that's what we're going to have to do. We're not going anywhere. They're not going anywhere. Continuing to pursue a strategy that says we're gonna win, no, we're gonna win, I think is completely incorrect. We need to engage and figure out how to make that relationship work.

And the final point on that piece is, so we have the, you know, I refer to it as the cringe. Other people have different names. China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, global extremist groups that, that we're trying to deal with. I cheat a little bit on aspects of that, but, but anyway, it gets there. Um, you know, how, how do we confront that? And I think, you know, acknowledging the threat helps, but then we're not going to be able to take on every single aspect of that and win. And of that group, China is the most invested in a global order. I mean, their economy is dependent upon it. They have slightly different views for how that global order should be run. But we are a lot closer to aligned in that than we are certainly with Russia or North Korea or Iran, or your average ISIS or Al-Qaeda group. So I think there is an opportunity there to have a dialogue with China that could bring the tension down and get to a better relationship. Ton of details in there we can dive, dive into.

The other piece of it is the countries in Asia, and this is something that the Biden administration did really, really well. I know there are a lot of people who are critical of a lot of different things that Biden administration did, but the alliances that we built up around China during his presidency were really consequential and very important. Um, certainly, uh, the Quad with Japan, Australia, India, and the US was important, but Japan has become a much better partner. South Korea, the Philippines, these are areas where we built partnerships that strengthened us. You know, maintaining and building on those partnerships is crucial. Obviously Trump has a slightly different approach, more confrontational. I worry about how that's gonna impact it.

Now he's in, as you mentioned, he's in Japan. He's trying to patch that, that up. But so I would say figure out how to get along with China, maintain and build alliances with as many other nations in that part of the world as possible, would be the, the quick summary.

O'HANLON: How do you take stock of how President Trump's been doing with this push for greater allied burden sharing? Obviously most of us get nervous about some of the methods and the process, and last spring it didn't look good for NATO's long-term survival. Then we had a summit where things seem to go a bit better and NATO allies committed to greater burden sharing. I was just in Japan, as I mentioned, they have a new prime minister, their first female prime minister in history, Prime Minister Takaichi, and she's talking about getting Japan to 2% of GDP for its military spending. Now, within a couple of years time accelerating the previous timetable, it used to be that the US insisted Japan not exceed 1% in the decades after World War II.

SMITH: Times change.

O'HANLON: Yeah, times change. How do you assess the overall success or, or lack thereof of President Trump in trying to elicit greater allied burden sharing?

SMITH: Well, I mean, there's a couple different questions. You know, has greater allied burden sharing happened and how much of that has to do with what Trump is doing? I, I don't think you can just sort of put those two questions together because the primary reason that we've seen an increase in greater allied burden sharing, if you would put it that way, is because our allies have become very fearful of people in their neighborhood.

Certainly what motivated Europe was Russia. I mean, the invasion of Ukraine definitely focused their attention. And yes, they have ramped up. I just met with the German defense minister today. They have ramped up their defense because Russia is a thing, again, and worth worrying about. Asia, you know, China behaved very belligerently to their neighbors, you know, economic coercion, but also grabbing at different sovereign territories from Japan, Philippines, and Indonesia, a bunch of other places. So that heightened their desire to be able to defend themselves. That's been a big part of it.

Now, Trump came in with his uniquely bullying approach, to try to get them to do more. And what I worry about there is if you're just trying to get them to do more as part of a, a collective understanding of what our national security interests are, great. You know, be as aggressive as you have to be, make it work. But there is considerable concern that isolationism is pushing Trump's viewpoint as much as a desire for greater burden sharing, which is to say, we don't care, we're out, good luck. That is where we don't wanna go.

And that's where a lot of the Trumpian rhetoric is troubling to me, because on the Trump side of the political divide here is the argument that somehow the United States of America has been taken advantage of for the last 80 years. All these European countries, these Asian countries, we provided security to them. I think, uh, Secretary Hegseth had the unique way of saying it: you know, "Uncle Sam shouldn't be Uncle Sucker." And I think that is a remarkably ignorant way of looking at the last 80 years of history. Those partnerships, those alliances that we built, benefited us more than any other country in the world. We had the biggest, most powerful economy ever because we had a relatively peaceful world and we had a lot of partners and friends. We weren't doing it out of some generosity. We didn't want to be dragged into another world war, which would be costly to us, and we wanted a reasonably prosperous world to do business with. That's what we wanted and that's what we got.

Now how we divided that wealth back here at home has certainly raised some issues, but the basic point that we generated a very robust global economy that we benefited from. So to go at that and say, you know, that Europe has been basically shirking their responsibilities, all the other, no, that was the post-World War II arrangement. It's the cliché, what is it? Germany down, Russia out, US in worked really well. Okay. We didn't want those countries building up their militaries and doing more because we saw how that had played out over the course of the previous thousand years. So I don't like the language and I think if we looked at it and said, Hey, we benefited, you benefited, times have changed a little bit, we need some help.

Yeah. So I, I think it's, it's really improving. I worry that Trump's belligerent approach could sever that. We're right now in the midst of a huge debate over the US presence in Eastern Europe and you know, are we going to maintain it? A lot of mutterings from Bridge Colby and others that we're gonna be pulling out, which can undermine the alliance.

So I'm worried about it. We're in a better place. But is this administration going to remain committed to the concept of why these alliances are important, not just for our partners, but for us as well?

O'HANLON: If I could, let me take advantage of what you just said, to swing over to Europe now since we're going fast here today and doing a whole tour, to resolve of the whole world, and then talking a little defense strategy along the way as well. So I just saw a press release by the chairmen of the Senate Armed Service Committee and House Armed Service Committee, the Republican chairmen, criticizing the Trump administration for it's apparent decision now to stop sending a rotational brigade to Romania in particular, and saying that, you know, there's still a big threat to Romania and Eastern NATO in general, NATO overall, and that this is not the right time to do this, certainly without consultation, without a transparent process.

Anything you'd wanna add? You just alluded to your concerns, but how do you see the overall US footprint in Europe, and maybe where should it go over the next few years?

SMITH: Well, that's the worry and the concern as I said, that the Trump administration is going to draw down in Europe. And now with Ukraine fighting for their life against Russia, with Russia, you know, being increasingly weakened by that fight, but with the Baltics, Romania, Poland being concerned about what Russia might do to them, now is not the time

to signal weakness to Vladimir Putin in Eastern Europe. That's kind of hard to argue with, so why, why are they doing it? And that gets back to sort of the concern about their worldview.

Now the way they try to pitch it is we can only do so many things at once, so we're trying to prioritize in, in, in, in different places. I guess the argument there, would they be, they're prioritizing in Asia, but the world is connected. Sorry, duh. But, so what's happening in Europe has a profound impact on what's happening. In fact, you know, if we wanna stop China from being overly aggressive in terms of taking the territory of other nations and militarily, the single best thing we can do is make sure that Putin fails in Ukraine. Is to make it clear that that type of aggression to expand territory doesn't work. So we're not helping Asia by looking weak in Eastern Europe.

And the other concern, when you look at the various characters, you know, influencing Trumpian national security, you have to be worried about, a: excessive isolationism. To my previous point, that, you know, the right wing wants to be isolated from the rest of the world because screw them, they're not doing anything for us. Why do we care about them? The left wing has its own reasons for isolationism, which I'll get into later perhaps. And then the second thing is, you know, as I think Liz Cheney, so memorably put it, you've got the Putin wing of the MAGA movement, which is, you know, well, Putin is a white Christian nationalist who's fighting woke-ism, why do we have a problem with him? And that is a thing, by the way. Fortunately it seems like a thing that, you know, better leaders like Mike Rogers and Don Bacon and Roger Wicker have managed to sort of tamp down. But Marjorie Taylor Green is still out there, and that's certainly her worldview. So as we look at what they're doing in Europe, we have to worry about which one of those worldviews is ascendant within the Trumpian world, and if they're drawing down in Europe, is that, you know, pushing that sort of Putin-friendly, isolationist, uh, viewpoint?

O'HANLON: Do you think there's room to reassess some of the US military footprint in central and Western Europe, even if we keep it robust in the east?

SMITH: Sure. I mean, yeah, we, we, we look at different pieces of it, but, but overall, remember we have drawn down massively in Europe over the course of the last 30 or 40 years, and justifiably so. I mean, the Cold War ended, the threat of, you know, Russia, you know, rolling into Germany substantially receded. So, you know, we, we've already done that. I'm not sure there's a lot more room to draw down there that doesn't begin to jeopardize the basic alliance and deterrence mission that that is such a crucial part of.

O'HANLON: And I know you've made a priority of focusing on military personnel just as you've made a priority in your broader career focusing on middle class and families in the United States, when you talk to military personnel about their views on serving in Europe, I don't get the sense that it's seen as a huge burden. I think it, it's seen as a place where you go, it's interesting. You can bring your family in most places. Is that your sense as well?

SMITH: Yeah, no, I certainly, it's, you know, it's not like serving in Afghanistan or during the course of the war to be sure. So, and I think it helps us, it helps us to build relationships and have that global presence. And that's sort of like, to sort of go back to, sort of the more framing narrative to everything we've been talking about here. You know, what, what should the US role in the world be right now? We're waiting for the National Security Strategy to come out from the White House, which should come out in the next couple of months, which would be really interesting to see what they have to say.

And we are in the post-post-Cold War world. You know, we had that brief period at the end of the Cold War and it's like, yay, we won, everything's good! And then oh shit, no, it's not. And so we're now, we're like accepting that, that it is a complicated world. So what role do we play? We did a masterful job in my humble opinion, post-World War II, of figuring out what is our role in the world and then playing that role to a very effective degree. It's not perfect. Certainly there are mistakes.

I think we need to do that again. And the number one biggest theme for me is we have to get rid of the idea that we are going to dominate the rest of the world. We have to be engaged, but we have to embrace the idea of a multipolar world that we can influence but not control. And that I think was the biggest downside to the end of the Cold War, is it gave us grandiose ambition, delusions of grandeur, if you will. And the notion that our mission was to make sure that no pure competitor emerged. You remember that philosophy? That's a really hard thing to do. And we're not going to be able to do it, just like we're not going to be able to "defeat" China.

So we need to think what should our role be in a multipolar world that we can influence but not control? And that sort of flows down to all of that. But I'll tell you the number, the two biggest aspects of that are the one I already mentioned, which is wouldn't the world be a better place if we weren't constantly worried about going to war with China? Yeah. Imagine what that would free up in terms of our ability to engage in other concerns that we have. And second, partners and allies in a multipolar world are gonna be really, really important. Alright? We can't do it on our own. So we want to be making friends and reducing the

number of enemies. And that to my mind, should be the overarching theme of how we move forward in the next 50 years.

O'HANLON: I can't resist asking based on what you just said about the US and China 'cause I agree with your point, but the, the number one potential spark in the US-China relationship, I think most agree is the Taiwan issue. And do you have anything to say on that matter? Especially as we think about a long-term vision for how this situation can be managed, where we know we don't wanna force Taiwan to live under Chinese rule, nor could we, even if we wanted to, but the Chinese won't acknowledge any kind of change to the idea that Taiwan's part of China. Do we need bigger, new concepts for how to think about sovereignty, how to think about commonwealth? Have you thought about this question?

SMITH: Sure, I have. And I had a lot of conversations, met with the, the Chinese premier, met with the defense minister, foreign minister, had the People's Congress. We had a lot of very high level meetings and had these conversations and I think it's three points I wanna make here. We'll see if I can remember them all as we work our way through it.

First of all, when it comes to China, and I've said we should get along with them, what do I worry about? I worry about the fact that they are making claims on the sovereign territory of more than half a half dozen other nations in their neighborhood. Now Taiwan's different, that would be my second point, which I'll get to in a moment. But, you know, they are fighting over the Philippines. They're fighting over Japan. They claim a chunk of Russia, they claim a chunk of India, they claim a chunk of Indonesia and Vietnam. And they have a very convoluted argument for why all of those things are in fact or should be part of China. It has to do with, you know, once the Japanese got kicked out at the end of World War II, okay, who takes over what, you know? But the thing is, you know, China has overcome their century of humiliation and that was one of the biggest messages to them. Stop acting like the kid on the beach who got dirt kicked in your face, you're over that. You hit the gym, you worked out. It's all good. You are now a global power. Alright, so stop acting like, you know, this tiny little chunk of rocks that the Philippines claims is just absolutely integral to your sense of self-worth. It's not, alright? In fact, I said it more or less that way when they were making their argument about why the Philippines mattered; it shouldn't matter to a global power. So their sovereign claims are something that needs to be calmed down. You know, and they're causing all kinds of trouble for no particularly good reason. So that's, that.

Taiwan is deceptively simple, which is one China, no war. That's it. Okay. Don't declare independence. Stay with China. China, keep the ships and the guns and all that stuff to yourself and just let things be. So, no, I don't think we should come diving into this and try to upset that policy. We should absolutely arm Taiwan as long as China keeps doing all these exercises where they're circling around Taiwan, like they're ready to hit the beach. There's gotta be a deterrence there. And I think that that is part of it.

And then the third piece, to be a little generous. I've often said, by the way, to China, if they could just get over the whole Taiwan obsession, the world would be a better place. Sadly, they cannot. So, you know, you play the cards you're dealt. Taiwan's doing well, China's doing well, why don't we just chill? But they're very focused on that a hundred years of humiliation thing. Pride can be a problem. There's a quote from Pulp Fiction about that, which I won't say, but it does create a fair number of challenges.

Third thing, to be generous to China, and this is where I think China has a point. So the global order that we set up— and we all, most of us anyway, want a global order — was set up in, you know, the 1940s and 1950s. The world is a very different place now, and it's different in a thousand different ways. But one of the biggest is China, what China was in the fifties. They're entirely different now. So it's not unreasonable for China to say, hey, we're not opposed to a rule-based international order, but we think maybe some of those rules need to be adjusted to reflect the role that we're now playing in that world.

Eh, I said that during one of the meetings, of course, the, the Chinese newspapers, they loved that. The other parts of it, they sort of left out. And that's fine. I think we should have that discussion and that conversation about what role. But if China wants those rules to be changed to help them, they're gonna have to show that they're something other than a belligerent, aggressive actor just trying to gobble up as much as they can gobble up. Because people forget we had to do a lot of crap that was just helping other people. Alright. You know, the, the, the Marshall Plan in Europe, we rebuilt Japan, earthquakes, tsunamis all over the world. You know, we, we've done that. You know, that's part of it. Alright, China, you want to be the big global player, part of it is not just looking at the rest of the world as a resource opportunity. Not that we haven't done that too, but we've balanced that out with, with helping people. And so that's sort of what we, the conversation we need to have. And I hope that that Trump's desire to have dialogue with everybody— except apparently for Democrats, but that's another story— you know, and cut a deal, let's go. Let's, let's do that. Let's start having those conversations. You know, the Chinese pointed out to me that, you know, the secretary of State has never been to China. That's something that we probably

ought to fix. So that is how I would frame the conversation. But as a starting point, let's start the conversation.

OHANLON: Let me swing back to Europe and Ukraine one more time, then a question on the Middle East, and then a couple on defense specifics before we go to the audience. Do you have anything to offer by way of guidance right now, the Trump administration or NATO writ large about how to pursue the next step in trying to force Putin to a serious negotiation and try to bring about peace in Ukraine? It strikes me that Trump has made some improvements in his initial thoughts and at this point seems to be looking for additional sources of leverage, but I wonder if you had thoughts on how he could pursue that?

SMITH: Sure. Very simply, make Ukraine as strong as possible. The stronger Ukraine is, the more likely it is that Russia will reach the conclusion that they can not achieve their maximalist goals in Ukraine, so they need to downshift and negotiate. That was the big mistake that Trump made during his campaign. And once he got in office initially by basically taking Putin's side in a whole series of these arguments, undermining Zelensky, undermining Ukraine in a thousand different ways, thinking that somehow Ukraine was the impediment to peace. And certainly if we can get Russia to stop their war, there's some tough negotiations that have to take place, no doubt. But that's number one. Russia invaded Ukraine, not the other way around. Russia wants all of Ukraine, not the other way around. So that took a long time to get Trump and his team in the right place.

And now they have finally stopped actively undermining Ukraine. That's positive. They even talked about some sanctions on Russia to ramp up the pressure. So that's where, where they need to get to. And then you force the negotiation. And then, you know, if Trump, again is the master deal maker, he claims to be, go for it. But you gotta get Ukraine strong enough so that Putin knows that he can't, he can't ultimately achieve his maximalist goals first.

O'HANLON: Just a quick follow up on that before the Middle East question. You mentioned sanctions. Do you have any particular recommendation on how to turn up the pressure economically on Russia? Or is it just sort of incremental, you know, ongoing, adding new companies to various lists of band or otherwise sanctioned groups?

SMITH: Yeah. I, I, I, I don't, I don't know the, the details and ins and outs of sanctions, but that basically yes, we're ramp up the pressure and then crucially make it clear that we're gonna keep arming Ukraine. You know, don't have any more of these Hegseth-inspired

pauses. You know, make it clear that we're gonna keep arming Ukraine. Ukraine is going to be able to defend themselves.

O'HANLON: Should there be another aid package from the Congress for helping Ukraine? Or are you happy with the way it's working now?

SMITH: I'm happy right now. I mean, we'll see. Talk to me in a couple of months. We'll see if the money starts to run out, that may, may be necessary. And also Europe, they're stepping up. They're providing a lot more funds, a lot more weapons in Ukraine. Ukraine is developing an indigenous capability that is one of the miracles of modern warfare. But we'll see.

O'HANLON: So on the Middle East, I'm gonna give you two questions and you can choose which one you like better or dislike less, and, or answer them both. One's on Iran, one's on Gaza. And they're sort of the obvious questions, but I learn so much from you, I'd like to hear your take on each. So in, in the aftermath of the June airstrikes on Iran and its nuclear facilities, do you have a sense of how much we've set them back and sort of what the next steps should be on making sure they don't now race for the bomb clandestinely? And then on Gaza, of course, the big question is how do we give some real muscle to this international force that has been promised as part of the overall deal?

SMITH: Sure, well, first of all, let's be clear, Israel set Iran back and we, we did help them, but I, I don't like the Trumpian mythology that everything he does is the most miraculous accomplishment in the history of the world and nobody said it could be done. It's the most, some people are saying it's the most unbelievable thing that's ever happened in the history of the universe. Okay. That's a problematic way of looking at things because it deludes you as to what's actually going on in the world. You know, the one bombing run into Iran is not primarily responsible for this. Israel's consistent effort, with our, with our help, by the way, through multiple administrations, weakening Hezbollah, you know, weakening Hamas and weakening Iran has certainly put them in, in a vastly weaker position as a regional player and has created the opportunity to get a stable government in Syria and a stable government in Lebanon and an increasingly stable government in Iraq.

And if all of those things can continue to happen, and if Iran can just focus on Iran instead of exporting revolution and destabilizing all of their neighbors because they don't have a choice anymore, that's where we want to get to. And we've made a large amount of progress on that. Now, again, Donald Trump is gonna take absolutely 100% of the credit for that, and he deserves maybe five percent of the credit for that. But that puts us in a better position on

that. So I would say the crucial aspect of it is, you know, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, you know, how do we keep those going? Yemen a little bit more problematic. So we gotta figure out how to, how to deal with that and then just keep the pressure on Iran and hopefully they make that decision to look after their own people instead of focusing on the exporting of revolution.

As far as Gaza is concerned, a whole bunch of different pieces to it, a lot of different people involved. Single most important piece is we have to work with Palestinian alternatives to Hamas. And, and that is, you know, personally, one of my strongest criticisms of Netanyahu. For 15 years, he tried to undermine every aspect of Palestinian society to keep them weak. And as a result of that, you know, well, sorry, that's an overstatement; that contributed to Hamas. You know, if there ain't anybody else but Hamas, then that's what you got. So there are, I believe, Palestinian alternatives. I have met with King Abdullah, I've met with MBS, a lot of different leadership in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, UAE, Egypt that are working with Palestinian alternatives. And they've been arguing for several years now for these people. So that is the most important thing we have to do is lift those people up. Yes, you know, you can bring in an international force that will help stabilize. You can obviously get a lot of money to rebuild. All of that is, is crucially important, but ultimately to get to peace, the Palestinian people need a future and they need a future that is an alternative to Hamas and you've gotta work with them to help create that.

And the West Bank is absolutely connected to this. All right? You can't continue the expansion of illegal settlements and continue to keep the Palestinian people down in the West Bank and, and ultimately solve this problem.

O'HANLON: Just two questions on defense and then we'll go to the audience please. The first one's gonna be a big picture defense strategy budget question, and I'm wondering how you feel about the overall size of the defense budget once it actually gets passed and appropriated and you know, signed into law and dispersed. But also in the context of the Trump's, Trump administration's goals with Golden Dome missile defense architecture, with a prioritization of the Western Hemisphere, whatever exactly that's gonna mean in terms of force structure. How do you feel about the overall size of the defense budget and then also what you're hearing about Trump initiatives?

SMITH: Yeah, the size is fine. I mean, I'm not gonna quibble a billion dollars here, a billion dollars there. What's vastly more important is the acquisition reform that we're working on, that Mike Rogers has done such an outstanding job of leading on, to get the Pentagon to

spend its money better, innovate more rapidly, get the technologies we need at scale more rapidly. That reform is gonna matter a lot in, in sort of the modern warfare requirements, which are loosely summarized: secure communications, information systems, missiles, missile defense, drones, counter drone. Can we do that better, quicker, and more and more efficiently? That's the most important thing there.

I do worry about the Trumpian Monroe Doctrine approach here. We're spending a heck of a lot of money out of the military to secure a border that Trump says is already secure. That is a distraction financially. And then, you know, picking a war with Venezuela and Colombia and randomly blowing up people down in the Caribbean and the Pacific, that's expensive, destabilizing, and I, I don't see it having the positive impact that they claim it is. And it also, it undermines our credibility if we are engaging in what most of the world views as extrajudicial killings.

O'HANLON: I wanted to finish my part of the conversation on the question of US military personnel and families and how they're dealing with all the challenges they face. And of course, we all thank them for their amazing service and all they do for our country. But in addition, of course, we have the last nine months of a controversial secretary of defense firing a number of senior military leaders and taking on a sort of whole different set of priorities to what secretaries of defense often do. I'm still trying to track how much it's affecting the overall state of the morale of the force in terms of recruiting, retention, morale, people's happiness. And I think it's a mixed message from what I see so far. I'm very concerned, but I don't yet see data that causes me to feel like we're nearing a crisis in recruiting or retention, which to me is ultimately maybe the single number one thing I worry about in this kind of a, you know, culture wars scenario. I wonder what you're seeing in terms of, and what you're hearing in terms of trends within military personnel and how they're doing in this complicated era.

SMITH: Sure. I, I think, you know, we started to turn the corner on recruitment and retention in 2024. You know, COVID really had the most profound impact, couldn't recruit, disrupted everything. Numbers came back up. I think it's holding steady. Yeah. I think the culture war issue is a problem. And that, you know, during the, the one opportunity that I had to speak to Secretary Hegseth, which was when he came in and testified, and as ranking member, I get to make my opening statement, I had a number of issues. But the one I focused on at the end was the answer to a left-wing cultural revolution is not a right-wing cultural revolution. And that's what he's doing. And it's been ridiculous. And also the way they're firing highly qualified people just because their, their loyalty, their absolute 100% loyalty to Trump, not to

the American people, not to the US military, not to the Constitution. I, I think that can have a corrosive effect on how people do their jobs, because it's very clear now what matters most. What matters most is that Laura Loomer likes you, okay? So you better focus on that. It doesn't, you know, you can do your job poorly, that's fine, doesn't matter. You have to make sure that, you know, the right wing, you know, media world doesn't have a problem with you. And I think that is contrary to what the mission should be and I think that is going to be harmful.

And then, yeah, I mean, if you're not a straight white guy, there's reason to believe that this military really doesn't think much of you. And they've given them a thousand different reasons for that in a bunch of different ways. And as I said to Secretary Hegseth, 'cause he's got that famous quote about, how do you put it exactly? I'm forgetting one aspect of it, but "there aren't enough trannies in Brooklyn and lesbians in San Francisco to populate the military." And as I pointed out to him, that's true, there probably aren't, but there's also not enough straight white guys who remind you of John Wayne to populate the military either, alright. We need all of them, okay. In his obsession that you have to sort of look like GI, well, I was gonna say GI Joe, but didn't GI Joe have a beard? I think he did, at least in one iteration. So, sorry, you're out. You don't make the cut. I mean, it's just the stupidity of that whole approach. You know, and I get it, I've had to deal with some of the aspects of the left wing culture, war, having the proximity to Seattle that I do, and some of it is really problematic. But again, you know, the, the answer isn't no, we're going back to just straight white guys and everything's gonna be fine. Sorry, they can't be fat either. I wonder what his definition of fat is, exactly. You know, the American Medical Association has their [inaudible]. Is there somewhere in the Pentagon, it's like, you know, 20% of normal body? I don't know, but it's just, yeah. That's all very, very troubling in terms of building the force that we're going to need.

O'HANLON: Thank you. By the way, I should have said, uh, by way of framing that we of course look forward to the day when we can host DOD officials here. As you know, right now, it's still pretty complicated and we certainly, uh, I should have also noted earlier that, uh, we're very happy to have members of Congress and the Senate from both sides of the aisle and we have invited them. Just, schedules didn't work this time, but stay tuned. We'll, we'll have them back. Although I think you can tell from Congressman Smith, he's a pretty straight shooter on a lot of issues and is speaking his mind. And there's been some positive, uh, regard towards the work of Senator Wicker, Congressman Rogers and so forth.

So, uh, without further ado from me, let's see. We got about 15, 18 minutes for questions. Wanna take one or two at a time?

SMITH: One's better for me. Just I'll try to do it quick.

O'HANLON: Let's start in the very back please.

Audience question: Hi, thank you so much. My name is Asme. I work with the Aspen Institute Financial Security Program, and I was really curious about your vision for multipolarity. So, in a world where the US does accept the notion of being in a multipolar global order, what does influence over, for the lack of a better term, the Global South look like? And what kind of collaborations will the US and other great powers have to maintain to create a truly multi-polar order. Thank you so much.

SMITH: Yeah, no, I think we, we have to address the concerns of other nations while also addressing our own. I mean, we want peace and stability. We want access to markets, you know, developing nations, you know, they have needs as well. And we have to make it clear that we're as interested in their needs as we are in our, in our own.

I mean, that's how you build friends and make alliances and partnerships. It's not a selfless act where you don't get anything out of it, but it is an act that is based on the notion of we're gonna work together to solve problems, as opposed to the old notion of, what is it, the, the strong, you know, take what they want and the weak suffer what they must, we have to make it clear that that's not going to be our approach. And frankly, that's, that's an opening on the competition with China, 'cause China can be very belligerent and bullying in their approach.

So yeah, I think we have to look at the rest of the world and figure out how do we work with them. It's the basic philosophy that I've had. I've had to negotiate a lot of legislative deals, a lot of political things throughout my entire career as chair of the Armed Services Committee, back in the day when I chaired the Judiciary Committee in the state Senate. And the first thing I go is like, okay, well who, who do we need? Who has to say yes in order for us to accomplish what we want? And then the second thing is, what do those people want? I have a very long story involving Jared Kushner, Donald Trump and Jim Inhofe about how we passed the 2019 NDAA based on that basic premise, which I will spare you. But the basic idea is what do they want? You know, okay, this is what we want. So we have to look at the world that way, as opposed to looking at the world like, this is what we want, how do we

force them to give it to us? And that's a very simple philosophy. And then you think about it, okay, you care about Brazil. Well, what's Brazil care about? Now they care about not having a 50% tariff slapped on 'em, probably, but beyond that, okay, and how can we get to a sort of a mutual situation? And that's the different way of looking at the world, not looking at the world like, I'm big, I'm powerful, who can I crush next? But how do we keep the peace in the world by getting a little bit of what I want, a little bit of what they want and working in a cooperative fashion. And we've built the framework for this, all right? There're all manner of different international institutional institutions and regional alliances. We can dive into that and work with those, but that's the philosophy we have to use going into it.

O'HANLON: So I'll stay on this side for another question. Uh, the gentleman here on the aisle, please.

Audience question: Good afternoon, sir. Thank you for coming. Lieutenant Colonel Lonnie Wilson, United States Marine Corps. Question about military family support. So I did a tour in Okinawa, 2021 to 2023, and one of the things that, you know, we focus on, on the battlefield is the golden hour getting a casualty off the X and to a higher level of care. That type of care is not available for service members' families in Okinawa. In fact, in 2023, we, a service member lost a child in a trauma incident because they did not have, and we do not have a SOFA families access to trauma care on the island. And at the time, I think it's improved quite a, quite a bit, but there wasn't even the ability to, for mothers to have their children on the island. Four service members, they're sending them back to the states. Like I said, I think it's improved quite a bit. I'm happy to go back there. I'm taking my wife, taking all six of our kids back there. We're willing to weigh the risk. We're willing to do the duty for our country. I think that this that this issue has been brought to the Congress before, and I'd like to know if there's any update and if it hasn't, I'd like to bring it to your attention.

SMITH: Sure. Yeah, I don't, I don't, I was in Okinawa two years ago, had that conversation. I know we're working on it. I don't have specifics. You know, if you have a card or some way to contact you, if you could make sure that I or my staff have it, I'm happy to follow up. I, I don't have a specific answer to it

Audience question: Thank you, sir. And I really appreciate everything you're doing. Thank you.

SMITH: Alright. And thank you for your service. We appreciate it.

O'HANLON: Okay, we'll go to the back on this side please.

Audience question: Uh, uh, my name is Roger Cochetti. I am an author and a retired high tech executive comps at IBM, Verisign, CompTIA Technology. And the 80th anniversary of the United Nations has brought about a flood of proposals for reform of that institution. And that's occurring right at the same time that you and others are calling for a multipolar world. So I wonder if you have any thoughts on restructuring of the, of the UN and if one of the poles in a multipolar world is NATO, should NATO have like one seat on the Security Council, or who are the polls and how does that relate to reform at the UN? Thank you.

SMITH: Yeah, first of all, I want to emphasize I'm not calling for a multipolar world. We live in a multipolar world. I'm calling for us to acknowledge that and deal with it as it is. Yeah, I think the UN would be a key part of that. I think we also have to have a more realistic understanding of what the UN does. You know, it is a place for people to talk and interact. Putting the pressure on you and to resolve all of these differences is hard, uh, but it's better to at least have those differences aired in an organized forum. And yeah, I think we need to change the structure so that it better reflects where the power is. Now, how that works out, whether it's NATO getting one seat, I don't have a particular answer, but I think we should be open to that discussion. And I think part of it is, you know, in including other, other nations and, and giving them more of a say to, to reflect the influence of where they're at in the world now versus where they were at 80 years ago.

O'HANLON: Another question here,

Audience question: Congressman, Tim Oliver, had a career in submarines and now do work that helps develop workforce for the country. And right now we can't put our submarines to sea because we don't have a workforce in our shipyards and with our vendors. What are your thoughts about how we have a conversation with the country to help them see that the jobs that are technical in nature, are for our youth, should be there, whereas the uncertainties of what artificial information will do to future jobs, and those things that can be exported, uh, how that plays?

SMITH: Yeah, no, there's a lot of really important US policy issues contained in that question. The biggest one of which is how do we build what we need to meet our national security? Now you focus specifically on ship building, but there are other key capabilities that we need to figure out how we acquire. Certainly rare earths have been much in the discussion, the processing of them, you know, making enough drones, you know, making

enough basic munitions like, you know, 155, and other missiles. So two big pieces to it. One is the workforce. And this gets me onto a domestic conversation. You know, for too long we simply focused on sending them, everybody off to go get a four year degree. I have a long explanation of that, but basically as the economy changed and that four year degree got a lot more expensive, number one and number two, it got a lot less useful. There used to be a time in this country, believe it or not, when you could go off and get a four year degree in anything you wanted to and somebody like IBM or Boeing or, they'd hire you and they'd train you for a year and then everything would be fine. Well, the rest of the world sort of grew up and competed with us and we didn't have that strength anymore. So we need to make more of an investment in vocational training, and career and technical education. And this is slowly starting to happen. The one and only provision of the budget reconciliation bill that was passed that I thought was decent was one that allowed for some of the higher education funds to go to technical training. So encouraging that and moving that forward, it's starting to happen, needs to happen a lot more.

But the second big point, I make this all the time, back to partners and alliances and multipolar world, we are not going to be able to meet our needs in ship-building or more broadly on our own. So partnerships like AUKUS, absolutely crucial. Finding other allies who can manufacture and produce what we need. Gosh, Ukraine now is in a position to export, believe it or not, some of their defense needs because of the sheer volume they're doing. So we need to engage in partners and alliances, and I think ship-building's gonna be a huge part of that. South Korea, Japan, Norway, all really good at it, all pretty strong allies. How can we get them to share in that so that we build the ships that we need. Not to ever become 100% dependent on other nations, but to really take advantage.

And this is the great advantage that we have. I heard someone say that, you know, China looks at the US and sees us as having three great advantages. One, we got partners and alliances that no other nation in the world has. Two, we do research better than anybody, and three people want to come here. You know, we're damaging all three of those to one degree or another at the moment. But, uh, taking advantage of those partnerships and alliances to strengthen ourselves, I think needs to be part of the solution.

O'HANLON: Yes, please. Here in the third row, microphone's coming.

Audience question: Appreciate your being here. I'm Shelly Myers. I'm a retired Air Force officer. My husband and I do a great deal of travel these days in South America, Central America, Asia.

SMITH: Don't take a boat.

Audience question: Good idea. I'm with you on that. However, my concern these days, and I've been a student of, a student of Chinese history and Chinese for all my entire career, we see the Belt and Road Initiative thing going on in massive, I mean, it's massive what's going on around the world, with the Chinese taking, doing that part to take over and to sway these other governments. And what they're doing in those countries is necessary. It's infrastructure, absolute infrastructure they're building. We just got back from West Africa, for instance. West Africa's desperate need of sewage and, you know, those sorts of things. So my question is, and in the in days gone by, we would also see USAID on the ground. Okay. And, you know, obviously we just got back from West Africa. There's none of that. The signs have been torn down and how sad, tragic that is. But, so my question to you is, how, should we be afraid of the Belt and Road Initiative or should we, as a global community be appreciative that somebody's helping these countries build their infrastructure?

SMITH: Yeah, look, my personal opinion, and, and it is not a yes no answer on that. I, I see it as more of an opportunity than a threat personally. And that puts me in the distinct minority, uh, of, of, of people in, in Congress and elsewhere. 'Cause look, I mean. If, if China can actually help some of these developed nations develop better, it's a positive. Now, they get something out of it. That's access in many, most instances to some of the rare earths and other critical minerals that are out there. And if that further contributes to our inability to get what we need, that, that's a problem.

But I would love to see a world 10, 20, 30 years from now where China and the US, if there's some disaster in the world, if there's a famine, if there's a natural disaster, if there's just a country that's infrastructure is crumbling, are sitting at the same table talking about how do we handle this? Okay, that is a better world.

Now, to get there, we have to get off of the zero-sum competition. And let me be clear, and I, I said this to China as well. It's not just the US that has this zero-sum way of looking at the relationship. You know, China has been very much about we're rising, you're falling. It's all this Marxist-Leninist crap about late stage capitalism. You know, they're, they're still invested in the notion that we're gonna take over. We're gonna, they gotta chill on that and understand that we're not going anywhere and figure out how to work with us.

But if we did that, and also, and frankly, much like some of the, some of the efforts that we did to help in the developing world, when too much of it becomes a debt bomb, it doesn't

really help that much. And China in particular does something that we didn't do to the degree is of course they bring in their own workers. So they come in, they'll build the thing, and that helps, but it doesn't help the local economy in the short term in terms of jobs. And then long term, they, they have, there's a lot of debt burden, that is falling down, which of course is what happened, particularly in the Western Hemisphere and elsewhere with us. So we gotta balance that out. But right now it's more of a competitive thing. I would hope it could evolve into something where, you know, we're two big powerful nations working to make the world a better place and, you know, meeting our interests at the same time.

O'HANLON : Eric.

Audience question: Congressman, thank you. Eric Bell, I work at Brookings. As part of our world tour here, I think it's probably a, a opportunity to highlight the Puget Sound. So I just, uh, I wonder what portions of this conversation resonate with your constituents in the ninth district in Washington? Thank you, sir.

SMITH: I think the single biggest part of it resonates is let's get along with China. I have a huge Asian American population. First of all, large Chinese American population, large Taiwanese American population. And then also we do a ton of business. It's not just Boeing, I mean ag, you know, a lot of different tech companies. So I think in my region of the world, I think it impacts the entire country. But Washington State, a better, more productive relationship with China is just really good for our economy and, and good for keeping the peace.

O'HANLON: Do we have time for one more question? Anybody wanna pose the final question? Do I see a hand in the very back? Yes, please.

Audience question: Um, hello. My name is Nykshavyah Yisrael. I'm a freshman political science major at Howard University. And my question is that you talked about if we wanna be successful economically, then we have to have more allies than enemies. But with the recent, with the recent actions of the Trump administration, that may not be, that may not be possible. I wanna ask you, do you feel that our relationship with our allies could be the same even after everything that's happened after in the last nine months?

SMITH: Yeah, it won't be the same. It, it can be fixed. You know, I think, you know, the, the, the Trump approach to date has been very confrontational and very belligerent in a way that has made those relationships more problematic. Now it's a testimony to the influence that

the US has in the world that so many nations have reacted to that by saying, gosh, how do we get along with this guy? Okay. And there's all kinds of different things written about, of course, you have to flatter him when you talk. It's just, oh gosh, just so painful to think about the United States of America resembling Kim Jong-Un in North Korea. You know, those countries have responded by saying, how can we make this work? You know, how, how can we figure this out?

But yes, absolutely, the, the, the belligerent belittling approach that the president has taken has undermined that. I mean, and I'll just fire off a couple quick examples in the last couple of minutes we have here.

He put a 50% tariff on India, primarily because Modi wouldn't give him credit for something he didn't deserve credit for. And that was, you know, stopping the brief little conflict that Pakistan and India had here a few months back. A 50% tariff on a really crucial potential partner that had been evolving in a positive direction, both, both through Obama, even the first Trump administration and the Biden administration. 'Cause India historically had wanted to be neutral in the Cold War. They had relationships with Russia. It took a lot of work to sort of build that relationship. And then, you know, Trump is kind of detonating it out of pique. And don't believe for a second that he's doing that because India is buying Russian oil. He did it just to say, Hey, you didn't say what I wanted you to say and I'm gonna punish you.

Same in Brazil. 50% tariff, because they're prosecuting Bolsonaro. They're prosecuting someone for committing an insurrection against the country. Hmm, interesting. So, but that damages the relationship, you know, again, because it's just personal. You know, a lot of the stuff with Colombia, same thing. It's personal. They've done a whole bunch of different things to punish Colombia, to jeopardize that relationship.

And I haven't even had the opportunity to talk about the plans to invade Greenland, Panama, and Canada. And you know, and it's funny, I saw Mike Johnson, you know, when there was the talk about Trump having a third term and Mike Johnson, oh, he's just trolling. He's just trolling. He just likes to do that. What fucking world are we living in that that, that that is something someone says about the president. Ah, don't worry about it, he's just an asshole. You know, that's just the way he likes to talk to people. We got enough problems in the world that we don't need to create them because of temperament. And whether he actually, you know, tries to take Greenland and Panama by force and tries to annex Canada or not, saying that puts the US in a dramatically different place.

And again, I, I hear quotes and I never quite remember where they, where they came from. So for the smarter people in the room, you can, you can attribute it. You know, the notion America, you know, will not be great if they are no longer good. And I know we've got a mixed history. It's a complicated world and we've had to navigate through some very difficult stuff. But overall, a general principle that has united the rest of the world since World War II is that the US, unlike just about any other powerful nation in the history of civilization, we care about other people. We try more often than most to do the right thing. We don't always try, we don't always get it right, but we try more often than most to do the right thing. And that is an enormous asset that we have.

You know, I mean, you all know people in your life who you know are gonna be decent to you. And then you know people who are a little bit more aggressive and you know how you feel about 'em, okay? In terms of who you're gonna wanna rely on and who you're gonna wanna be around. And if the US continues to be a belligerent, belittling, insulting nation, almost regardless of what policies are that follow from it, that's going to make it harder. Now, the big question that all of us wonder would imagine, okay, so assuming Trump doesn't go for that third term—an assumption, by the way, I do not make—then we get back and we got a different group of people. Is it fixable? Yes, it will not be easy, but it is fixable and I think it's really important that we sort of work to build a coalition around that. And there's a lot of Republicans who, who, who agree with me on this broadly, they may not agree with some specific aspects of it. They want partners and allies, they want us to keep defending Ukraine, they want us to stay involved in the world. So it is a, a relatively niche group of people that is buying into the Trumpian way of looking at the world. Not to say that there's not a lot of damage being done, we gotta try to mitigate it in the short term, but in the long term build, build a different world.

And then lastly, I guess, you know, take advantage. Trump does have an instinct. He wants to cut deals, he wants to talk to people. So try to encourage that instinct. On Ukraine, just as an example, the one thing that sort of got Trump's attention is he didn't want to be the president who lost Ukraine to Russia. All that other stuff that I talked about earlier about how, so find that thing. And I'm sure he doesn't want to be the president that lets you know the relationship with China go bad or any of this other stuff. So try to encourage them in a more positive direction. But his basic belligerent, belittling approach to the rest of the world is unquestionably damage that we are going to have to work to mitigate and overcome.

O'HANLON: We're now gonna do a seamless transition to panel one. You'll have to wait for your coffee break till after panel one, but let me just, in closing, and as we leave the stage,

thank Alejandra Rocha and the, and Natalie and the whole team who's put this together, and Virginia and others. But also, please join me in thanking Congressman Smith. Thank you very much.

FELTMAN: Good afternoon, everybody. Um, that was a, that's be a very hard act to follow, but I'm confident that with, with this panel, we'll be able to, uh, meet your expectations of, of continuing such a frank, um, an important discussion.

I'm Jeff Feltman. I'm the John C. Whitehead visiting fellow at international Diplomacy here at the, here at the Brookings Institution. And I'm joined by four colleagues from the Brookings Institution, all of whom have expertise in the subject that we're to talk about, which is the international security environment and the national security strategy.

As Congressman Smith noted that the Trump administration's national security strategy is not yet out. We're all anticipating it being out in the next, in the next few weeks, in the next couple of months. So we'll be talking today both about sort of the, what, what is the NSS, what's the process of the NSS as well as what's, how should the NSS look at those at all?

The international challenges that Mike O'Hanlon and Congressman Smith talked about in the, in the, in the, um, keynote address in their discussion afterwards. I'm not gonna go through the bios, but I'll hint at some of the background. You can look up the bios of this distinguished panel. Online, but I will hint at some of their, um, background in my, in, in my questions.

And, and as before, we will leave time at the end for, for questions from, from all of you. Um, I'd like to, I'd like to start, um, Josh Rovner with you because you have literally written the book on, on strategy and grand strategy. You talk and you've, you've talked about this, you've written articles about it. And you've published, you've published the book this year talking about the distinction between strategy, which I think you describe as a theory of victory and grand strategy, which is, um, a theory of security bringing in all the components of, of, of government, um, power into play on, on behalf of, of security.

Um, and you've used some very interesting historic examples such as the role of the Amer-- of the British and the French and the American Revolution, because you've talked about how often these two concepts are confused between strategy and grand strategy. That, that they should work in tandem, but sometimes they become confused.

And I'm wondering, when you look at the national security strategies of, say the Biden administration, the first Trump administration, or you look at the challenges that, um, Congressman Smith was describing for all of us just now, how do you make sure that we prevent ourselves from having the confusion you described?

How would you advise those? Looking at today's challenges, building a national security strategy to, to dis to distinguish in a way that's, that's avoids the confusion is helpful.

ROVNER: So it's, uh, well, buy the book. Read the book. The answers, the answers are all there. Um, no, it's, it's, it's very hard to do and it's something that's bedeviled leaders in states.

Going back to antiquity, that's why I kind of wrote the book, because this is such a recurring problem, like confusing these ideas of how do you win a war, which is strategy versus how do you keep yourself safe, which is grand strategy, right? And, you know, in the United States, um, the national security strategy is supposed to be a way in which we identify our grand strategy, our theory of security, our basic approach to, to staying safe in what can be an unsafe world as, as we heard in the last, uh, discussion, right?

So, um, one way that we try to avoid this is by, well, through law. And the, the national security strategy began in, in the 1980s as part of the Goldwater Nichols Act. And every administration since then has been kind of forced to set down its vision of what the United States needs to do to, uh, remain secure, right?

What is our theory of security? How do we build forces? How do we, uh, bring in other instruments of, uh, national power? And what's the logic connecting all of those things to enduring a national security? Writing it down seems like a good idea, right? At least going through the process of thinking through the problem is a good way to start.

It doesn't always work, right? Some national security strategies are a lot more memorable than other ones. Some of them are, are fairly bland documents, right? Some are valid victories at the end of administration. Like, look at all the great things we did. Others are more substantive and, and more interesting and, and provoke better debates.

Now the real danger though is when you get into a war. Right. When you get into a war, you start thinking about strategy, small s and that's how do we win this war? Right? And in wars, the problem is that victory becomes so important, right? Winning this conflict becomes so

essential that you lose sight of how the war itself is connected with your broader theory right?

You might win the war, but at a, a very, very high cost, right? In ways that that actually affect your grand strategy, uh, later in negative ways. To go back to the American Revolution case, France won the war, right? And their strategy was terrific. It's not good for French grand strategy over the long term.

So winning the war is not the same. It's winning the peace and strategy is not the same thing as grand strategy in terms of the recent cases. So, uh, the Biden administration, I think that a pretty good job of keeping these two ideas aligned, right? Uh, uh, the Biden administration's grand strategy, as you can read in their national security strategy.

It is, on the one hand, it, there was an element of ideology. It did portray the world as in, in one respect, that contest between democracy and autocracy. And this is an ideological battle that we needed to, to fight for security. On the other hand, there was an element of realism too, right? The Biden administration was cognizant that resources were not unlimited.

We'd come through 20 years of fighting very frustrating wars, right? Uh, in places which were not immediately vital to national security. So think then about how the Biden administration fought those wars, or, or thought about the conflicts that were raging during, during its term. Like, well, got out of Afghanistan.

Okay. And this in one respect is to sacrifice an ideological principle to the reality that resources were not unlimited. And the Biden administration was very concerned about rising China and of Russia. Also, think about how the Biden administration handled the war in Ukraine, wanted to support the democracy, wanted to defend it against incursion from an autocratic regime, but it was careful, right?

Worried about nuclear escalation, worried about getting drawn into a big conflict that might be prohibitively expensive to the United States and affect its uh, uh, security elsewhere, right? So we can be critical of the Biden administration for some of its particular decisions in these conflicts. It at the macro level, it did a pretty good job of keeping these things together.

Now with Trump, I'll be very quick with this, with Trump, I am a little more concerned because the president really values his ability to remain flexible and ambiguous and transactional, right? He does not want to get pinned down to any particular principle. He

views bargaining leverage from being, uh, uh, uh, having the ability to change his mind or keep you in the dark, right?

So statements of clear unbreakable principles are not consistent with how he wants to conduct his foreign policy. And I get that, right? There's something to that, right? This comes from his business background, and maybe you do get bargaining leverage. The problem is what happens when you have to fight a war, right?

Because if you find yourself fighting a war, then you have to bring in big institutions and they need to have an idea of how their fighting will affect American grand strategy long term, right? It's not just a matter of one-on-one negotiations at that point. You're talking about big organizations that need to work together.

Right. And not having a clear grand strategy, uh, can lead them to, to, to wartime defeat. So, you know, as we think about what's going on in Venezuela, this has got me somewhat concerned, right? We seem to be drifting closer and closer to conflict without any sense of what the strategy would be in such a conflict or how it would affect the US national security in the aftermath.

FELTMAN: Thanks. Thanks Josh. Um, lemme turn to, lemme turn to Tom Wright at the end. Tom. Um, you were senior director for strategic planning in the Biden administration, which gave you the leading role in developing the Biden administration's national security strategy. And Josh just said you did a pretty good job.

WRIGHT: I think I was intimidating to him, though. I don't know what he really thinks.

FELTMAN: Um, and I, I've read some of the things that you've, you've, you've written since you've left office and you've talked about how the, the NSS, the National Security strategy is important because it can, it commun as a communication device.

It communicates to insiders, I think you said what their commander in chief expects. It communicates to outsiders what the United States should do. But I'm wondering, I've sort of two questions on this. One is, what's the practical impact for what hap, for how it affects how government operates? You have the NSS and then what happens?

How does it work in practice when things happen? Like the Gaza War, you know, October 7th and the Gaza War, which, which were not anticipated when you wrote the, when, when

the strategy came out in 2022. And the second question I have is when we look, when we listened to, to the way that, um, Josh just described President Trump's approach, the transactional approach, keeping things, um, ambiguous as long as possible.

Should we, will the NSS when it's released, reflect anything more than whatever the views were of that particular day? Is it is a Trump administration NSS that important? Um, when you have a president that's, that is operating by sort of instinct and ego.

WRIGHT: Thanks. Uh, and it's great to be with my colleagues up here, um, to talk about this and I guess we are expecting the strategy soon. I would just, I don't wanna be too retrospective and get into why we did such an amazing job as Josh said. Um, uh, I would just say, you know, I think the challenge within NSS is basically you wanna lay out sort of your internal, particularly the president's sort of internal theory of the case of worldview, which basically is how, you know, they are sort of conducting sort of foreign policy and strategy and what you think some of the major, you know, challenges are.

And you wanna do that in a way that is a little bit provocative and interesting. So it's not just another speech or another sort of communications talking points, you know, document. And you also wanna not get too far ahead of over your skis that you get into a lot of trouble. Right. So historically, the most interesting national security strategies are maybe 2002.

You know, when they talked about preemptive or preventive war and primacy, um, there was Bush's freedom, uh, sort of a, a agenda, I think NSS and I think it was that in the next one in 2007, both of those in retrospect, you know, were sort of pretty controversial, even controversial, you know, at the time I think we tried to, uh, lean into really how the president saw the world and not just have, you know, a collection, a, a consensus view from the interagency.

Um, and you know, we put a big emphasis on strategic competition, which was consistent with the Trump administration's national security strategy on great power competition. But also elevated the transnational challenges and talked about how those were, uh, you know, not just both significant, but there was a negative synergy between them, right?

That they both made each other worse. In some ways. Transnational challenges like COVID, you know, would make geopolitical competition worse because China and the US wouldn't cooperate, I think largely in my view because of China. Um, but um, there wasn't much

cooperation and geopolitical competition made those challenges worse and we tried to be realistic in terms of how to navigate that.

Um, I think the answer to your question on implementation is interesting 'cause there's sort of two bits of advice you get when you produce an NSS Uh, one, one group will say, you know, you need to have a big process and implementation. You need to pull everyone together in a sort of interagency meeting and ask them to produce, you know, documents showing how they're implementing your strategy.

And the second group is definitely don't do that, that's a terrible idea. 'cause everyone will show up with a long list of what they're already doing right. And claim that's consistent and will be a complete waste of time. So we sort of took the latter more and didn't sort of try to force, you know, to say, show me how everything you're doing is basically consistent with the strategy.

But I think there's a different way of looking at implementation, which is, is it part of sort of the iterative process amongst senior decision makers where it reflects how they think about the world and how they are acting, right? Does it shape their actions and behavior? Um, sort of later on, like, are we actually trying to, you know, compete with China systematically? Can you see sort of a new framework that comes out of that? I would say you could see that on technology, for instance, on the, uh, on the, uh, approach to the global economy as laid out twice at this institution and Biden National Security Advisor in a bunch of other ways.

So that gets me onto Trump. I actually think, you know, I, I've long believed, you know, that Trump has a core visceral worldview. It's not like a sophisticated, you know, strategy that you could put into a, you know, you know, in a, in a, a proper sort of laid out. Like here's how it all fits together. But he believes in certain things very profoundly. Um, he sees allies as the problem, not the solution.

He thinks allies are ripping America off. He believes in tariffs and a me capitalist approach to the global economy and fundamentally disagrees with the free trade regime that's exists more or less since World War II. You know, and he has an affinity for authoritarian strong men and transactional deal making. And that's been his view since the mid 1980s. And in the first term, he was constrained, um, by a lot of his team. And the people responsible for the NSS, producing NSS, that had nothing to do with that at all. Um, because they wanted to give the mainstreamers in the administration sort of a North Star to guide them, right?

What they thought was a responsible approach to us foreign policy. So it was unusual like that. This time I think they will produce a strategy that reflects what the White House wants to do. And I think it, it will, you know, it will be interesting in that regard. I think they need to lay out sort of how they see things.

I think the leaks we've seen already about the NDS, the National Defense Strategy, you know, prioritizing the Western Hemisphere over the Indo-Pacific, um, and, and Homeland Defense, uh, over, you know, alliances and all of that. I think that's all indicative of that, you know, so I think we actually probably will see, given the people who are supposedly writing it, we'll probably see quite an America First national security strategy.

And I have to say, I'm conflicted about that, right? Because I don't agree with that at all. So I'll criticize it substantively, but I think they will actually weirdly do a service to the debate, to the national security debate by actually being, uh, sort of upfront and frank about what they are actually trying to do.

So we can have that debate in a more, uh, you know, in a more rigorous way.

FELTMAN: Hmm, interesting. Um, and it'll be interesting to see if it comes out as you describe how it affects day-to-day interactions by diplomats, military, et I mean, I, I think about the fact I was, I was, you know, a US State Department officer for nearly three decades, um, and mostly in the Middle East and North Africa. And I, and I can tell you a lot about what we did during the time I was there, but I can't, but I suppose I went back and, and read the relevant national security strategies. I could find the linkages, but I didn't think every day about what the National security strategies said, really, you know.

WRIGHT: Well, I would just say one thing on that, 'cause I hear that a lot. No, I would just say one, one thing on that, which I think I, I do think that's a little mistaken because, at least for us, right? Because I think it's no one National Security advisor was not saying, what do I do now? Show me the National Security Strategy. Right? That doesn't happen.

But if their view is reflected in the national security strategy and it helps advance their view as they're navigating it in real time and they have future data points where they are further developing that it actually is a catalyst, right, for strategic development. So it's not a bible that you look to, to say what the guidance is. It just, it, it basically is part of that evolution in your worldview. It helps to force you to put it down and then maybe you reject it later. I don't think we've rejected any core part of it. I think we built on it, but that's, to me, the, the

implementation part. You know what I mean? It's not, it's not like that we were referring to it as a manual for foreign policy. It is that it, it is internalized, basically.

FELTMAN: Thanks, Tom, thanks. Vanda, let me turn to you. Vanda, you're one of this country's leading experts on transnational threats, transnational criminal act action, trafficking in persons, trafficking in in protected wildlife. Um, and you've advised success of US governments on, on these transnational criminal issues, including narcotics, how to combat, how, how to combat narcotics. And as Tom says, we, we anticipate that the national security strategy will have much more focus on Latin America. We've seen that the Trump administration is not using war on drugs rhetorically. It's not a metaphor where, where we've seen foreign terrorist organization designations against Mexican cartels. We see the repeated attacks on ships in the Caribbean and the Pacific, um, allegedly because of, of drug trafficking. And so moving from the process of the NSS itself to an actual issue that's important for this administration, can you describe what is the national security threat of narcotics, um, for us?

And what is the national security implications of the approach that Trump administration is taking so far, even in advance of the NSS being issued?

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, thank you very much, Jeff. So drugs do pose a very significant threat to the United States. There are different ways to deal with it. One is to try to deal with the supply.

One is to try to deal with the demand side. Both are important. What has significantly changed over the past 10 years that drugs like cocaine are not the primary focus. It is drugs like fentanyl and methamphetamine, synthetic drugs that are killing people around the world, including in the United States and the scale that we have never seen in human history in the worst years in the US. 100,000 people have been, or more were dying per year. We have seen those numbers going down. Don't hold your breath, it'll stay.

That's not the only issue why we should be concerned about transnational threats and transnational actors. Before the Biden administration, we, of course, had 20 years of the global war on terrorism. And I see in the audience some of the leading officials that were helping to protect us from the very significant threats that terrorism poses. The Biden administration, given the difficulties and traumas of the challenges of places like Iraq and Afghanistan, wanted to go away from dealing with internal issues. But that also led to, and focusing on great power competition like China and Russia. And that was reinforced by the

fact that the sources of the killing drugs of fentanyl and meth are immediately Mexico, but in the more distant, in the precursor stage, countries like China and India, China certainly became, and the fentanyl issue became a very important focus for successive generations, starting with Obama going through Trump one and through the Biden administration.

The Biden administration, however, uh, was not for a significant amount of time finding an effective way to deal with the fact that the threat of criminal groups is not just about drugs coming to the us, it's about the way that they have been undermining the state and society in Mexico, eating up Mexico alive and expanding power and control over territories, people, institution and political processes in the country, and legal economies in the country.

So I think that the, the corrective to look to the west to look to what's happening. South of the US border, not at the border, not the flood of people supposedly becoming an invasion in the us but the threats to Mexico that have been growing very significantly during, uh, the prior six years is an important corrective.

Now, how, how one goes about that is a very significant issue and certainly that does not, uh, eliminate the need to focus on the Chinas and Indias again, how one goes about it is the important issue. So China, uh, was the country that on the first day, along with Mexico and Canada, very surprisingly, Canada, were signal out as places to have, uh, tariffs related to fentanyl and migration mixed together, imposed on them.

We also had the, the designation of, uh, drug trafficking groups as foreign terrorist organizations. Those were radical shifts in US policy. And of course the even more radical, uh, aspect is now, uh, lethal actions against, uh, drug trafficking, allegedly drug trafficking entities that are designated as foreign terrorist organizations, of which there are at least 13 or 14 at this, at this state.

So we heard Representative Smith talking about, um, some of the implications and some of the, uh, questions. I think there is a massive questions about the efficacy of those attacks. Are they meant to deter, uh, criminal groups? I skeptical that they will work. Are they meant to stop the flow of drugs? We know for sure that's not going to work.

Are they meant to intimidate the Venezuelan military to stop support for Maduro so that the regime breaks and Maduro and set of people around him leave? I'm skeptical that will work, but we can have that conversation perhaps in q and a. But there are big implications we

haven't talked about. So it is up to the executive branch to designate a group as a foreign terrorist organization.

It appears now that in the scale of the 12, 13, 14 groups that have been designated, any criminal group that uses psychological intimidation or violence can be designated as a foreign terrorist organization. And the Trump administration is saying that they are now a valid target for lethal action.

FELTMAN: But does FTO designation give them the authority for lethal action as opposed to financial restrictions and sanctions?

FELBAB-BROWN: I would say it doesn't, but the Trump administration says it does, and it is also relying on Article two, self-defense, and the ability to act without having congressional authorization. So they're specifically saying that because we are at war with the cartels that gives them lethal ability without congressional declaration of war.

But let's think about it. So right now we are blowing boats off of Venezuela, uh, off of Colombia as of yesterday. Just on the edge of Mexico's territorial waters. Are we going to start taking those actions to the waters off of India, to the waters off of China, especially as precursors from India and China are the crucial ingredients for production in Mexico?

Uh, what is the end and limit of the actions that are being taken? The FTO designation and the conceptualization of war also carries with itself tremendous implications in terms of material support that potentially allow the Trump administration to say that the US drug user is in material support of a foreign terrorist organization that the United States is at war with.

What does that mean for the use of law enforcement in the United States? The deployment of US military in the United States? So I very much hope that the NSS will, as a document, lay out some of the boundaries of the policy as well as try to articulate what is the ask, what is the purpose of the policy that we are seeing?

And if not, that when Congress returns to session, hopefully before 2027, we will have some answers and some questions being posed to get these answers.

FELTMAN: You said the, you know, the fentanyl and meth are definitely threats toward, you know, definitely real threats, but the boats are, if they are carrying drugs, are probably cocaine based on the origin. How much of a threat is cocaine compared to fentanyl?

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, look, having a substance use disorder is a problem. Don't get substance use disorder, right? You can have substance use disorders that are alcohol that will kill a lot of Americans. Not as much, uh, not as many as fentanyl, many more than cocaine. So cocaine leads to problematic effects on health, social life, economic productivity, a labor force. But it's not killing people. The drugs that are killing people are methamphetamine and particularly synthetic opioids like fentanyl. So those are not the boats in the Caribbean. Um, but we also don't know that the boats are heading to the US. A lot of the cocaine traffic is heading to Africa and Europe, so they might not even be heading, on the Caribbean side they might not even be heading to the US --

FELTMAN: If they, if they are carrying.

FELBAB-BROWN: But I do want to make 1, 1 1 additional cap here. It's not just about the drugs. We need to be very concerned, not what's happening at the US border only, what is happening south of the border. The, the, the pressure to take over, the power that criminal groups exercise in Mexico and across Latin America.

And they are not just Latin American criminal groups. There are many other, that is a very important focus of US strategy that requires a multifaceted response. It'll not be solved by us blowing the boats off, uh, in the coastal waters or, or in the outside of the EEZ. It's not going to be, uh, uh, solved by us dropping bombs in Mexico or anywhere else. But that needs to be elevated on the part of China and Russia.

FELTMAN: And that includes groups like Hezbollah in the tri, in the tri-border area that are increasing their activities because their weakness in Lebanon. But let me, let me move on to, to Bob Kagan. Um, Bob, I think it's safe to say that if you were drafting the Trump, if you were drafting the NSS, it would not look like what's gonna come outta the Trump administration.

Um, but, and, and you've written, you've written a lot about the impact on our national security of our, of our internal political polarization and dysfunction. Um, you've written quite darkly about the, the impact on the world of, of our political dysfunction. Um, and, you know, your books *Rebellion*, um, *The Jungle Grows Back*, things like, things like that.

And I'm wondering, can you define what you would see as our, our, the, our biggest national security threats today, given those domestic issues that you've so eloquently identified? And what would you do about them?

KAGAN: Well, thank you, Jeff. Um, the, the biggest threat to our national security right now is our domestic problem. I mean, I, I don't, my national security strategy is we have to, uh, elect a different government. Um, but I'm not sure we're gonna have elections. So I don't know whether I have a good strategy for dealing with that.

I mean, I'd like to, one thing that you mentioned, which I think is important, is, regime type is a critical, uh, factor in determining what a foreign policy is gonna be and even what a grand strategy is going to be. It's not as if nations have fixed grand strategies based on their geographical situation. And, you know, I understand what you're saying, but I don't believe that most nations' grand strategy are, are, are solely concerned with the question of security. There are ambitions in grand strategy, there are ideologies in grand strategy. You know, the, your example's interesting because for the French monarchy, the support for the American Revolution was a bummer.

Uh, I'm not sure it was for France, which then turned around and almost conquered all of Europe, uh, within, you know, beginning 10 years later. So it, it matters what the regime is, and I think it's important to understand what this regime is. And this regime is not the, uh, sort of product of a democratic bargaining that previous regimes have had.

Uh, and you need to ask what are the goals of this regime. If you look at China and you say, what is the grand strategy of Xi Jinping? Uh, a major component of that grand strategy is to ensure the continued control in power of the Communist party, uh, of China. And that much of their foreign policy is subsidiary to that.

I think if you had asked, uh, Americans in the, in the World War II and afterward period, what the grand strategy was, uh, if you read the works of, of a historian like Mel Leffler, it would be to preserve a liberal democratic capitalist system. Uh, uh, not necessarily to preserve any particular, uh, person's rule, but what we're dealing with now is one man rule in this country. Uh, we're not dealing with the normal democratic processes that produce the, whatever that kind of national security strategy is.

So take this question of Venezuela and the bombing of the, of the boats. Personally, I don't think this is primarily about foreign policy. I think it's primarily about domestic policy. I believe that the administration wants to be able to go to the Supreme Court and say, we are at war, uh, and therefore we can do whatever we want on a whole host of domestic issues, including deportations and arrests, and even pursuing, uh, the wrong kind of people here in the United States under the overall blanket of a national security waiver because we are at war. And

that's why they don't need to explain to anybody why we're at war, who we're at war with, or who we're blowing up. It's gonna be simply the fact that we're at war.

So I think that policy is not about the Monroe Doctrine or hemispheric policy, it's about this. And if you look at a, if you look at our approach to the world right now, yes, we'll probably come out with a national security strategy that looks a lot like, uh, some version of America First. Although I can assure you, it's no version that the original America First would've recognized even with its hemispheric, uh, uh, focus. Uh, and we are conducting policies that seem to be in accord with a, a restraint approach. We're pulling back from Europe. Our forces, regardless of whatever else is happening, our security guarantees are very much in question.

So it would be kind of, uh, an America First approach to the world. But on the other hand, that is in conflict with the clear desire of our president to be world emperor. And I think that is, you know, his aspiration here is to maximize power. And I believe his aspiration in the world is to maximize power. I believe that's what these tariffs are about, primarily. They're about the exercise of power, uh, over countries that he can control. They're a demand for tribute. We already talked about flattering his ego, et cetera. If you wanted to ask me what is the major guiding purpose of American foreign policy right now, whatever the national security strategy says it is, to further the interests of Donald Trump and his family.

And so any, and I'm just saying that as an analytical matter, and so if you want to understand American foreign policy, you need to understand the basic regime type that we're now dealing with. Did that answer your question, Jim?

FELTMAN: But let me, let me, lemme pick up. You've, you've hit, you've, you've made some connections back to what Representative Smith said in this conversation with Mike.

Um, lemme bring up something else he said. He talked about how we can fix the international order after, after this administration, assuming we have elections, assuming there's a different approach to foreign policy in a subsequent administration, I'm, I'm more pessimistic about putting things back together again. What do you think?

KAGAN: I don't think we can put things back together again. I think that if you look at the post-war order, um, post World War II order, uh, a huge amount of it has been based on trust in the United States. We have major world powers who once ruled the world, Britain, France, Germany, et cetera, who after World War II ceded not only their geopolitical

ambitions, but also their basic security to, to, to it into the hands of the United States. And basically much of the rest of the world, most of the rest of the world accepted that the United States would be the strongest power, uh, in the world, economically, politically, and militarily.

Now, normally that produces panic in the world, but in this case, it produced acceptance because the United, the United States was trusted on two fundamental grounds.

One. That its security guarantees would be security guarantees, which is not the case now because now we don't know whether there's a guarantee, which means there's no guarantee. Um, so the security guarantee was one part of the bargain and trust that we would not use our overwhelming power against those who had voluntarily seeded it to us to take advantage of them and extract resources from them, which we are doing right now.

So I would say the fact that we've had this experience with the United States means the golden age is over, and if I were another country, I would never trust the United States again with the level of trust that we, that has been given to the United States until now, which means that any post-war, any post-Trump order should we ever get to such a thing, uh, will have to rearrange the nature of the relationships in the world to one that is more, uh, a more decentralized system of power.

But again, I don't know if we're ever, if we're ever actually going to get there. I have a few things to say about what, whether we're actually in a multipolar world or not, and what it means to actually be in a multipolar world, but we can maybe do that on another day.

FELTMAN: Great. Um, I think with that, let's, um, turn to the audience for some, for some, some questions. And the mics are around. Well, I guess we can talk about the --

KAGAN: Silence.

FELTMAN: We can talk-- right, right here.

Audience question: [Off-mic] Does that mean democracy is dead as you, oh, I'm sorry. Does that mean that democracy is dead?

FELTMAN: I think that's, I think that's for Bob.

KAGAN: It means, it means democracy is dying in the world.

FELBAB-BROWN: But I would add here the operative word is dying, is the -ing.

KAGAN: Yeah.

FELBAB-BROWN: And that means that there are actions that can be taken. And they must be taken.

KAGAN: Yeah, I meant to say that too.

FELTMAN: Let's see what the Dutch, let's see what the Dutch election, what the Dutch elections are today. Other, other questions? Are we, or I or I will make Bob talk about multi--

Audience question: [Off-mic]

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, I think that, uh, there is need for, um, American people to realize the democracy is a living thing. That rule of law is a living thing. That it's not something that's given out thin air. That it requires freedom of expression, that it requires security. That rule of law is obeyed, that laws matter. That, um, civil society is robust, that fundamental issues of freedoms of speech, freedom of assembly are protected. There are limits on force and that all needs to be experienced and protected and defended. And the more one tries to trade democracy for safety or democracy for economy, the more one loses both. And I'm paraphrasing here, Ben Franklin, um, who, who said if one makes a, if one trades a democracy for security, one doesn't deserve either. I would've paraphrased that if one, saves them, uh, um, sacrifices democracy for economy, one will end up with neither.

FELTMAN: I, I keep thinking about the exchange between, the indirect exchange between Bob and Josh about the French monarchy after World War II. Maybe we're, maybe we, we'll our democracy will restored in the same way. But Josh, you you wanna say something?

ROVNER: Yeah, just on, on this, on this question of whether we can rebuild, 'cause this came up in, in Representative Smith's comments and then up up here. I guess I'm slightly more optimistic than, than Bob, um, just because politics doesn't end. Right there, there is no international politics goes on and on and on. And there are periods of declining relations and there are periods of rising relations. So if you look at the great powers today, and if you went back 20 or 30 or 40 years ago and you say, would, would everybody be enamored with China in the 1970s?

They think, no, you're nuts. This, this is a, a fundamentally untrustworthy country. Nobody, nobody's ever gonna make a deal with, with Maoist China who had their cultural revolution, they murdered everybody. Right? But it didn't take long for people to start cooperating with China, right? When they had new leadership and they changed their approach and they changed their diploma diplomacy, right?

There's no reason we can't do the same. This is not to defend the Trump's approach. I think it's misguided. It's only to say that politics doesn't end and there's gonna be, there will be time and opportunity to set things right.

FELTMAN: I hope you're right. Um, over in the back.

Audience question: Hello? Um, my name is Asmi. I actually had a question for most people on the panel and what I'm, what I understood from what everybody was saying is that one of the biggest threats right now we're seeing to national strategy is the immense personalization of policies in negotiations, in perceptions of threat.

So if we are to, so what that tells me is that policy negotiations matter more about the leaders in office, right? More than the actual state of the people or the actual state that is comprised of the people. So if we are to move on from this kind of strategy or grand strategy, uppercase s what kind of pivots do we need to be making to our own states and our own, um, I guess structures and institutions? Thank you.

FELTMAN: Anybody. Tom, you wanna take that?

WRIGHT: Yeah, I mean, I, I can take a cut at it. I, I think we have a, a group of individuals who are running a lot of the major powers who I think are very sort of volatile and ambitious by most historical standards, right, as Trump and Putin and Xi and Kim and Erdogan.

And you know, there's a long sort of list where I think you can, you can see the dynamic of what you're talking about, which is a much more personalized, you know, approach, but also a concentration of power in a lot of those systems to those individuals where it's not even a politbureau system anymore. I think in Russia and China it's more, you know, individual based. And I think that should make us, you know, nervous because, you know, you can easily see sort of the pre-war vibes there. Not saying that that's sort of inevitable. Um, I think how do we get beyond that? I think, you know, this goes to Bob's point a bit about domestic, you know, change in democracies and then deterrence.

I think of, you know, the autocracies. I would say one thing on this question of whether it's possible to go back. I mean, to me, I think the rules based order, international order created after the Cold War is definitely over, you know, but there were remnants of it. Bits of the system are still there, the alliances are still there.

There's other bits. Maybe some of them aren't as relevant as they used to be. I do think there's an open question about, not sort of how do we go back, but how do we sort of build on that and go forward?

One thing on the alliances where I guess I do disagree with Bob, is if you look at the European and the Indo-Pacific reaction to Trump, what is it? What are, uh, America's allies doing? They're basically accommodating him, right? They're bending over backwards to accommodate him. That's because they believe they don't have options. They're trying to buy time to hedge, to create their own capability. So it's not that they fundamentally trust him, but they're actually not pushing back, right? They're going out of their way to say, he's amazing, everything's fine. Which they don't actually believe, but that is sort of what they're saying.

So I just don't find it credible, you know, that if an internationalist pro-alliance president comes in in 2029, that having accommodated Trump, they're gonna be like, we don't trust you. We don't wanna work with you at all. I think what will be the case is they will wanna hedge, right? They're not going to abandon efforts to develop their own capability. But from the perspective of, you know, an internationalist's perspective, that's probably not such a bad thing. So that's not to be optimistic I'm not, but I think there is, you know, a little bit of a, a, a, a silver lining there.

FELTMAN: Okay. Over here.

Audience question: Thank you. Hi there. Thank you all for being here today. Um, I'm a student in the region and my question for you is, what should the US National Security Strategy be towards Africa? This is intentionally a broad question, so feel free to keep it high level or run with specific issues or regions.

FELTMAN: Vanda, I'll return to you.

FELBAB-BROWN: I was going to say, I'll turn to you, Jeff.

FELTMAN: No, you.

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, I would say, first of all, having an Africa policy that's more than limited conflicts, uh, and the occasional rare earths and critical minerals. Africa is a very important, uh, continent growing continent. Continent that will face very significant challenges, uh, in terms of climate change, migration, massive ongoing security issues, terrorism, but it's also a continent with significant opportunities.

This is where labor, uh, uh, will coming from, as populations are aging, this is where, uh, new jobs and economies will be created. Uh, we need to be very mindful in the immediate, um, setting of the significant security deterioration we are seeing across the sa. It's also an important geostrategic opportunity because the glitz has come off the Wagner Group, the Africa Corps. They are being shown an empire without many clothes on, if any, uh, but the US is now absent and both absent because it got kicked out, but also absent because those, those are no longer issues of focus of the Trump administration.

That's just the immediate, um, uh, period. But over the long term, this will be a continent with important opportunities and very important challenging, affecting other areas. But that means being present, being engaged. We have liquidated USAID, we have liquidated our presence in multifaceted way, in ways that directly leads to many people dying who would not have to die. Uh, such as, uh, taking away medication like PEPFAR programs that had several decades of bipartisan support, needless harm to people, felt in a very visceral way.

It's not sufficient just to rapidly coming, uh, to mediate a conflict that might be very important, but the presence must be sustained much more, much more, uh, multifaceted. Jeff. Your take on Africa?

FELTMAN: I would, I would add that if you're going to have, if you're going to focus on Africa, you must also focus on having discussions about Africa with the middle powers that are doing so much damage inside Africa.

You cannot solve the conflict in Sudan, which is the largest humanitarian and displacement crisis in the world without also making sure that Sudan's high on your priority list with Egypt, with the UAE, with Saudi Arabia, with Turkey, et cetera. So that, so that having a strategy. A focus on Africa has to include making sure that Africa is a priority in bilateral relations with those others who are working in Africa.

FELBAB-BROWN: Well and, you know, I think that's very emblematic of the withdrawal of the United States. The place doesn't stay vacant. Other powers come in, they might be great powers, right? Russia, or let me not use great about Russia. It might be big powers like China or, or Russia, or it might be smaller powers. Uh, and their actions are often not beneficial.

We heard Representative Smith, uh, imagining a world where the role of US and China is positive for a country right now. Their engagement is not positive. Often it might be positive just for the elite, the junta. Um, but if we just go away, the problem stayed, the opportunity stayed and others come in and our influence declines.

FELTMAN: Um, I think we've reached the end of this, this panel I have, I have instructions for all of you, which is that there's a coffee break now for about 15 minutes, but please be back in your seats by 3:30 because that we have the keynote address with Senator Slotkin. Um, and please join me in thanking the panelists for their contributions today.

SISSON: Good afternoon. Good afternoon everybody. My name is Melanie Sisson. I'm a senior fellow with the Strobe Talbot Center for Security Strategy and Technology here at the Brookings Institution. And it's my pleasure today to welcome Senator Elissa Slotkin to the 2025 Knight Forum on geopolitics. Senator Slotkin has worked at the Central Intelligence Agency, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the National Security Council, and the Department of Defense.

As an elected official representing the great state of Michigan, she's continued to focus on national security and defense policy, serving on the Armed Services, Veterans Affairs, and Homeland Security Committees, first in the House and now in the Senate. Senator Slotkin, we look forward to your remarks.

SEN. SLOTKIN: Alright. Hello everybody. Thank you so much for having me. Oh, good Lord. Sorry about that. Thanks for having me. Again, I'm Elissa Slotkin, the newest senator from the State of Michigan. By way of introduction, as you heard, before I got into politics, I was a national security nerd and I'm also what's called a 9/11 baby.

I happened to be on my second day of grad school, actually with Melanie in New York City when 9/11 happened, and it completely changed my life. And by the time the smoke cleared, I knew that I wanted to go into national security. I went on to the, as you heard, the CIA, I did

three tours in Iraq alongside the military, the Pentagon, the White House under two presidents.

But before all that, back on that 9/11 time, the day after 9/11, I was busy switching my classes so that I could focus on security policy and national security. And one of my professors, I don't know where he is, was Michael O'Hanlon. There he is. And I was lucky to get into his class. We are all lucky that he has convened this form. He has about 12 titles here at Brookings, but as I just told him behind stage, I'm still a little bitter that I got a B plus. So, and as Melanie said, it is, it has held me back.

Okay. I know a lot of you are here to talk about the forthcoming National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, America's role in the world. A very timely discussion, since the word on the street is those strategies are being rewritten and reoriented to focus on homeland defense rather than competition with China and those kinds of things. Sounds reasonable enough. But here's the thing: in 2025, homeland threats aren't being defined by the Pentagon or based on what the intelligence community deems our greatest threats.

They are being determined by one man, Donald Trump and Donald Trump alone. And he is showing the world just how willing he is to use force against his enemies. Now, our system is set up to give the president, any president, real power to make decisions on national security and foreign policy. And that's because when it comes to keeping us safe from attack, a commander in chief needs the power to make quick decisions.

As someone who worked in both a Republican White House and a Democratic White House, I saw these critical decisions made up close. You need the power to act when it's about life and death. But Trump has laid out a whole lot of enemies that are American citizens, and if he's willing to use lethal force against enemies abroad, as we've been seeing, what's stopping him from using lethal force against enemies here at home? That question should chill every American to the bone.

And I'm giving this speech today because I believe that's exactly the plan. I believe that Trump is ready to bring the full weight of the federal government against Americans he perceives as enemies. Why? Because he has one goal: making sure that he and his ilk never have to give up power. Now, to be clear, I don't say this lightly, but I think between the strikes in the Caribbean, his efforts to identify domestic terrorists and his deployment of force in American cities, that seems to be where we're headed.

So I wanna start with what's happening in the Caribbean. Let's review the bidding. Since early September, Trump administration has announced attacks on 14 ships. They've killed 57 people. The Trump administration notified Congress that we as Americans are in armed conflict with a number of cartels, which they have called designate designated terrorist organizations. They argue that the strikes are fair game because the boats are filled with drugs being smuggled into American cities. On the surface, this makes sense to a lot of Americans, and I'm actually sympathetic to going after these types of groups, given what drugs do to Michiganders every day.

But here's what's different about the strikes and what's precedent setting: the president and Secretary Hegseth are refusing to tell the American people who we are fighting. They won't tell us the names, and they won't tell us why they're being targeted. A few weeks ago, the Senate Armed Services Committee, the committee I sit on, received a briefing on these strikes. During the briefing, members from both sides of the aisle asked the Defense Department for the name and number of the organizations that the United States is currently at war with. They refuse to provide it. We ask for a copy of the memo from the Justice Department that lays out the legal case for these strikes. They refuse to provide it. Whatever our differences are these days, I think it's safe to say that the American people deserve to know who we are at war with. Especially if people are being killed in our name.

And just for reference, for those of us who worked on the global war on terror, we named the groups we were going after. Think about al-Qaeda or ISIS. Congress knew the name of every targeted group. The administration at the time provided the intelligence that justified going after these groups and why it was legal to do so.

But as much concern as I have about the Caribbean strikes, it's nothing compared to my concern, concern over Trump's full reorientation towards the quote "enemy within." That reorientation has major implications for his use of force inside the United States. Last month, the president quietly put out an executive order directing the Department of Justice to create a list of domestic terrorist organizations. The order lays out a broad definition, groups that are accused of anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism, anti-Christianity, or hostility towards those who hold traditional American views on family, religion, or morality. And these groups don't have to be violent to get themselves on the list. The order suggested that the DOJ could look at chat groups, in-person meetings, social media, and even schools.

To be clear, US law on domestic terrorism is squishy, mostly 'cause of the First Amendment, but it seems clear from his own order that Trump plans to see how far he can stretch the law

before someone tells him no. And if the administration won't publicly name drug cartels in the Caribbean, you can bet that they're not gonna tell you the name of this new list of domestic terrorist organizations. Only this time the secret lists are not made up of drug traffickers in international waters. It'll be Americans on American streets and in American homes.

So let's play it out. What happens to the people on the secret list? The next logical step is that the president would use the full power of the federal government to target those American citizens. In theory, people on this list could be wire-tapped, their homes could be searched, or they could be arrested just for disagreeing with President Trump's agenda. I never thought I'd have to lay this out about my own government. This is the kind of stuff that is fundamentally un-American and strikes at the heart of who we are as a people, and we've already seen anecdotal evidence that this is happening.

Trump has created at least two quote, "weaponization working groups," his name, that bring together people from across the federal government, including the intelligence community, to go after Trump's perceived enemies. As a CIA officer, the idea that intelligence officers could be asked to target Americans turns my stomach, and it would shift us into a modern day surveillance state.

Turning the federal government against Trump's enemies goes hand in hand with his use of force in American cities, both federal law enforcement and the military. As of today, the president has attempted to deploy more than 7,000 National Guard members across five cities, including right here in Washington. In August, the administration ordered the creation of two new National Guard units, a standing quick reaction force that can deploy anywhere in the country, and then separately, National Guard units in all 50 states focused on quelling so-called civil disturbances. At this point, Trump has been very clear about his intent. At Quantico, speaking as commander in chief, he instructed his military brass to use cities as quote "training grounds," and many times he's floated the idea of invoking the Insurrection Act so that military units can raid, detain, and arrest Americans. The president has already deployed ICE and other federal law enforcement to these same cities across America. In some cases, these federal officers are playing fast and loose with their tactics, which sooner or later could lead to a deadly escalation.

The videos out of Chicago are shocking. Federal agents pulling their weapons on highways, firing tear gas into neighborhoods right before a Halloween parade, injuring and even killing civilians. Many are masked, not wearing uniforms and driving unmarked cars. For those of

us who served abroad, it feels like another country, and it's only a matter of time before things get worse. By my estimation, we're about two weeks away from a bloody incident that spirals out of control, and this is just the kind of incident that Trump wants to justify more force coming in.

So what's the end game on all this if the president is going to fundamentally redefine the use of force in America? What's it all for? What I'm about to say, and my theory of the case is something I never imagined saying. I believe Trump is reshaping the country to hold onto power. Trump is following the same playbook as almost every authoritarian in history. The playbook is first, get elected to address legitimate issues. In our case, the cost of living. Once in office, surround yourself with people loyal to you, accumulate power and influence, and then start using it against your perceived enemies. But here's the kicker. There comes a time in every authoritarian playbook where you hit a tipping point. You accumulate so much power that you realize if you ever lose and your opponent gets elected, they could use that very power against you. So you hold onto it with everything you have. That seems to be Trump's approach right now, and from everything we've seen so far. The Caribbean strikes the list of domestic terrorists, military and law enforcement deployments across our American streets. He seems to be laying the groundwork to stay in power.

There are two ways this can happen, both straight out of the same authoritarian playbook. The first a scenario in which Trump finds a pretext, invokes the Insurrection Act, and tries to impose martial law. Elections, therefore could be canceled. Or if they happen, he could surround polling places with military and federal law enforcement to intimidate voters.

The second option is harder to track, but can still swing an election labeling opposition groups, candidates, and elected officials as terrorists or criminals, and going after the infrastructure that allows for competitive elections. For instance, Trump could use the IRS to make it impossible for Democrats to fundraise. He could sue left-leaning organizations and sow disinformation about our elections. He could discredit defund and silence his opposition until they have no chance of winning an election. The point is, there is more than one way to destroy an election. There's more than one way to lose our democracy. I'm popping a flare today because we're in danger of that happening here at home.

Now, let me just say again, I am not an alarmist. Some of you in this room have worked with me directly. You know that I don't say things casually. I don't wanna tell you that. Why I'm making the point of saying it today. Think back to April of 2020. That was the first time Trump started tweeting about election fraud in the 2020 election, that if he lost, it could only be

because of fraud. I was in the House of Representatives at the time. I remember being shocked, but back then I was pretty polite about it. I sent a bunch of letters to the administration. I talked about it in hearings, but I didn't make enough of a stink about it at the time.

Fast forward to January 6th, 2021. As rioters stormed the capitol, I barricaded myself in my office and looked for something I could use as a weapon. The thing I thought was unthinkable was happening. I had a failure of imagination back then, but my imagination is working, my imagination is working just fine now, and I'm not gonna make the same mistake.

But here's what Trump hasn't planned for: the will of the American people. Americans have an internal barometer for things that sound and smell authoritarian. I've seen this in Michigan, where even ardent Trump supporters don't like what they're seeing on their phones. That should give us hope, and there's still time to turn the tide.

First, Congress needs to reclaim our power, like, yesterday over the use of force. To my Republican colleagues, I'm looking at you in the spirit of John McCain. We need to start pushing back where we don't agree on how force is being used. Leadership is about the actions you take, not the things you say behind closed doors.

To that end, I'm introducing a bill, the No Troops in Our Streets Act that give Congress the ability to immediately end a military deployment in an American city. To the military: you, too, have a critical role to play. According to the law, there is such a thing as an illegal order, and military does have the ability, though difficult, to push back. Because in the choice between loyalty to the Constitution and loyalty to one man, there is only one right answer, and every one of you has taken that oath. To our veterans: you can also exercise your political power to call out Trump's dangerous use of our military. I saw a lot of veterans show up at the No Kings rally. Don't ever underestimate the power of your voice and how impactful it can be when you specifically speak up. And let me just say, if there's veterans out there that wanna get involved in a positive way, DM me, we're getting the band back together. To our state leaders: you have a responsibility to hold the line, protect the integrity of our elections, and withstand the pressure that Trump, the Trump administration is already starting to apply.

Ordinary citizens can help on this score. We can help stiffen the spines of people at home. Your local elections are gonna be more important than ever. To regular Americans: you can also speak out about what you're seeing and organize peacefully against it. Throughout history, grassroots movements have been the only thing that have pushed back on

government overreach. And lastly, to everyone listening and watching, don't give up the ship. Generations of us have fought against impossible odds to build the country we have today. And I am living proof of that as a female senator. I would not be here if generations of women before me had not fought for literally 100 years to get the right to vote. We don't have the luxury of deciding that this is too hard. This is the country we all love. Our country needs us right now. It is our moment to step up.

Thanks so much for having me. Appreciate you.

SISSON: Okay. Senator, thanks so much for being here.

SEN. SLOTKIN: Of course.

SISSON: Our time is short, so we'll move with some alacrity. I'd like to pick up on two elements of the speech you just gave about this redefinition of the use of force. You spoke about the Caribbean. It's not just the bombing of these ships that we're seeing. We are seeing an unusual set of deployments to the region, including most recently, the movement of a carrier strike group. What is your understanding of the intent of those deployments? What is the policy objective?

SEN. SLOTKIN: I mean, I think we have to at least open the conversation on use of force, land, on land in the Caribbean. And I think the president has sort of even mentioned this kind of casually as he does. I, I don't, while of course, a carrier strike group is a great way to create deterrence, I think we have to assume that the movement of such a high value asset—you know, we never have enough carrier strike groups—moving that into the Caribbean and into these areas, is because we may actually use it.

And if you go back and think of Grenada or Panama, like it wouldn't be the first time in my lifetime that we do that. I don't think the average American is thinking that they wanna, you know, invade and do regime change in another country. I think it was, it's been an exhausting time since 9/11, and so I don't, I don't think that's high on people's agenda. But it is clear that the president, I think we have to assume that he could use force against Venezuelan mainland in the near term.

SISSON: You spoke directly to service members just now. What is your assessment of the overall organizational health of the Department of Defense today?

SEN. SLOTKIN: I mean, I think, look, between people being fired and or do or retiring earlier than they expected, between, you know, people on the civilian side being cut. Between the, the overreach of some of the sort of social policies, the, the use of the military as a prop, you know, like we saw in Quantico. I mean, that was for mythmaking around the president and Secretary Hegseth. I think for everything I've heard from people that are still inside is that morale is really low and people are walking on eggshells. I think the thing that killed me the most was I was having a conversation with a young officer last week, who I happened to know from home in Michigan, and she's seven years into her career. And, she said that her entire cohort is looking at, particularly like, women getting removed from their jobs, and just saying like, do I have a future in this military? You know, her dream was to be an admiral and she's now saying like, is that actually, is there a ceiling on what I can do in this organization?

And, I think morale is low, and then I think the thing that is definitely happening that I was, I've never seen in my time is, you know, people are being asked to sign NDAs who are participating in these strikes in the Caribbean. People are, who are participating in these strikes are doing memos for the record and then taking them to their JAGs and being like, Hey, I don't wanna ever one day be held personally liable on these strikes, so can you kind of cover me legally? I mean, that is some crazy stuff when young officers up and down the chain are seeking legal cover so they don't get sued one day for what could be illegal strikes.

SISSON: You have just said that, you know, land attacks in the Caribbean are not on sort of the average citizen's agenda of things that they'd like their government to be doing with its military today. So let's talk about what might be on that agenda. What are the core elements of a national security strategy, what does it need to have in order to be responsive to these concerns that you hear from Michiganders about their security and their prosperity?

SEN. SLOTKIN: It was interesting, you know, in August I did something that, when I was at the Pentagon, I would've probably laughed at, which was, I held these kind of town halls across Michigan on what do average people want out of their national security, right?

No one ever asks people, they just, like, no offense, a bunch of people in Washington, like, you know, across administrations, kind of think about it and come up with these great new things. No one actually asked the public like, what do you expect out of your government? And it was interesting, I think the, the thing that struck me is there's a bunch of new threats based on tech that are putting American citizens on the front lines in a way that we've never seen.

So think about cyber attacks. Every single person that I talked to in these town halls had had, you know, been the victim of a cyber attack. Their kids' data had been ransomed from their K through 12 school. Their hospital had been ransomed, sometimes they paid, sometimes they didn't, and they just felt like their government was completely not protecting them. And you know, that's, warfare used to be somewhere else and now it's kind of like in, and it's some like weird Russian group or, you know, it's from abroad. There, there just was a feeling like the threats have evolved, but my government hasn't evolved with it and they're not protecting me.

Obviously in a place like Michigan, there, there was a lot of concern about China. We've seen, you know, over 30 years we've lost jobs to places like China. So there's a real concern about trade and feeling like, you know, and this is obviously very relevant given that the president's about to meet Xi and I, I think there's a feeling like we haven't managed that relationship well and we need to, and a lot of interest in bringing manufacturing back to the United States and not giving China a veto on our supply chains.

And then I think, a, a general feeling of kind of being a little bit outta control generally on social media and technology and just kind of, they don't know how to help their kids. They don't know how to approach all this technology, and they certainly are real concerned about AI. Like, they've heard about it, but they're like, Hey, we've been losing jobs for 30 years, are you telling me we're gonna go through another round of job loss? And, and so what is this? And, and how do I think about technology? I don't, I'm worried about my kids. So those are the things that I heard really strongly.

And now governments have to protect people from threats they don't even know about. So it can't just be like a, what does the public want us to do? But I would say it, it's pretty important to hear what people are saying, because frankly, for the national security nerds in the room, like, we've lost the faith, the automatic faith from the public that national security people somewhere in DC should just get to decide and they're gonna do everything great. After Iraq and Afghanistan, people are like, Hmm, I'm not sure those folks in Washington did it so great. You know, that they're, so, I think we have a, some trust to build back up with the public.

SISSON: Okay, we have a few minutes left to receive some questions from the audience. The Brookings audience, I expect your usual excellence. You have 30 seconds to say your name and affiliation and form a question. There's a person in a reddish neck tie, I think in the

middle section here. Or maybe it's not a neck tie. It's a gray blazer. Oh, do we have a microphone? Yeah. Thank you.

Audience question: Hi. Thank you, Senator Slotkin. My name is James Stevens. I'm with the Stimson Center. Yeah, I have a question about war powers. So you described the situation near Venezuela. Does the president have the authority to declare the existence of an armed conflict, or is that something that's reserved for the Article One powers in the Constitution?

SEN. SLOTKIN: Yeah, so this is where, the president has shown, extreme interest in doing somersaults to make something fit in a box. So, he, he has sent us this note, this very unusual note to Congress saying that he is, created this secret list of designated terrorist organizations. And when you ask for the legal justification, there's a classified OLC, you know, Department of Justice explanation, but you're not allowed to see it. This is truly unprecedented. Right, and you can debate, there's lots of people who would say, you know, we shouldn't have gone as far as we did in the global war on terror, right? We shouldn't have been able to do all those things. That's an open debate, but at least we got to know their names of which groups and the justification, the intelligence pack package that backs up going after one of these groups. We don't even, we don't have any of that. And so, no, I mean, we had a war powers resolution that Senator Kaine brought up maybe 10 days ago now, that I voted for, that said, you don't have the right to actually just get us involved in this conflict without coming to Congress. That is just, you know, how the, the president, the president is just deciding like, he's gonna create a new legal theory.

Now, to be fair, Congress has basically abdicated its oversight responsibilities on the use of force since the Iraq war. The Iraq war was controversial. People lost their jobs over that vote. So politicians, never known for their bravery, have basically said like, I know it's in the Constitution that we're supposed to approve war, but like, could you not bring that vote up here? That's what's been happening for the better part of 20 years. But Trump has taken it to a new level. And if people are gonna be killed in our name, 'cause that's what's happening, right? The United States of America is killing people. You should at least be able to tell the public why and who you're killing, you're going after. And again, I've, I've been open, I'd be willing to consider, you know, a war that goes after these guys in a, in a different way. But you gotta show me the math. I mean, if you're worried about fentanyl, Venezuela doesn't produce a lot of fentanyl, right? There's other drugs, right? There's cocaine, there's other things that are not good. But if you're gonna say like, fentanyl's killing our kids, which it is, let's go after the fentanyl and have to show your math on that.

SISSON: Senator, thank you very much for joining the forum today.

SEN. SLOTKIN: Thank you.

SISSON: On that note, if everyone please yes, thank you. I need to ask everybody to please stay in your seat so the senator can get where she needs to go, and the next panel can come up. So feel free, and please do express your appreciation again as she exits. And thank you all.

SEN. SLOTKIN: Appreciate it.

Speaker 4: Thank you.

KARLIN: We got it. Alright. Going up. Let's do it. Fabulous. Thank you. Great.

NOYES: Close to the podium. Okay.

KARLIN: I don't know how we're gonna follow that.

NOYES: We got this.

KARLIN: Is everyone awake now?

NOYES: Great. Well thanks so much for, um, for sticking with us to the end here. We're gonna keep this final session, um, fast moving and en entertaining as possible and get you guys outta here at 4:50 on the dot. I'm Alex Noyes. I'm a a fellow here in the Talbot Center and, uh, we are gonna focus, uh, on some really nerdy defense issues in this panel, uh, drill down on the National Defense Strategy and US defense policy, uh, writ large. Um, so we have a fantastic panel here. I'm not gonna belabor you guys with their, um, very illustrious backgrounds, but you can check 'em out online. Uh, we have Mara Karlin, um, who was the architect of the 2022 National Defense Strategy. We have Caitlin Talmadge, who's done a lot of work on nuclear policy and we have Bruce Jones, who is, uh, a man of many hats but has been doing a lot of work on the defense industrial base. Um, so in the spirit of kicking things off, quickly, we're gonna do, uh, five to eight minutes down the panel here of, uh, hot takes US defense policy and, and NDS hot takes. And Mara, we're we're gonna start with you. Over to you.

KARLIN: Alright, so National Defense Strategy sounds really boring right? At like four o'clock in the afternoon, and I'm gonna tell you why it's not. Uh, actually the first thing I say will make it sound even more boring, which is that the National Defense Strategy is actually a homework assignment. The Congress says to the Pentagon, every four years, you have to do this homework assignment. You have to roughly tell me, here's where you are and here's your North Star. Here's where you wanna go, and how are you going to get there? Right? How are you going to reshape your military and use your military and spend a bunch of money to try to get to that North Star, based on how you understand the future threat environment, and then what it is that we need our military to be able to do.

Here's the thing, there's a lot of money involved in this National Defense Strategy and that's why you should care. Because at a minimum, a National Defense Strategy is telling you today how to spend \$850 billion. Right, that's a pretty big deal for a homework assignment.

So I've done a bunch of these, including, as Alex noted, the most recent one in 2022. They're all a little bit different, as you can imagine. Uh, but ideally they start with this assessment, trying to predict the future, right? What are we worried about in the future? What are the future opportunities that might arise? And then what role do we think the military needs to have in tackling this future? There's a whole bunch of debate inside the Pentagon, which is obviously not a unitary actor. Then you get a whole lot of debate with the White House, which also has a bunch of different views, and ideally there's some serious adjudication by the secretary of defense and by the commander in chief, the president, and they say, alright, we've fought, we've thought about these things, and the bottom line is here are our priorities, right? That's a pretty good deal. And then this homework assignment gets delivered, it, there's a classified version and then an unclassified version, which very much rhymes with it that comes out, uh, as well.

So we're getting ready for the Trump administration's defense strategy, and I expect that what we're actually going to see is a tale of two strategies. The impression that I think many of us have gotten is the Department of Defense has the strategy it wants. The White House has the strategy it wants, that focuses a whole lot on the Western hemisphere; that's not surprising if you've been watching what the military's been doing lately. And a lot of folks in the Pentagon wanna focus on China, because there's no other country with the will and increasingly the capability to fundamentally reshape the global security order. There's real debates you can have on which one of these is the priority, I suppose. I mean, I think the answer's pretty obvious, but nevertheless, you could have real debates.

But the bottom line is if you don't choose, you're purchasing some serious problems, right? Purchasing some serious problems in terms of how you're going to manage today's military, how you will build today's military, excuse me, tomorrow's military, and how will you spend \$850 billion? So I expect that that's what we're gonna start to see.

It is possible that this strategy will be delivered and it will sit on a shelf. It's uncomfortable to strategist like myself, but every now and then, that sort of thing happens. Even if there are beautiful words written in it, it's also possible that it will get published and only one piece of that will actually become a reality. And we'll start to see, I suspect quite soon.

NOYES: Great. Thanks Mara. I see Josh is still here. We're gonna have, um, him live grade the NDS from 2022, but that will be in the classified session after. So, uh, Caitlin, over to you.

TALMADGE: Thanks Alex. And thanks, Mara. I think that's a really helpful overview of kind of why we should care about the NDS. And you know, I, I was thinking as we were getting ready for this panel, if we had been here a year ago gathering and asking what might a second Trump administration NDS look like, we probably would have said it will focus a lot on the Indo-Pacific, uh, in part because we have a 2018 NDS from the first Trump administration to look at. And that was a lot of the focus, and we saw that focus in the 2022 NDS that you were, uh, leading as well.

And so, as you kind of alluded there, there are some strategic reasons to think that the Indo-Pacific would be a focus, um, including, you know, the Trump administration the first time around, but what we've actually seen from the administration over the last several months that it's been in office is a focus in some ways on everywhere except the Indo-Pacific this week, not accepted, but, um, we've seen lots of bandwidth, I would argue, go toward the Middle East for one thing. I mean, time flies, but don't forget, we had an entire military campaign in Yemen, an entire military campaign in Iran, and the president's been very involved, obviously in ending the, the horrific war in Gaza. So that's been taking up a lot of oxygen. But there is also all of this activity that we've really been talking about throughout the day, um, going on in the Caribbean.

And I agree very much with, uh, several of our other panelists today, including Senator Slotkin, who have outlined the connections between what's going on with military operations in the Caribbean and, um, the president's domestic agenda. And I think that, you know, we often try to look at the NDS as being the United States, looking at external threats, thinking

about how it's gonna deal with, uh, foreign actors. But I, I really do think that the roots of what the administration is sending the military to do in the Caribbean have everything to do with a domestic agenda. They have to do with immigration, the notion of who America's enemies are and loosening restrictions around the use of military force. And so I think that those issues are very significant.

We've already talked about them, but I highlight that here to say that I agree with, um, the leaks we're hearing that this probably is going to be an NDS that, um, says something pretty significant about prioritizing the Western Hemisphere in contrast to what we might have expected had we been having this conversation as a guessing game a year ago.

But, you know, the NDS is supposed to be about priorities, and I worry very much about the, the problem that I think you were, you were just getting at, which is that rather than, for example, explicitly delineating that the Indo-Pacific is not as much of a concern and we are going to focus on the Western Hemisphere for whatever reasons, and you can debate substantively whether that would be a good prioritization or not. But it would be clear, I worry instead we're going to have this Western Hemisphere White House focus that you've been talking about, affixed onto the, you know, draft file of the NDS that was based on a focus on the Indo-Pacific. And we may get a little bit of a dog's breakfast, which is sort of the opposite of what you want in an NDS, which is supposed to lay out, um, clear priorities.

And just to elaborate a little bit more on why I think you won't get a clear elevation actually of the Western Hemisphere in the way some of the reporting sometimes makes it sound like. Um, one is I think all of the strategic reasons that the administration focused on, uh, the Indo-Pacific in its first NDS, you know, are still there. They're still present and I think the president does still care about those. But secondly, I think as you said, the building still cares about those. And you are not going to have a nearly trillion dollar defense budget justified by boat strikes in the Caribbean, um, just from a bureaucratic perspective. Um, I definitely expect the services to care more about that Indo-Pacific set of missions, and so they're probably going to be kludged together. Why is that a problem? It's a problem because just from the perspective of defense strategy, putting aside all of the other many problems we have outlined today, uh, regarding this expansion of military force and focus on the Caribbean, the reality is the types of military operations that are being called for in the Caribbean are actually very different from the sorts of things that we would want the military to be focusing on. If competition with and deterrence of China were our key priorities, um, there is wear and tear on our military from going to do these operations.

You do use up munitions, you do use up political and military bandwidth and attention. And if you really start to think about where is the administration headed with respect to Venezuela, for example, if you're thinking about doing a large scale air and missile coercion campaign, if you're thinking about going ashore, which Senator Slackin was also mentioning, where does that lead?

I think it goes down the path of things like counterinsurgency, which we've seen that movie before, and how that is a very different skillset from doing things like, uh, defending allies and friends in the Indo-Pacific from a nuclear armed great power adversary like China. Um, and we haven't even talked about Europe, but we'll, we'll put that aside for the moment.

So my point is, there's actually a trade off here, and I think the trade off is not just in hardware, I think it's also in what I would call software. And what I mean by that is it's not just that by doing these sorts of operations in the Caribbean, you're, you're using up or you're, you're training doing types of training for, for one set of operations rather than another.

But I actually believe, and we've heard some hints of this already today, that not all of our military is going to want to go along with what's going on in the Caribbean because I think people, at least on the inside do see this for what it is and what it may become. And I worry a lot that many of our most talented people in our military loudly or quietly may just decide this is not the profession for me, I do not wanna be involved in the US military if it's going to be doing these types of operations where I, you know, I myself am not sure if, if what I'm doing is legal. And so I worry that you could have an exodus of some of the very talented people that you might actually want to have in your military, in your officer corps, for great power competition. And those people may say, that's what I signed up for. And, and instead, I am, you know, being drawn into a US military that may have to use force or be ordered to use force illegally against my fellow Americans. I'm, I'm not doing that. Um, and I think we're seeing some rumblings of that. We saw the combatant commander of US Southern Command, um, retire. We don't know exactly why, but, um, seems like it could be related to some of these mission sets.

So my larger point is that I think NDS, uh, the NDS is an opportunity to prioritize that happens better or worse in different cases. But I'm particularly worried here that we will not get a prioritization and even worse than that, that we may see two different mission sets that actually conflict with each other. And we will end up worse off than if we had actually chosen one or the other, whatever their substantive pluses and minuses are. So I'll pause there.

NOYES: Thanks, Caitlin. Appreciate it. Bruce, over to you.

JONES: Uh, well, these have been some awfully serious and sobering topics, so I thought I might lighten the mood by talking about nuclear weapons.

Um, in all seriousness, I thought I'd start by something that happened yesterday, or at least it was announced yesterday and President Trump's reaction to it, which I thought was interesting. Uh, several of you will have seen this, that, uh, Vladimir Putin announced yesterday that several days before, uh, Russia had flight tested at least, uh, what's known in NATO terms as a Skyfall missile, I don't know when we started naming munitions after James Bond movies. That's a different topic. Um, in, in Russian it's called the Burevestnik missile. It's a nuclear powered cruise missile. From what we appear to be able to confirm from Western intelligence agencies, it was launched, uh, in the Bering Sea, flew for around 15 hours, covered something like 8,000 miles at just below subsonic speed maneuvering while it traveled.

And the Russian statements about this make it clear that what they're signaling with this weapon is a weapon that could evade potential US and North American, uh, missile defenses, including Golden Dome. And yes, we can talk about the movie if we want.

Um, now I think there are some reasons to be skeptical about this specific weapon utility, uh, but is not the only highly sophisticated weapon the Russians are producing, okay. They've made striking advances in hypersonic missiles, including submarine launch hypersonic missiles, which is a capability we don't have; uh, weapons designed to destroy satellites in low earth orbit and low earth orbit, highly destabilizing. And they possess the world's only nuclear powered, nuclear capable, autonomous long range underseas drone. Okay? Highly destabilizing weapon. Um, and they're not alone. China is also developing some very sophisticated weapons that includes space launched hypersonic glide missiles using a suite of technologies that we do not currently possess, or at the very least we have not currently fielded. Uh, I spend a lot of time thinking about undersea warfare. I look at deep sea, uh, deep diving submersibles a pretty important tool for a range of different functions. They now have more capability than we do in that very sort of niche, but very high tech area. Uh, they are making extensive investments in quantum navigation, communication, and detecting, at least keeping pace with us. Some would argue outpacing us in the investment. I dunno about that, but at least keeping pace with us. All while increasing their nuclear stockpile by fourfold. And building ships and submarines at sort of multiple X faster than we are. Alright?

All of which is to say that we have two potential rivals or adversaries who are rapidly equipping themselves with highly advanced weaponry at scale, including a variety of new nuclear devices. All of which is to say we may not be interested in geopolitics, geopolitics is interested in us, right? These issues are not gonna go away.

So I was very struck then by Trump's reaction to Putin's statement, and I want to read you a portion of what he said. He said a little bit about Ukraine, but then specifically about the missile test, he said, "they know we have a nuclear submarine, the greatest in the world, right off their shore. So it doesn't have to go 8,000 miles, but you know, we have a submarine, a nuclear submarine. We don't need to go 8,000 miles." Now, I don't know if he was referring to an attack submarine with Tomahawks or a ballistic missile submarine with nuclear weapons. But here's the thing, he's right. Our submarines are actually the greatest in the world. And they can sit, whether they're attack submarines or ballistic missile submarines, they can sit kind of just off the coast or someplace else, or wherever the hell they want. Almost impossible for the Russians to detect or the Chinese to detect. And they can strike conventional or nuclear munitions, uh, inside these countries. And that is a very powerful deterrent. A combination of stealth and strike that is a very powerful deterrent. Okay?

So he's not wrong, but here's the thing. And by the way, long range stealth bombers have a similar, a similar effect. Okay? But here's the thing. We have that capability because at the end of the Cold War, just before the end of the Cold War, we made this massive investment in basic science, in technologies, in pulling together the world's leading physicists and metallurgist and oceanographers in institutions that we had built up over basically in the entire time since the end of the first World War, a kind of a huge lead in the sciences and the ability to apply those sciences to technology and the ability to apply that in terms to military capabilities. That gave us a set of tools, long range strategic bombers and, and nuclear power submarines in particular, which hit the kind of playing field in the early part of the post Cold War period. And are still the best technologies in those spaces today because of this massive surge in science and technology investment to deal with potential future threats.

And what I worry about when I see the discussions about where we're headed on something, we don't know, let's see what the documents actually have to say, but I worry if we start to underinvest in the basic science and in the applied sciences that can give us the kind of technologies that we need to compete in those, in those domains, right.

Now, this doesn't go to strategy, uh, and it doesn't go to deterrence questions and it doesn't go to the relations with these countries. But, and we don't have time to go into kind of long discussions about deterrent strategies, but the thing I want to emphasize is relations between world major military powers are inherently unstable. They're inherently unstable. And so we may think, oh, we're gonna try to improve our relations with Moscow, or we're gonna try to improve our relations with the Beijing and we might succeed for a short period of time. But there is, I think, highly unlikely to be the case that those relations will be stable over the medium to long term. And so if we take our foot off or we take our attention away from having the kind of tools available to us, uh, to deter these actors, I think we are baking in a world of trouble.

NOYES: Great. Thanks Bruce. Really appreciate that. Great opening salvos. Um, I'm going to take the, uh, prerogative of the moderator and ask, uh, one or two rounds of questions and then we'll open it up to the audience.

So start thinking through your very sharp and very short, uh, questions. As a reminder, questions have a, a question mark at the end of them and um, we're gonna try to limit to, to 30 seconds 'cause the mic will actually shut off after that.

Okay, Mara. No, just kidding. I'm, but be, be quick please. Um, okay. Mara, you've written a lot about civ-mil relations over the years. Uh, as we've covered today, we're in a bit of, uh, an interesting moment in civ-mil relations. Uh, maybe you could pontificate a little bit, um, about that and how the NDS, uh, could mediate or, or impact our civ-mil relations. I think, I believe, if I'm remembering correctly, in February you wrote that we're actually in a civ-mil crisis right now. Um, does your assessment stand and how could the NDS play a role?

KARLIN: Yeah, absolutely. That assessment stands, it probably should have been a lot punchier. I wrote that on a Friday night after a number of senior military leaders had been fired, including just as worryingly, a whole bunch of senior military lawyers.

And the thing is about the military is when you're in uniform, there's like one question that really, really no kidding matters. Is it legal? Right. You can say, Hey, is this stupid? Is this a thing I wanna do? But the really big question that matters is, is this legal? And you yourself are probably not a lawyer, so you get that answer from your military lawyer. And so seeing the senior lawyers across the military services get fired, as you can imagine, was a pretty worrisome outcome.

Uh, so when we talk about civ-mil relations, I would say there's probably two threads that we should sit on for a moment. Thread number one is the relationship between the US military and the American public. You know, and I think Senator Slotkin, uh, alluded a little bit to this, but, but hey, our military fought wars for the longest time in our contemporary history in post 9/11 period, most Americans didn't pay a whole lot of attention. They, um, had some broad but pretty hollow, uh, broad support of, of what the military was doing, pretty hollow knowledge of it, nevertheless, and there weren't sacrifices made by the American public, right? There was, it wasn't a whole lot asked of, of the public. And, um, as you can imagine, that's had an impact on the military as well. And I would say not a terribly healthy impact, actually, probably pretty corrosive for the force and also for our democracy, uh, as well.

When we look at the relationship between the American public and its military, what worries me the most is some recent polling. And this polling shows that partisan views are really predominant vis-a-vis the US military. So usually what happens when you do some polling about how the public feels about the military is people either feel like relatively good about it or relatively not so positive about it. Here's what's scary. The latest polling shows very, very, very high support among Republicans for the military and pretty low support among Democrats that is not healthy, right? We want those to move in tandem. We do not want the military to be seen in such a partisan line. So that's one element that we should probably worry about on the civ-mil front.

The other piece, which I think gets directly at your national defense strategy question is the relationship between the senior military leaders and the civilian masters, um, kind of of violence, right? Those would be folks like a secretary of defense or war as we call it these days, and the senior folks around them, right, the commander in chief.

And we have seen that relationship get pretty sporty, right? I think the Quantico gathering, which we've never seen before, of all the senior general and flag officers coming together to be told that they've all like gained a little too much weight. That's not a terribly professional way to interact with folks. It's also not terribly relevant to like the future of, of warfare either.

You know, we've seen a whole lot of folks getting fired. It is absolutely fine, it is the, the prerogative of the commander in chief to fire whomever they want in uniform. But usually you have cause, right? Usually you have a reason because you're trying to say to folks, don't do that. It's been pretty vague other than folks who on the whole happen to be women or happen to be people of color. And so that's sending a certain message, uh, as, as well.

Um, and even as we look at this National Defense Strategy, there's been a whole lot of scuttlebutt about how folks in uniform haven't been included in the national defense strategy development process. That is frankly, pretty astrategic because who do you think is actually going to implement your strategy? The people who are part of the process, and a lot of those are the most senior folks in uniform as well. And so what we're seeing in that relationship is actually not boding terribly well for realizing any sort of strategy. And if we just go to like the wonky literature on this topic, it says that the way folks in uniform are now going to look a little bit skeptically at senior civilians is actually going to continue, right? It's not just going to be about one team or the other. It's going to actually be kind of how all senior civilians get painted. Also not healthy for our democracy.

NOYES: Thanks, Mara. Um, Caitlin, I know you've done a lot of research on nuke policy. Um, if I'm understanding the, the latest news, um, the Nuclear Posture Review is going to be, uh, is, is jettisoned for this year and it's going to be part of the National Defense Strategy. Uh, maybe if you could speak, uh, a little bit about that and feel free to use that as an entree to your nukes research more broadly.

TALMADGE: Sure. Well, I'll once again turn to nuclear weapons to cheer up the conversation because I actually think that the practice, the relatively longstanding practice of having a separate, um, nuclear posture review that you know is, is detached from the larger national defense strategy doesn't actually make a ton of sense. And I think the notion that we should actually discuss nuclear weapons as an integrated part of our national defense strategy, which to some degree was already kind of moving in that direction in the previous administration. But I, I don't think that's a crazy idea at all.

I mean, I think that, you know, if we look back on the history of the nuclear age for, for most of that history, our decision making in the United States about conventional and nuclear forces was actually very tightly integrated. I mean, during the Cold War, relatively early on, we made a very deliberate decision that we were not going to try to match the Soviets ruble for ruble, dollar for dollar on conventional forces. And that we were instead going to rely heavily on nuclear forces as a credible means of defending, uh, a wide network of allies that were under the US nuclear umbrella.

And I mention this to say that 50 years ago, the notion that we would talk about our nuclear forces separate from our conventional forces would've been kind of nuts. It would've been like, well, we're, we're making decisions about what we're going to build in both of these domains because they're integrated in our strategy and, and, you know, we think about them

together. I think what happened is with the end of the Cold War, the United States did not face nuclear armed, uh, competitors. And it also enjoyed overwhelming conventional superiority, which made the need to rely on its nuclear arsenal in the way that it had during the Cold War vis-a-vis the Soviets recede. And I'm sorry to report that, that interlude is now, now over, and in a number of key regions around the world, if the United States does not enjoy conventional superiority, I think at the very least you could say that conventional military balances are not moving in a direction that is favorable to the United States.

And so if it is the case that the United States wants to maintain its alliance commitments, and I will put a giant asterisk next to that, given everything that we're seeing and everything that we've talked about today, but if it is the case that the United States wants to maintain credible defense promises to allies in various locations where there are adversaries that at least locally, uh, may pose a really serious conventional threat, then the question of what the role of the US nuclear arsenal is, I think is back whether that arsenal is fit for purpose.

And it is, again, very much related to questions about, well, what, what do we think we can do conventionally versus what might we turn to our nuclear arsenal to try to deter? And so bringing those questions back into the National Defense Strategy directly, I think is a good move. Um, I think there is, however, still the question of what the substance of the answers to those questions is going to be.

And again, one of the things that I kind of worry about is whether there is sufficient political attention and bandwidth being given to this relatively important question that, you know, two years ago, this, the very nonpartisan expert strategic posture commission identified as a really important one, which is, you know, is America's nuclear arsenal, is its size and shape, uh, its nuclear posture, which was essentially designed in 2010 in a completely different strategic environment where Russia was a partner, uh, China was not building hundreds of silos, and both the US and Russia were constrained by strategic arms control, is that really the right template for the US nuclear arsenal going forward?

And, you know, I would say the answer to that question is no. And that there's some things in the short and long term we should be rethinking with our nuclear posture, but it is right to do that in the context of the National Defense Strategy, I think.

NOYES: Great. Thanks, Caitlin. Yeah. I'm gonna add a quick two finger on that and, and direct it to Caitlin and Bruce, if you'd wanna jump in as well. I think it's kind of, uh, surprising that we've got this far in the day, and if I'm not mistaken, we haven't mentioned AI. Um, and

you know, when you're usually at a gathering of this sort, it's, it's been peppered through the conversation already. Um, I read a report, I believe it was in Politico a month or two ago, um, showing that AI war games escalated quicker than humans did to the nuclear stage. That's kind of terrifying. Um, maybe both Caitlin and Bruce can, can quickly, um, or Caitlin, will take this one and respond to, you know, what does AI mean for policy? What does it mean for national defense strategies writ large?

TALMADGE: Just a real softball here at the end of the day. Things easy, easy quick one.

Yeah, yeah. No, I, I, I definitely get why people are concerned. My, and I, I do think there are, there are ways you can imagine at least that AI could be destabilizing in the nuclear domain. What I, what I will say, just a short answer, kind of bottom line, is I think decision makers like to retain control over how their nuclear forces are used. Um, I think that is an overwhelmingly common behavior across virtually all nuclear states, irrespective of time period, regime type, and many other characteristics. And so it, it's true, you know, there are the killer robots, but like, I, I think it is questionable whether national leaders are going to truly delegate to AI in a meaningful way. And, asterisk, we can talk about what that would actually mean, um, the authority to use nuclear weapons in a way that would be destabilizing and would not occur otherwise if humans were in control. I, I, I think that's unlikely. I mean, we do have some agency here.

NOYES: Okay, I feel better. Thank you Caitlin, appreciate that. Okay. Bruce, over to you. You've done a lot of thinking on defense industrial base, uh, base as I mentioned, uh, especially shipbuilding. There's been a lot of headlines about, um, new efforts and initiatives on how to crank up our shipbuilding. Are these real? Is there anything behind it? What are the implications moving forward?

JONES: Yeah, thanks. Um, by the way, I might have a slightly different answer on the AI piece, but we'll go to that later. Uh, look, this is kind of one of these very increasingly rare, uh, topics where there's a degree of bipartisanship actually, uh, which is sort of shocking these days, but it's good. Um, you have a piece of legislation which hasn't been moved forward yet, but is bipartisan, bicameral, to kind of invest in the shipbuilding sector. You had substantial monies authorized that, I think personally by Mara. Pretty close. Uh, and you have, again, everything we hear as you'll see that again in this, in this budget, uh, this administration has assembled some pretty talented people to work on this issue inside OMB and inside, uh, Pentagon. Um, so there are good things there.

And to be perfectly honest with you, I think we have to be a little patient. I hear a lot of people now saying, oh, look, it hasn't moved. It's like, well, I mean, you know, okay, we, we, we downscaled this capacity for 40 years. It's not gonna get fixed in six months, right. We have to have a little patience.

Um, again, to bipartisanship, we saw the president signing a deal with Finland to build icebreakers. That's a good thing. It builds on an agreement that was struck during the Biden administration called the Ice Pact. Uh, so there's lots of positives here.

I, I guess what I would like to see, uh, so I will, I'll, I'll make a disclosure here, which will, you can, you can interpret my answer through this prism. I'm writing a book about submarine warfare. Okay. And when you're writing about a, uh, an when you're writing about hammer, all problems are nails. Okay. So right now I'm a little obsessed by underseas warfare. But I will say that when you look at the capabilities that are adversaries or potential adversaries are, are, are, are fielding and the export of those capabilities and what that does to air power and surface power, I do think that both long range, uh, strike and undersea warfare are gonna play extremely important roles in the coming period.

By the way, a domain that is going to be highly resistant to AI, actually, much more than people think and talk about. Um, and so I would love to see some real prioritization on the submarine industrial base and accompanying pieces of it. We're very expensive, very complicated. Uh, we have it in part because—it feels almost impossible to say a thing like this right now—at the end of the Cold War, Congress made some very wise, farsighted decisions about keeping a number of capabilities open, even when it looked like they might not be necessary in the short term. They've proven to be extremely necessary in the medium to long term. Um, so I would love to see some prioritization of the submarine piece of the, of the puzzle, not just in funding, but in sort of focus. Uh, icebreakers are good. Submarines are better.

NOYES: Great. Thanks. I'm gonna, uh, I can't resist the temptation to ask a security cooperation question to, to both Mara and, and Caitlin. If, if you'll, um, if you'll humor me, uh, you both have written, um, what I think, the technical term is pretty awesome, books on security cooperation and building partner militaries. Um, and I've thought a lot about these issues myself. What do you think the recent shifts in the geopolitical environment, um, and US foreign policy mean for security cooperation? I think on one hand you could make the argument that we're pulling back in certain regions, um, in Eastern Europe and, and maybe, uh, reshoring to, to the Western Hemisphere. Um, I also think on the flip side, if we are

serious about burden-sharing and burden-shifting, I mean, that is security cooperation, right? Um, so yeah, we'd love to hear your, your quick thoughts and then we'll, we'll open it up to, to q and a.

KARLIN: Yeah, absolutely. Let me give you two examples that show why you should care about this and one that should make you nervous. Alright, so why you should care. Let's use Ukraine, right? So, uh, the United States, um, spent a lot, you know, kind of, kind of got rid of a bunch of its old stuff that was in the cupboard, um, spent money on our own defense industry. So my home state of Wisconsin got half a, I think it was like half a billion dollars or so, um, and a whole bunch of material went to Ukraine and zero US military service members have died and about a million Russian casualties. Have happened in the last few years. Those are extraordinary numbers when you think about it. About a million Russian casualties, zero US ones, and a whole lot of US jobs as well, right. Um, financially this has been good for the United States and hurt one of its adversaries. So security cooperation in that case, pretty, pretty good, right?

Uh, another interesting example, which is a little different than the way we usually think of security cooperation as like helping a country deal with a problem that we don't want to deal with. Um, but here's the thing, sometimes we can use a little bit of help too. And so the next example I would use is AUKUS, right? AUKUS is this relationship between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. On one level it's about the United States selling nuclear powered, conventionally armed submarines to Australia. On another level, it's about three countries building a submarine together in the future and doing a whole bunch of advanced technology cooperation.

So that means the United States, look back, back in the day, like when Bruce was talking about it, we had a real monopoly on what was happening technologically. That's really not the case anymore. And so finding a way, frankly, to benefit in some ways, almost extending the security cooperation idea from our allies whose systems are pretty impressive, like the Brits and the Aussies, that's actually a good thing for us. So you should look at those two examples and say, wow, security cooperation, like, I feel good about that. We should do it.

Let me now make you feel badly. And where I want you to feel badly is, uh, what we see in particular happening across Europe. It is great that the Europeans are increasing their defense budgets. Exactly right. You'll note that that, you know, those shifts really happened after Russia invaded Ukraine. Un, unsurprisingly. But what we've started to see among a lot of Europeans is a nervousness about relying on the US defense industrial base. That's

problematic. And it's particularly animated by the way the Trump administration has been turning on and off the military assistance to Ukraine. Because if you rely on US defense industry and you think that it might get turned on and off, and you might not be able to get the material that you need, you gotta look elsewhere. You gotta build it yourself. And so we're starting to see a lot of that beginning to happen inside Europe, and I think that that actually is not going to be great for the United States writ large.

NOYES: Great. Thanks, mark. Caitlin, do you have anything to add?

TALMADGE: Honestly, not a whole lot. I thought that was a great answer.

I mean, I would just say that I, I think security cooperation often gets a bad rap because we think about it and we think about cases where it didn't go so great. Um, we've both written about some of those, but there's a lot of cases where nothing happens. Like the war is deterred, the local military is strengthened, and that's a success, but it's kind of a dog that doesn't bark. And so we don't, we don't always give it the credit that it deserves.

And to your point, you know, I think it can be a really important, um, and cost effective way to pursue our grand strategy. I mean, I would much rather pay pennies on the dollar to strengthen partner and friendly militaries in the Indo-Pacific than, you know, do all of that on the United States own dime and on the back of, of US soldiers. So, I, I agree.

NOYES: Here, here. Okay, great. We have, um, just about 11 minutes left. Let's open it up to, uh, q and a. Please, uh, state your name and affiliation and, and keep it, uh, short and sweet up here.

Audience question: Tim Oliver, submariner by experience. Bruce, I'd like to get to meet you, talk a little bit. Uh, I came here interested in the speakers. Um, I've come away, uh, alarmed. Um, but I'd particularly like to ask you, uh. Uh, now that I know that the cell phone that I wasn't allowed to take into any classified spaces because of the technology that's out there in the world is now going to become available to our government, uh, what you might think the implications of that to be.

NOYES: Anybody wanna jump on that one?

JONES: I'm not sure which technology you're referring to specifically.

Audience question: The one that, uh, was talked about on was the last Monday night, Rachel, um, about the, uh, starts with the PE and it's basically the technology that --

TALMADGE: Pegasus?

Audience question: Pegasus, yes.

JONES: I don't know. I don't know the answer to that.

TALMADGE: I am not an expert on that technology. It's not good.

NOYES: All right. Anybody else? I know it's getting late. We'll get you outta here right on time or maybe a little early. Dr. O'Hanlon.

O'Hanlon : I will also use this opportunity to thank everybody for being here and the panel for a great discussion. I wanted to ask your opinion about the famous Hegseth 8% memo from last spring, where I think he conducted a useful exercise by asking the services to look for expenses they didn't necessarily need to continue in order to free up budgetary space for new initiatives. So my question would be, is 8% sort of the right ballpark number when you do that kind of a blue sky exercise? And where, could you give an example, each of you, of where you might cut, uh, US military capability that's less crucial?

NOYES: Good question. Yeah, Mara, you wanna start with that?

KARLIN: Oh, yeah. Um, the, I, I don't know what the right percentage is, right? So you can, when you're doing a strategy, you can either be very focused on the budget, like, here's the number we have, we're gonna try to anchor to that number. Or you can kind of live in a blue sky mode and that sort of fun, butterflies and unicorns. Ideally, what you wanna do is be like strategy driven and budget informed so that you're relatively realistic.

There are absolutely cuts to be made. Um, and in fact, I thought DOGE was an unfortunate missed opportunity to try to get, get after that. The way that I would try to figure out what cuts to be made, and I'll give you a couple in a moment, is I would try to kind of build scenarios about the future types of conflicts that a president might want the military to wage. What are the capabilities, what's the capacity? What are the personnel that you would want for each of those, um, scenarios? And then you would figure out, all right, what don't I, I really need, so things that I would think about cutting, uh, people, people have gotten very, very expensive

in a way that we did not envision, um, dozens and dozens of years ago. So I would look at cutting, say, army and strength.

Um, surface ships. They're, uh, not doing so hot. When you, um, imagine a lot of future conflicts, we probably wanna rethink, um, what we have in terms of, of, uh, surface ships, um, as well. Uh, those, I think those two probably jump up. I guess if I had to give you another, I think a lot about where we are using crewed platforms and where those might translate into un, uncrewed platforms.

Ideally, you wanna try to build a force that can be very effective at a high-end level. It's got some really like exquisite, precise capabilities and also has a bunch of cheap stuff, right, that you can use mass, that you can attrit and kind of lose a bunch of it, but it doesn't cost so much. So that's okay, you can kind of throw a lot of it, uh, at, at the problem.

TALMADGE: Sure. So once again, I mean, I think we always have to be wary of the fallacy that like, oh, just because this administration does it, it must be wrong, right? Like even a broken watch can tell time correctly twice a day. And as I said with, with the NPR, and as I'll say here, I, I agree with you. I think this is a good exercise. And, um, the notion that a secretary of defense would use the budget as a tool to force the services to discipline some of their spending is actually a great idea.

Now, is 8% the right number? This is where I would like the secretary of defense to also be telling us more about like, what are we, what are we doing in the world? What are our objectives? And even at a higher level, as we were getting at in the previous panel, what's our grand strategy? Because if I don't know what I'm trying to do, it's kind of hard to know what is and isn't essential to that. And so I think we're kind of missing the strategic discipline, guiding the budget discipline, which would then produce, um, clearer recommendations about force structure.

But I will just say, you know, if we are thinking about great power competition, and if we're thinking in particular about, um, deterrence in, in the Indo-Pacific, I think we need to think a lot about which platforms are actually going to be survivable in an environment, uh, where we're facing adversary air defenses and, you know, adversary undersea forces.

And to, to the point that Bruce made earlier, which I think is absolutely spot on. I think if you think about war in three dimensions, you think about the air domain, you think about the surface, and you think, or you know, or land, and you think about undersea. Um, if we're

thinking about, you know, a, a maritime conflict, for instance with China, there's no question in my mind that America's strongest domain is the undersea domain.

And the flip side of that is that I think our very expensive surface forces and manned aircraft are going to be increasingly vulnerable. This is part of what I was getting at earlier when I was saying that I think, you know, the, there are conventional military balances that at a minimum are not moving in a great direction for the United States in places like East Asia.

And so, you know, what is the exact right answer? I don't know. But the ratio, I think in terms of our naval spending, which is something that I like Bruce, pay more attention to, to me, points a lot toward investing more in the undersea domain, less in manned aircraft from both the Navy and the Air Force, less in surface forces, which also gets to your defense industrial base point because you can want submarines, but if you can't build them, that's a problem.

NOYES: All right, Bruce, what are you cutting?

JONES: Uh, actually I'll, I'll just add to what Caitlin just said. So I, I thought it was a clever exercise and I would go farther in just building a, you literally just said, and, and I break the shibboleth on one third, one third, one third for the services. You know, if we are gonna end up fighting a high end conflict with the Chinese or the Russians, it will be primarily in maritime space and in nuclear and space. Space-space, right. These are not gonna be ground campaigns. I know you wrote a fantastic book about why land war still matters, but for now, I would prioritize the ability to fight in the maritime space. And the fighting in the maritime space isn't only a Navy thing, it's a space thing, it's a, you know, there's a bunch of of things that are involved in it, but it is primarily gonna be maritime in the, in the kind of most essential parts of the fight. So I would break that.

You know, I was very struck by the way the Australians in their recent defense budget, uh, yeah, they did this. They basically said, yeah, look, this is fundamentally about sea lanes of communication. This is about protecting sea-based trade. It's about maritime conflict. And so we are gonna prioritize maritime capabilities to about 60% of the budget, uh, which is a really big number, especially in sort of Australian history. And so I think we have to kind of break that, kind of, China as well, that, that's a terrible phrase in the context, but we have to break those shibboleths.

NOYES: Mara, you want to do a finger on that?

KARLIN: So the, the good news is there was this long period of time where the budget was indeed kind of divided. One third, one third, one third, so like Navy, Air Force and Army. And that actually has shifted over the last few years, such that the Navy gets more money than the Air Force and then the, the Army, I don't think it's dramatic enough, but it is meaningful and it has happened over the last few years.

NOYES: Fair. Interesting. Thanks. Uh, Jeff.

FELTMAN: I defer to others if there's a non-Brookings question.

NOYES: Yeah, you're up.

FELTMAN: Um, Jeff Feltman, former moderator. Um, I think I'm, I, I'm, my questions along the is, um, it derives from what you've all been talking about just now, um, about the need to look at these, the, the what, uh, what a future war with China or Russia would look like. What are the capabilities we need? What are the technologies we need, et cetera. But then I think back to the comments made earlier today, references back to the, um, Quantico theater where we talk about fat generals and beards. Um, do you get the sense that this administration, which are, which, you know, the warrior ethic, the, the, the GI Joe look, is this administration grasping the realities that you've all described? Because I leave here more worried than I came in, that there's a disconnect between what the "secretary of war," um, perceives his job to be and the military to be and what we actually need for our future defense.

KARLIN: Mm-hmm.

TALMADGE: Yeah.

NOYES: Yeah, why don't, why don't we, um, just go down the, the line here and have sort of closing thoughts. 'cause we got about, uh, two minutes left, so

TALMADGE: I'm gonna, I'm gonna breach the line according tomorrow. No, I, I, I think you're absolutely right. And, um, one of my many reactions to that speech was, um, yeah, actually we do need fat generals and admirals. I have zero problem with that because, um, there's gonna be types of wars that we're fighting where they're gonna be fought in people's brains, um, and at keyboards, and it's actually not relevant whether you, you know, are meeting the, you know, an arbitrary standard of physical fitness.

Not, look, I'm, I'm all, I'm all for, for discipline and fitness and all of these things. But, um, I think you're absolutely right that that performance reflected a very specific view of what warfare is. And it's the view of a company level officer in a long counterinsurgency war in the Middle East, and, um all of the concerns were the things that small unit commanders do worry about, which are things like, you know, hygiene and fitness and discipline, and absolutely those things are important for small unit cohesion and performance. No, no argument. Um, I'm not sure that that's at all what the secretary of war or, um, you know, general officers and flag officers need to be thinking about, especially in a war that is likely to be in airspace, maritime domain against a nuclear armed great power adversary.

And so, um, that's what was missing from the speech is actually what, what is the strategic environment? What are the threats? What are, what are the types of wars that we need to fight in the future? But there was an implicit answer based, I think, on a very narrow set of personal experiences. And I, I do worry that it's actually very much at odds with what we may actually encounter in the world. And this gets back to what I was saying about there, there really is a trade off in, uh, the types of missions and operations that you're preparing for.

KARLIN: I wholeheartedly agree with everything Caitlin said and would just add a smidge if you are spending a lot of your time thinking, Hey, is what I'm doing legal? And are, am I really focused on what I look like? There is an opportunity cost there. And I think one of the things we've tried to outline over these last 50 minutes is those opportunity costs are real, right? The security environment is getting more complicated and more complex. The threats to the United States are growing, and so we should be more worried about this.

I would also add an addendum to a question you didn't ask, Jeff, but you did in your earlier panel where you were talking about the National Security Strategy and you effectively said, I spent 30 years in the foreign service and I dunno how much time I've spent focused on the National Security Strategy. I a hundred percent get that. The National Defense Strategy is a little bit different in so far as there's a lot of money attached to it for the Department of Defense itself, and so folks invariably have to be somewhat steeped in it because it, it's going to affect literally how they are doing their job in a very direct way, right? What sort of material do they have, what kind of training are they going to have? So what happens here isn't going to be just like a news release that comes out and folks across, you know, the military can kind of move on from it. It's actually going to inextricably affect how they are doing their business.

NOYES: Interesting points. Bruce, any uh, closing thoughts?

JONES: Yeah, the only, the image that was in my mind during that entire episode was some guy sitting in a basement someplace in Beijing, who's less fit than I am, but has a triple PhD and met, metallurgy, physics and quantum dynamics and thinking like, why the hell does that guy care whether he can do sit ups or not? Like, that guy's gonna really mess up our stuff, right? And I don't, he's not gonna be a fit guy, but he is gonna be a really, really smart guy or a woman and gonna mess up our stuff.

So yeah, the, the focus of war readiness is to my mind about whether we are investing in and mobilizing the most relevant science and having nimble systems, which we do not have for applying it to technology and military technology. There is a lot of stuff to do in my view. I'm a, I'm a real outsider in this stuff, but everything I've seen tells me that there's a lot of work to do in breaking down the kind of calcification of our systems for acquiring technologies and applying technologies. There's a lot to do there. Uh, and none of it has to do with situps.

NOYES: Great. Thanks so much. Well, uh, I learned a lot in this panel. Thanks so much. Uh, please join me in a round of applause for our panelists. And big, big thanks for, for coming out. It's been a fantastic audience. You guys have been fantastic. I appreciate you guys staying to the end and, uh, yeah, signing off from Falk.