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DISCUSSION:

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O'HANLON: Well, good afternoon everyone, and welcome to Brookings. Thank you for coming. I'm Mike O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy program, and I've got the fun job today of starting a conversation about strategy. With three of my favorite strategists in the world. I'll just say a very brief word of introduction.

I'm guessing a number of you know a fair amount about a number of them. To my left, Mara Karlin is a professor at SAIS and a scholar here at Brookings. She was assistant secretary of defense for strategy, plans and capabilities in the Biden administration under Secretary Austin. So she's thought about strategy at a very practical level of how does it translate into American defense planning and capabilities, as well as war plans.

And she's also written two books along the way. So a lot to draw upon. Also, a couple of fun facts. She went to Tulane in New Orleans and after she left the Pentagon, she's, even though she worked for six secretaries of defense, she's still a lot of fun. And, and each time she, each time she left the Pentagon, she would do a semester at sea with her kids teaching around the world.

Speaking of overseas travel, Sir Lawrence Freedman is kindly joining us today, and it's really his book and his visit that are much of the impetus for our conversation in the first place. He's recently written a fantastic book that I was reading yesterday on strategists and strategy. He also wrote a great to that many of you will know as one of the classics in the field on strategy several years ago.

I first read him when I was a grad student, and he was already, despite his youth, a very established, famous historian who wrote a book called The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy back in the early 1980s. And has had a remarkable career. He's Sir Lawrence Freedman to you, by the way, he's also commander of the British Empire which is one of his other titles.

He was the head of the Falklands War Research Project. After that conflict in the 1990s, that study took place. And then about a half dozen years after the Iraq invasion, he was part of the British investigation about the decision making and war fighting in that conflict. So he's had a lot to think about with strategy over the years.I'll just mention upfront that my favorite chapter in his new book is about Nelson Mandela. So, again, a little bit unusual and and a lot of, you know, fascinating thoughts and ideas.

Josh Rovner is a professor at American University. He's also been with us here at Brookings. For much of the last year, he's also got a pretty fun background. He went to the University of California at San Diego, apparently decided he had enough of surfing, so then went to Boston College for his masters, at MIT for his PhD. He's got interesting affiliations over the years with Southern Methodist University, the Naval War College. As I say, he's now at American, but he's also in his various writings, including a book called Strategy and Grand Strategy that provides much of the impetus for today's talk. He's, he's also been a fellow at the National Security Agency, a scholar in residence there, which is a nice way to juxtapose research with a American national security policy.

So the basic approach today will bring your questions in the last 20, 25 minutes or so. But until then, we're gonna talk up here, and I'm going to start with one big question for each person.

And I'm gonna take the liberty of answering it first myself, but I'll try to be brief to get to the real stars. And, and I just wanna sort of give an indication of what I'm thinking with this first question. It's just gonna be to tell us one big idea you've had in your writings about strategy,

or one big lesson you think we need to understand. Well, for today's world, that's just gonna be a, you know, a conversation starter. And after that we'll have really a back and forth with each other, not just responding to questions from me.

Before we go to you now, my brief role as panelist I, I just finished a book called To Dare Mighty Things, US Defense Strategy Since the Revolution. And what I wanted to draw from that book to start this conversation before I go to, to Laurie, to, to begin as our great friend from across the Atlantic and visiting to have him speak first, but I wanted to make a distinction between what I define as grand strategy and what I define as defense strategy.

Other people have somewhat different definitions. Josh has a slightly different definition in his book, but what I wanna, I'm not just gonna make a pedantic or a semantic point. I wanna also illustrate an an idea and strategy that struck me in doing this history book and grand strategy, I define, at least for the United States, is how we protect ourselves, but also maximize our power.

I don't use it to describe every aspect of American foreign policy or an overall diplomatic approach to the world. It's really about security. But since the United States has always been pretty secure, I define grand strategy, not just as how do we protect ourselves, but how do we strengthen ourselves and maximize our role in the world defense strategy or military strategy.

Those are all the pieces of the armed forces that we use in pursuit of that grand strategy, whatever it may be. Everything from the weapons we buy, the people that we recruit and train, and how we fight our wars, but also how we try to prevent war or fight the smaller wars. So that's the broad definition.

It's really applying to all the ideas, guiding the application of military force. And just to give an example here's what I would like to leave you with to start the conversation. I think in the 1920s and 1930s, the United States had a terrible grand strategy. It was basically pullback from the world.

That was our only real period of isolationism. In my opinion, in our history, I don't think we're naturally isolationist. And I tried to argue that for the first half of our history, we were expansionist with a vengeance. That's why we turned into a big country. That's not isolationism by any proper definition of the term, but in the 1920s and thirties, we did pull back from the world as a matter of high politics and deliberate choice.

But luckily, our military services were thinking ahead and developing concepts of aircraft carrier warfare. Amphibious assault, the use of radar the use of aircraft, which of course were still relatively new at that time, such that once we decided to scale up after Pearl Harbor second time, Pearl Harbor's been mentioned this week in Washington, I guess.

But but the last two, once we decided to scale up, we had the wherewithal to do so quickly. So here was a place in the twenties and thirties where our grand strategy led us down. But the military strategy, to the extent it was allowed some free reign for experimentation and innovation did much better.

I would argue things flipped in the Cold War. In the Cold War, we sort of had the grand strategy, right, containment and protection of fellow market oriented democracies. But the actual application of military force in our wars was overall much less successful with Vietnam being, of course, the worst example, but even the Korean War being up and down.

So the actual application of military force in war fighting. It turned out to be fairly mediocre, and that is not meant as an indictment of people who wore the uniform. It has a lot more to do with the difficulty of these missions in the first place. So I could say more, but I've already talked too long and I want to get to the panelists.

That's an, that's a sense though of where we're trying to go with today's conversation, but it's gonna be a little bit of a smorgasbord of different people weighing in on this general subject as they wish. And then again, we'll have the conversation with ourselves and with you. So, Laurie, welcome to Washington.

Thank you for coming. Congratulations on your book. And over to you, my friend.

FREEDMAN: Thank you very much, Mike.

So in the new book, there's a couple of essays, which obviously they're there because I quite like them. One of them is called In Praise of Tactics. And the origins of this was when Hal Brands' new edition of Makers of Modern Strategy was being promoted. And I, I was at some event. And it struck me that there's no makers of modern tactics. That you have in many organizations, I was one myself, vice presidents for strategy; don't have vice presidents for tactics. It's considered to be rather lowly in theory and the, and the kudos and, and the and the excitement is seen in strategy.

Yet in practice, you watch movies, you read novels, you read even good military history, and tactics dominate. It's decisions, often taken by individuals, stuck in particular situations, trying to work out how to get through them that can be very decisive. And obviously if you had movies that were just based on senior figures deliberating about what they should do next, well, you can imagine this administration may be different, but generally it would be pretty boring. Whereas when you get to tactics it's quite exciting. That's where the drama is. And it struck me that we sort of think forward with strategy, but you move forward with tactics.

And one of the problems with so much strategy is they forget the tactics. They don't talk to the doers, they don't think through implementation, and that is where a lot of stuff goes wrong. So that, you know, there are basic issues that unless you have people who understand the operational details who know what it's like to try to do what is being asked of them, you'll get it wrong.

So, in praise of tactics is basically urging that we pay more attention and that we encourage people to think through how you get things done, even if you've got the greatest strategy in the world if you haven't thought through these things you'll, you'll it can go very badly wrong.

And just briefly, the, the other sort of main sort of idea about, there's, there's another piece about writing strategies which I had to do in, in a university. So I've done it and I've seen other people do it. And, you know, everybody says you've gotta have a strategy. It's really important, the magic ingredient that turns a totally chaotic situation to something that's directed and purposeful and so on. So you sit down and you write down a strategy, and all of a sudden it becomes very difficult and problematic.

First, you, people assume you start with your objectives, yet whether your objectives are gonna be successful, it depends on whether you've got the means to achieve them. And if you don't have the means to achieve them, then your objectives look wrong.

Then people say, well, there are these six important functions in the organization. Why are you only focusing on one? My function is really important. Oh yeah, okay, we'll have to bring that in. Then somebody says, well, you do realize our competitors are gonna be reading this. Oh yeah, better water it down a bit more. Then you have the question of whether the people writing this stuff are actually doing it in connection with the people who will be responsible, not just for the implementation tactically, but actually taking the decisions.

So you get people, we've gotta blue sky thinking, think out of the box. You normally know when somebody says that it'll be really interesting and completely irrelevant because unless you know how to think in the box, you are gonna have trouble outside of the box. So my, the, the basic point of this is that we need to understand both strategy and tactics, the political organizational realities of how these things work out and not offer some sort of idealized view about what good strategy inevitably looks like.

Because it's difficult. It's not that you can't do it, it's just difficult. And you need to think about implementation and you need to think about not tying yourself down too much. That's why politicians normally like to keep options open. They don't like to close things off. They like to be, because who knows things may, may happen.

So I think part of what I try to do, my general work is, I think a skeptical view to the process of strategy formation. Not because people are bad strategies, it's just difficult because you are dealing with opponents who want to disrupt your strategy. That's what makes strategy interesting. And unless you are prepared to take that into account, you may go badly wrong.

O'HANLON: Well, what a fantastic intervention and what a perfect setup for Mara, the primary author of the 2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States. So –

FREEDMAN: It’s very good, incidentally.

KARLIN: Thank you.

O’HANLON: We have other reasons to go to you next, but since you're on deck and now lined up the, the baton is yours.

KARLIN: Sure. I was, first of all, it's a treat to be here. Like Mike, I have read Laurie Freedman's work since I was in school, and it's constantly worthwhile. This latest book is unsurprisingly, quite, quite well done as as well.

You know, I was thinking per your first question, Mike, kind of the big take away from, from our books on, on strategy. And, and I realized that for me it's really that it's very easy to be astrategic. And I think that's, that's quite validated by some of the points Laurie, Laurie offered. And I think it's because it's really hard and can feel potentially ephemeral and other things you can grab onto.

So my first book looked a lot at security cooperation, how the US works with militaries around the world. And what I kept finding is folks would want to just focus on the technical elements, right? We've succeeded because we gave a military x, y, z platforms and assets and we trained them, thus we win, right? And, and that feels satisfying. It's also totally wrong. But, but that sort of Excel spreadsheet approach, I understand why folks wanna turn to, because the strategic approach is so hard.

And then, in my last book on the legacies of the post 9/11 wars, there's this real emphasis you see by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan on operational wins, right? Because you can pinpoint them, you can hold onto them, whereas being able to step back and say strategically to what extent are we actually achieving our ends that just feels so much, so much terribly less, less satisfying.

I would just wrap by kind of foot stomping some of the really important points that Laurie makes in this chapter on strategy making you, you know, there is often a gulf between the strategy writers and the strategy doers as he notes.

And I think the most important thing for realizing a strategy is forcing those communities to be together and forcing them to, in every real life, no kidding decision, not words written on a glossy document, they get put on a shelf. You're actually considering, does this align with the strategy, does it not? And then that's informing how you make the decision.

O'HANLON: So. If I could stay with your thinking for a minute, Mara, and ask about the national defense strategy. 'cause I think today's conversation is gonna be a blend of history and big ideas with current events. We might as well start to get there. I'm not gonna ask you about Iran or anything right yet, but, but I would like to understand how you see the implementation of the 2022 National Defense Strategy, which in many ways, as Colin Kahl your colleague at the Pentagon acknowledged when he was here for an event we did with him that fall is many ways a continuation of Jim Mattis's strategy.

There was a lot of continuity from Trump to Biden on that issue at least. And so I guess my questions are of the things that you all wanted to do, what were the most important? How much are we seeing them get achieved? And is the current Trump administration reversing any or is it essentially still continuing on with some of the ones that President Trump's first Secretary of Defense back in 2017 actually initiated?

KARLIN: Absolutely. So some of the points that Laurie makes in this chapter are the importance of prioritization in a strategy and highlighting trade-offs, being clear about your audience and your time horizon. And so, you know, as you highlighted, Mike, you know, the 2018 Trump administration strategy was pretty clear.

It said, we have to worry about two things, Russia and China. And then when we came in, in the Biden administration, we tried to. Put even more of a fine point on it, which is really no kidding, it's China, no other country that's really able to reshape the security and political and economic environment like, like China and is increasingly, you know, capable, not just willing of doing so.

So we tried to be quite pointed on, on what that priority is and the time horizon. You all may know that the Pentagon likes to think in five year time horizons. And so what we tried to do is look at three five year time horizons. What can you change in the near term? What can you change in the medium term?

And then what can you change in in the longer term, right? If you're looking about 15, 15 years out. Now the thing is events intervene, right? As you know, this is this problem, right? You have folks who, who do strategic planning, and then you have folks dealing with crisis management. That's why I actually think the horrific full scale Russian invasion on Ukraine.

Actually ended up forcing the defense strategy in 2022 to be more implemented than it perhaps might have been. And it was because when you're dealing with a conflict of that

magnitude and that sort of like big serious dilemmas and decisions you've just finished your strategy, you actually have your strategy getting a seat at the table because you're trying to understand how am I managing the force?

What am I doing in terms of assistance, how am I using the budget? And so there ended up being almost like a, a synergistic relationship there. If you're saying your top priority is China. What are you doing today with each of these decisions to make that a reality? The Trump administration, I will say, I think their defense strategy, that that came out about two months or so ago, it is very clear on prioritization.

It is the western hemisphere that it is most worried about. The threat picture is very much most on kind of so-called narco terrorists on implementation. I'm pretty skeptical. And that is because frankly implementing any strategy, even the most brilliant one is difficult. Right, because there's winners and losers to a strategy and the losers will want to do all they can to stymie.

The, the kind of realization of, of this strategy, given that this national defense strategy was sort of rolled out late on a Friday night, we haven't seen the secretary, the deputy secretary, own it publicly. It's just really hard to imagine that that's happening inside the Pentagon. And so I'm skeptical that a pointed and clear strategy is actually going to become a reality.

O'HANLON: Excellent. Laurie, I'm gonna have all these same questions for you in a minute, but first, lemme go to Josh. Thank you for being here as well. And the floor is yours. Your book, such a good conceptual book with so much rich history, including a way to think about who really won the Revolutionary War in the United States and going forward from that.

So whatever you choose to address, Josh, the floor is yours.

ROVNER: Great, thanks. Thanks so much and thanks for all of you for, for coming out today. It's, it's marvelous to see a full house talking about big things like strategy and grand strategy even though it's sunny and the flowers are blooming outside.

So, welcome inside. So I like simple definitions and this is the way I, I I approach the world to try to make sense of it. 'cause we all know it's complex and it's messy and all, all of that. So I try to, to to, to get things as simple as I can. And for me, strategy is a theory of victory. How do you win a war?

Grand strategy is a theory of security. How do you keep yourself safe? Okay. And anybody can have a grand strategy. United States, any other country, non-state actors can have a grand strategy. They can have a theory of their own security, right? So in the book, I try to lay out these two ideas and just describe them as in straightforward language, as best as I can.

And then I'm curious about how they interact, right? 'cause in, in principle, you would think that these should be mutually reinforcing ideas. If you're good at strategy, you should be good at grand strategy, right? If you win a war, you should be better off after the war. You should be safer after the war.

And if you've got a good, solid, coherent, grand strategy in peace time, you should be in a better position to win if you have to fight, right? So in in the ideal, these things should be mutually reinforcing and synergistic, but in practice they often come apart. You can have

cases in which states have very good grand strategies and they screw it all up because they don't know how to fight.

Or you can have states who have very, very skilled war fighters and very smart strategists in wartime, but who do things to win, which leads them off less secure in the aftermath. Right. And, and that's just one sort of weird a finding from the book among other weird peculiarities of, of these two big topics and how they, they interact.

So as I was thinking about this, this panel coming in, I, I noticed that the title that we've given it today, which is a strategy and a turbulent era, and you know, those titles, they're, they feel sort of common. We always hear about times of uncertainty and change, blah, blah, yada, yada, yada. But I actually think turbulence is a really good word.

I think turbulence is maybe the best adjective I, I've heard that describes what we're, we're living through is when I think of, of turbulence, I think of airplanes, right? We've all, we've all been there. You're at, you're, you're at 35,000 feet. And you hit a little turbulence and you hit the first bump and nobody cares.

It's just a little bump. But then you, you hit some stronger turbulence and you know, people who are scared of flying, they start to grip their handles. And you hear some people squeak a little bit. And then if it gets more serious, well then you see the flight attendants take their seats and you hear the, the warning signs beep.

And sometimes the captain will come over the PA system and then, you know, the, the, the mood shifts. People start to get genuinely nervous. And why are they nervous? Well, because they are entering a, a, a period of looming danger and profound uncertainty. Like, how bad is this going to be? Is this gonna be bad enough to make me sick?

Is this gonna be bad enough where they have to do an emergency landing? Is this bad enough where I have to like start texting my loved ones? Like how, how, how, how bad is this gonna be? And it's that, that sense of, of the unknown combined with this lingering dread that starts to, to come in. And if you've ever been on a flight where it's really bad, you know what I'm talking about?

I think we're kind of there today where, where, where we're in this period of, of substantial uncertainty about the future of international politics. We're kind of past the post Cold War era. And there's also considerable turbulence about domestic politics. Like, what's the future? What's the future of the republic?

How's this all going to shake out? Right? And so I, we're in the bumps right now. I don't know how bad the bumps are, but we're, we're definitely in the bumps. The good news is we, we have some experience with this. And the historical view helps us to, I think understand what's going on in the present a little bit better.

So I, in, in the book, I look at some times of turbulence the first one that, that Mike mentioned was the, the War of American Independence, like enormous turbulence. And, and in, and in that chapter, I, I look specifically at, at Great Britain and France. I don't spend much time on, on the US or the American experience, but I look at the, the experience of the external powers who are fighting each other in North America and, and the Caribbean and elsewhere, right?

And one of the, the interesting findings from that study is that France conducts an absolutely brilliant strategy in the war, right? Not just giving the Americans guns and material and people, but French strategy was quite, quite good, but it had terrible effects on French grand strategy. Right.

France spends so much helping the Americans gain their independence that it really deepens its debt problem, and this becomes one of the causes of the French Revolution. Right. So in this way, an excellent strategy can undermine grand strategy after the war is done. There's also success stories. It's not, it's, it's not always the case that, that states screw this up.

And we have some more recent success stories. I actually think the first Persian Gulf War is a success story, right? Where the George HW Bush administration not only had a, a, a, a well articulated theory of victory in the war in 1991, but it actually aligned with the administration's view of what international politics should be in the aftermath.

It's like trying to preserve international peace at a time of serious international turbulence. Like there were profound fears that the collapse of the Soviet Union would lead to, to, to real chaos. And that didn't happen, right? Partly that's because of the way that the, that the Bush administration thought about fighting and limited its aims and, and tried to avoid the perception that it was just a big bully barring over weaker powers.

Right? So that was, that was a success story, and I think that we can learn a lot from past periods of turbulence as we try to, to negotiate the, the bumps that we're in today.

O'HANLON: Josh, that's great. I want to go, if I could to Laurie, there's a lot on the table and I guess please comment wherever you like on, on the different topics we've been discussing, but just to give it some frame and you can go where you wish you and I and all of us have been at this for a while and you've began your career during the Cold War.

We've now gone through the post Cold War world into whatever this current world is of great power rivalry. How has Britain done, how has NATO done, how has the United States done overall in your judgment over this 50 year stretch? Or if you don't like that question, take any specific piece of it and, and say what you wanna say, please.

FREEDMAN: No, we haven't done badly really in practice. We made a bet on the alliance with the United States, by and large, up till now it's worked. And, you know, you wouldn't have find many regrets now that shifting and obviously we can't avoid the issues. So Josh describes the situation in an aircraft of turbulence, which is fine until the pilot comes on and says there is no turbulence.

It's, it's not happened. Or if it did happen, we're over it now.

We beat,

ROVNER: we beat the turbulence.

FREEDMAN: We won. This is turbulence that we cause deliberately, right? And we know what we're doing, so don't worry. And anyway, buckle up. So part of it relates to the strategy question is confidence in, in Trans Atlantic leadership.

And that's lacking not to put too fine a point on it. And that I think creates a different sort of situation now, is that for the allies like the UK that's bet on close relationships with the us.

You could argue since 1940 this has been a successful and necessary strategy. You're suddenly forced to contemplate the possibility.

Maybe it's, it's reached its time. It's done us very well, but we need. To move on now, it's actually very difficult 'cause we've made the bet we're, we're entangled. We, you, you can't just walk away from it all. But that's why I think this feels to me different from, I've been around a long time, but it feels to very different from the many other crises of one sort or another I've lived through.

You know, you mean NATO's always in disarray? It's never in array. There's always a, there's always something that's going wrong. But this feels to me quite different. And it's partly because you have the leader of the alliance not really interested in the views of the alliance enacting in ways that are, shall we say, challenging.

So I think that that's one of the things that makes it different and it makes it hard to give it the sort of framing in terms of great power rivalry and so on. Because you can see, and just from a European perspective, ma and I were talking about this before. So I mean, you know, Europeans don't believe there's a deal to be done with Russia.

You know, that, that these, our main opponent, that's our main focus. But China, you start to think about hedging and I think that in terms of grand strategy becomes quite an important issue. If you are no longer sure about the judgment and the policies of, of your main ally, then you hedge. And there's again, limits on what you can do and how you can hedge, but you can see it taking place already whether it's trade delegations to Beijing or or, or or whatever.

And I think that seems to me part of the current situation is question marks about American leadership and policy and a readiness. To think things that you wouldn't have thought before which don't become any easier just because you've suddenly started thinking. I mean, it's very hard to become more independent of the us It's not easy and there's a reluctance to to pay the price, but the issues are, are, are very much to the fore of European debate and people are careful about how they present them.

But anybody who's been to Europe is, is aware that these issues are, are, are actively discussed.

O'HANLON: I'm gonna follow up if I could and then invite my co-panelists if they have any questions for you or reactions to the same issue. 'cause I'm intrigued by this sense of just how serious is the damage to the transatlantic relationship so far.

And I'm a critic of the way President Trump handles the alliance, but I'm also hopeful. That the damage so far at least, is not as severe as some of my colleagues think, and not yet beyond repair and the evidence I would invoke. But this is all a provocation to you. I want to hear obviously what you feel the evidence.

I would point, for example, to Britton's Strategic Defense Review. Our great friend and colleague Fiona Hill was part of the team last year that did the review. And it was very well done and compelling, but it did not recommend some dramatic increase in British military capability. And in fact, even though the things that Britain was already committed to do, it's having a hard time funding, for example, fighter projects.

And so it looks to me like maybe this is, maybe the strategists are getting worried, but it doesn't look to me like British politics are really worrying that much about a fundamental break with the United States just yet. Is that fair or am I wrong?

FREEDMAN: People are very worried. I mean, I, I, I just don't think I mean the review is actually, I mean, it did propose all sorts of things that should be done.

It was pretty active. Unfortunately, not as many of them that should be done are being done. And that's a funding issue. And what's going on at the moment doesn't really make those funding issues any easier. But I think people are worried. You know, the position will be that NATO is the bedrock of our security.

The alliance is vital and the relationship with the United States is essential and in practice the a lot of military to military intelligence to intelligence stuff just goes on as before, it's not affected. People talk to each other, they're very businesslike and so on. But I think in domestic political terms, you know, Trump is toxic. You know, about 13% approval like in the uk. And Starmer has done himself some good by appearing to stand up and not go along with the initial offensive action. So, but it's difficult because you, you really don't want to give up on all you've got when you probably can't afford to fully replace it.

And that's true for all Europeans. But you're hedging, and that's why I would, you, you are thinking about alternatives. You are thinking about what does it mean if the, you're not sure of the US nuclear guarantee anymore. And you're not necessarily putting these all this out in public. But the thinking i, i is, is going on and the political context is shifting.

Quite quick. Now this can come back. You know, I don't, I, I, I genuinely don't hope that, that none of this is terminal. But it's important to recognize the moment and the the anxiety that is there. So I say, I mean, the security communities talk to each other all the time, very close. And despite what Trump said about Stama, the UK is doing a lot in with Iran, including on intelligence and so on.

So the UK is, is not abandoning the US in all to hedge, but, but it really wouldn't rather not be in this position. It wasn't consulted. So having, you know, global economic crisis created because the president decided one day this is something he was gonna do without talking to anybody. And as he told, you know, the Japanese Prime Minister when he was explaining.

The president of Pearl Harbor, if you want surprise, you've got a surprise. So, I I, it's really difficult and, and, and getting the language right and so on is hard.

O'HANLON: Thank you. Mara, I wanted to go to you, you and Phil Gordon, our colleague here, and vice President Kamala Harris's, national Security Advisor in the previous administration.

You wrote an article last fall in which you, I think, made some similar kinds of arguments to what we just heard from Laurie. I wanted to invite you to comment and then also if you have any follow up questions for him as well, please have at it. I,

KARLIN: I do, I do indeed. And I, I think they're, they're tied together.

You know, I think what was so striking to the two of us Phil and I, that that inspired this piece, which is called No Plan B is how we were finding an interaction after interaction. With

various senior folks from Europe in particular, this almost kind of bipolar approach this real perturbation, these low poll numbers as Laurie highlights vis-a-vis the United States.

And then kind of real emphasis that the Transatlantic Alliance could just never be the same, and that they needed to look elsewhere and think differently. And then about two breaths later, many of them would say, so what does it look like to strengthen this relationship? And what does it look like to redouble and turbocharge the, the alliance?

And so that's why I described it as, as a bit bipolar and, and we were trying to understand, you know, what does it mean if so many folks across Europe in particular are having difficulty. Reconceptualizing that plan A, this very, very close alliance, particularly in defense terms with the US, may not work.

Can they even begin thinking about a plan B? Is that different relationships? Is it different capabilities and can they even think about doing both, both simultaneously? But I think that actually leads perhaps to, to a question to you Laurie, which is it seems there are two things that really matter for transatlantic security and more pointedly for European security.

One is wither Washington. We don't have the answer for that. The second is what's going to happen between Russia and Ukraine? And I know that's a topic you follow closely, you talk about it a good deal in the book as well. Could you kind of fast forward for us, if you're sitting here a year from now doing an event on this topic, what is the state of that conflict?

How do we even begin conceptualizing war termination? Or is that not even something we should be thinking about?

FREEDMAN: Oh, we certainly should be thinking about it. So for Europe, this is the issue. I mean, it it, it's the reason that Europeans put so much effort in trying to keep Trump on side, keep be sweet to him and so on.

Last year was because of Ukraine. And you saw this really jump into action after the famous Oval Office meeting and so on. And it's been a very sustained effort and it's led to the position where essentially the Europeans have taken over the Ukraine file. Mm-hmm. I mean, not completely. There's things us provides or provides when it's paid by the Europeans, but the things that, that do help.

But Ukraine is far less dependent upon the US than it was I think Ukraine is an astonishing story. I, I don't think, you know, we, we, we still are very full of the. First days of the full scale invasion, Ukraine's resilience and success in holding that back and pushing back. But Russia has been on a continual offensive since late 23 and has made some advances, some progress, but nothing compared with what you would expect from the resources and manpower It's put into it.

And I think the view in Europe and Ukraine at the moment is that there's not a deal to be done until Trump, sorry, until Putin abandons his belief that the, the Ukrainians have got a hand over the net and of the territory that they failed to take. And the, you know, the Ukrainians combination of built defenses, extraordinary drone developments are now, I would say reasonably confident, not totally confident.

They shouldn't be totally confident. I mean, the Russians adapt, adapt to the, the challenge that they're posing to Russia is despite Putin keeps on standing up. And so we've taken this

city and that city when they haven't is that it actually looked very much the same in the year's time. Now it may not, you know, this is war.

You can never be absolutely sure, but I think that's the objective at the moment is hanging in there. And part of that is you, you, you need better answers to the air defense problem. So, you know, Ukraine has got a lot to offer in terms of how to do certain sorts of air defense against drones. It hasn't got a lot to offer in terms of how to deal with missile ballistic missiles.

And that's a worry. And you know, Paul Zelensky watches. Well, 800 Patriots used in the first three days when he's been, Ukraine's, been given 600 during the whole course of the war. An ordinance being used to put a staggering rate, all of which could have been usefully put to the course of Ukraine.

So it's pretty hard, I think, for him. But he's got 'em in now with the Gulf States and hopefully they will bankroll quite a lot of military production. So it, it's tricky time. But my sense is that there's a greater confidence that I would say last autumn, that they can hold and the longer they can hold, the more awkward it becomes for Putin.

And that's all you can say, because I've got no idea at what point Putin says, or if he ever says enough. 'cause it's a pretty big blow for him in his prestige if he, if he has to accept that this is a failed adventure.

And you know, if you're watching this. From outside. There's two. The, the two big lessons that you can learn from what's happening at the moment and and Russia and Ukraine is if you don't win these wars in the first couple of days mm-hmm.

You've really got a problem. Mm-hmm. And hopefully others might learn that lesson too. Mm-hmm.

O'HANLON: Well, that's, that's a good setup for Josh. And then we'll go to the audience because Josh, I wanted you to invite, invite you to comment on whatever you would like to address at this point, but also you wrote an excellent book called Fixing Intelligence about a dozen years ago, and you thought a lot about the intelligence world.

And I guess just to put a question to you, a specific question, how can we keep getting it wrong about the difficulty of winning wars? The CIA thought that Russia would win within a couple weeks. Yeah. This is a pretty good organization that I admire greatly. And I, I realize, you know, whoever wrote the report may have skewed it in a given way for a given, but I don't think that's the way the Biden administration requested it.

I think the CIA itself thought Russia would win fast. And that was a possibility, but it's not what happened. And it certainly shouldn't have been a prediction in my mind. How does this happen?

ROVNER: So it's the, the, the cop out is to say intelligence is hard. Right? But it's true. I mean, but intelligence analysts are not soothsayers.

They're, they're trying with partial limited and sometimes dubious information to make predictions about the future, right? And, and, and as Laurie said earlier, war is inherently uncertain, right? As soon as you unleash violence on the battlefield, things happen that you

just did not expect, right? So it, it, it's, you can go back and you can look at the CIA pre-war and say, well, they, they really goofed.

They, they predicted this would be an easy Russian win. Why did they screw up? But I'm kind of humble about that because I also predicted it would be over quickly. Right? And a lot of people did. Just because the sheer overwhelming mass that Russia could, could, could throw at Ukraine. Right? But the interesting thing with, with the, the Russian experience, and I think this is relevant to the question of transatlantic relations, is that Russian military performance early in the war was, was incompetent.

Right? It was, it was just sort of comically inept lining up this enormous long line of tanks, right? And just running outta fuel and stopping or, or trying as this ill conceived rate on the airport, which was quickly disrupted. And these images I, I think have lingered. I think people were, were very quickly came around to the idea that Russia was not 10 feet tall and that its military was kind of a mess.

And, hey, this is this really that big a threat anyway. Ways. And now Russia has found itself bogged down in a very long war, which is, which is taking a huge toll on, on the Russian economy and Russian society, and just like staggering numbers of losses. Right. So what, what does that mean for transatlantic relations?

Well, one thing that binds allies together is a big scary common enemy. And right now they don't have one. Russia is dangerous. Putin is problematic for a lot of ways, but I think Russia kind of exposed its own weaknesses. Now, the counterfactual is, had Russia one quickly. Right. Had they won in two weeks?

Had they taken kyiv? Right. I, I I suspect that, that the transatlantic relationship would be much stronger. That you would see a, a, a, a recommitment to the special, special relationship. Right. And one, one other comment on, on intelligence and, and, and trying to, to predict the future, I would just, I, I would warn that we spend a lot of time talking about intelligence failures, right?

And but there's also a fair number of intelligence successes recently, and one of the most noteworthy one was before the war in Ukraine, right? Where the intelligence community, you read between the lines in the newspaper appeared to have very, very good intelligence coming out of Moscow. They were very, very confident that this war was going to happen right now, predicting the outcome of the war.

That was a different matter, but they were very good. Apparently, intelligence has been has highly played, placed sources in, in, in Venezuela and in Iran, right? So we're seeing intelligence successes. The big question for strategy is how do leaders use that intelligence? Right. Do they, do they use it in ways that are encouraged, sort of a sense of safety?

It's like, okay, we know what's going on in the world. We, we can feel safe, right? We can plan for later contingencies if we need to. Or do we use that, that intelligence to go arrest a foreign leader? Or do we go and use that intelligence to assassinate an ayatollah, right? And it seems that the current administration is really keen on using this very precise, intelligent, for airstrikes and for and for raids.

Whether that enthusiasm continues, I don't know, maybe it depends on what happens going forward in Iran.

O'HANLON: Thank you all. Let's go to your questions. Please, please wait for a microphone and identify yourself before you ask your question. And we'll start here with the gentleman in the thorough and thank you Alejandra for the great title of the panel and the word turbulence.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you very much. Most interesting close Lara from UNT Chapel Hill. I was wondering

how does China fit into that grant strategy, which seems to be unfolding Venezuela, Cuba, Iran, all Chinese allies. And I understand that the Chinese and Beijing are quite horrified when they see that it was possible for the Trump administration to take out individual leaders in a very targeted way.

They think the grand strategy is it's all about China, it's not about Iran and the Middle East. How do you see all that? Thank

O'HANLON: you. That's a great question. So why don't we actually ask everyone to respond to that starting with Laurie if we could?

FREEDMAN: That's a good question. So I think it's probably the case.

The every country views international developments. By assuming it's about them. So you hear stories that the Putin is incredibly alarmed by what's happened in Tehran, and there's, you know, one reason why Telegram is shut down and he's, he seems to be hiding and so on, is he's got this idea that could be done to him.

Like, you know, when SKU was strung up at the end of 89, Sadan Hue. We've got petrified. I mean, it, it it's natural that, that the people think it's about them. I'm not, I mean, I think Venezuela, Cuba are not close allies of China. They, they're countries with which it suits China to work. The closer principle have been with, with Russia.

And there's a question, I mean, they've realized there's limits to what anybody can do for them. And, and we're seeing that with potentially Cuba now. I think China if it. When a company comes up for air, we'll be feeling, actually this isn't too bad for us. The, the Western Alliance is splitting the US has got itself in a mess.

And actually we're the ones who now have an opportunity to both take advantage of it and try to find a way out because China does have good relations with Tehran, and ships going through China are getting through the strait. So, I think China sees an opportunity there. And I think if China reads what the Trump administration is saying, despite all the things that we were led to expect that would be coming prior to the 24 election they're saying I think they'd be seeing a loss of interest in China in the, to the extent that it was built up and hyped up.

In the first Trump administration and also to a degree in Biden. And I think that is because they've got a, they've got cards to play and which is why I think Europeans are pushing quite, you know, trying to find ways of working with the Chinese. Now the Chinese are as capable as anybody else of screwing up this moment and not taking advantage of, of a situation which could work to their advantage.

But it wouldn't be surprising if you, you know, China knows that countries around it are suffering badly from the, you know, we tend to talk about what, you know, inflation in, in, in the bits of the US inflation in, in Europe. You know, look at what's been happening in Pakistan, in India, Malaysia going on four day weeks and, and so on.

It, it, it's a, it's a big deal. So what, so China is gonna have to work out in terms of demonstrating its value to its neighbors. How it can most usefully contribute to the resolution of this? I'm not sure. I, I mean, I, I haven't seen much about it. I don't think necessarily have great ideas, but I think for China, this, this is by and large more opportunity than anything else.

O'HANLON: Mara,

KARLIN: I would say there is indeed a line of argument in Washington that actually all of this is part of some grand strategy approach to make it about China. If so, that's exceedingly circuitous. And it seems to me that operationally the Chinese are watching a number of these events that you highlight and thinking, gosh, the American military sure is capable.

They knew that. Now they have further evidence that that's the case. They're also watching it operationally and probably paying attention to the fact that the US military has used. So many munitions over these last couple weeks that will take years and years to replenish. That probably makes them feel a little bit more comfortable as well.

And then strategically, I think Laurie highlighted a lot of the reasons that if you're China, you're actually seeing these, this all in a light in which it's pretty good for you. I mean, some real gaps between the US and a number of its closest allies and partners. Some real questions about the security or and stability of Washington's approach to the world.

All of which I think allows China to kind of sit back, smile, and continue a pace.

O'HANLON: Josh,

ROVNER: there's one possibly optimistic outcome of all of this regarding China and the United States. And one thing that I've worried about for many years is a situation in which the United States and China get into a war, and both of them think that it's going to be decided very quickly.

Right. If you read military doctrine in both countries, they both emphasize winning fast, right? Information operations and deep strikes and blinding the enemy and then, and then having it resolved quickly. And my concern has always been, well, what if the first volley fails and then you're stuck in a long war?

We've got a lot of history of this kind of thing happening, and we're actually watching that in Russia, Ukraine, right? We thought it would be a quick war and now you're stuck. 'cause it turns out the war is unpredictable. It might be where Chinese observers are watching what's happening both in Ukraine and increasingly in Iran, and saying even mighty militaries cannot quickly topple much smaller countries.

Right? And they certainly can't do it from offshore with long range weapons. Right. So it might be where that injects a dose of sobriety into Chinese military thinking and perhaps American military thinking about winning decisively and quickly. And that would be good for stability

O'HANLON: before going to Antoine in the front row.

I'm gonna add one quick comment of my own, which is an unusual word of praise from me for the Trump administration. I do like the juxtaposition of pushing back hard on China in certain specific areas, not so much the broad tariffs, but technology sectors that need to be

protected, military improvements that are needed in our posture while trying to maintain a positive tone.

Some people feel like President Trump likes dictators too much, including Xi Jinping. But I'm gratified that the National Defense Strategy and the annual report to Congress on China. Seek to create a positive atmosphere while also pushing back where necessary. To me, that's a good, relatively good rhetoric around the strategy.

It may not add up to itself a good strategy, but it's, but I sort of like that. You can comment later if you don't agree. I'm sure we'll have more questions on China, but Antoine, over to you.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I, I was wondering, is there a parallel between the Ukraine and Iran, you know, kind of David or Goliath versus David in the sense that in both cases the aggressor kind of fundamentally misunderstood the changing nature of modern warfare and asymmetric warfare?

O'HANLON: If we got a biblical reference, we gotta start with you, Laurie. You begin with ancient times in your previous book.

FREEDMAN: Yeah, yeah. So, well, I mean, it, it reinforces Josh's point. I mean the, the, that it, it, these things are, are harder than you might imagine. And just the assumption that brute force will prevail forgets why people fight.

Now, you know, I don't think we're particularly taking on all of the Iranian people. We're taking on a regime that is desperate to survive and will do anything to survive. And it's not quite David versus Goliath, but, but it's certainly a determin. I mean, they had worked out a strategy. They knew this was gonna come after June or was likely to come, and they'd worked out what to do about how to look after succession, how to suppress the population, how to mount what, you know, we used to call asymmetric war.

We used to spend a lot of time writing about asymmetric war. And it really is depressing how much we wrote about all of this stuff. Yeah. And how much nobody seems to have taken the blindest bit of notice about the, the possibility that when you go in hard using your strongest military assets, there are things opponents will do that use their strengths against you.

So the, the sort of equivalent of the slingshot and Ukraine has managed to do that as well, but it's tough. I mean, you know, the thing about David and Goliath was David had one slingshot and he, he hit the sweet spot and Goliath went down and he chopped his head off. I if if it had missed, David was in real trouble.

And if he needed to do it again, they'd know what to be prepared for, which is actually, I think, what to some extent what happened. So, I think Ukraine I think it's an extraordinary story. But it's tough. I mean, I don't think we should ever lose sight of this. I think the, the problem for you, the problem for Iran, and this was different from Ukraine.

Ukraine is fighting Russia. It's not fighting anybody else. Iran has decided to fight America's allies in the Gulf. And its neighbors in the Gulf. To their surprise, I mean, they weren't expecting it. I mean, maybe some, but they weren't expecting it, not to this extent. And this cre this going back to Josh's original sort of distinction between sort of military victory and security there's an inherent instability that's gonna be left after us, even if the regime survives in some form that nobody in the region is gonna trust.

In the same way, and they're very angry with it. So the, the difficulty is Iran I, for very understandable reasons and, and quite effectively has managed to give itself a voice in any negotiations about how this ends. Has embarrassed the United States has caused pain to America's allies and around the world, but it doesn't have a theory of security out of all of this.

It's, it's about desperate regime survival, and they've done it quite effectively, but it doesn't help them particularly necessarily over the long term.

ROVNER: And if I could just add, add to this, that I think the problem for Iran before the war is that their previous grant strategy had collapsed. In the last five years, like everything had gone wrong further on.

And so it, it, it entered this war in already in, in desperate straits and then just struggling for survival. So in lieu of a coherent, grand strategy, it to some extent, my, my, my view as it was lashing out, right? It was taking risks, it was lashing out, it was hitting a number of different countries in the, in the region, and that inherently breeds a kind of lingering instability afterwards.

The other interesting part is that the, the, the variety of targets which are at risk in, in the region is, is it's different. They're not just military targets. And they're not just civilian population centers. They're things like desalination plants and AWS data centers, right? And, and of course, oil and, and gas infrastructure and oil and gas fields, right?

So. How Iran ultimately thinks about its future and whether it continues to imagine threatening those kinds of targets. Again, it's very much an open question.

O'HANLON: Okay. Let's see where we try to get further back in the room. The woman in the, about right there, Alejandra, just to your right.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hi, my name's Asia. Asia Beckham. I'm a Chatham House fellow. I have a specific question about the Reform party leader, Nigel Farage. If Nigel Farage was to lead the uk, how differently would the world look in terms of war and international relations?

FREEDMAN: It would be a challenge. So Farage hasn't had a good war.

Farage is too close to Trump, seemed to be too close to Trump. And there is a view for that reason, he's probably peaked. And Farage's problem, I mean, he's still in a very strong position. But the anti reform vote is much stronger. I mean, there's nobody, he hasn't got any natural coalition partners.

Not even really the conservative party. So, I think Farra has got, I mean, he's a brilliant campaigner. He's Trumpian in some respects, but he's not very disciplined. And he gets bored and, you know, I don't wanna go into exes about British politics, but he's managed to acquire for the Reform party the most unpopular members of the previous conservative government, which is quite an achievement.

And they I think they're harming his brand. So I'm a reform could well be in the mix, but it's just very difficult to see why, how it would have the mix that Farage could form a government. The difficulty we've got with the fir first pass the post system and at least five parties, labor Tories, reform, greens, liberal Democrats, you could have all sorts of tactical voting, producing some really crazy outcomes.

But by and large, I think he's Pete, optimistic.

O'HANLON: Okay. We'll stick in the middle section and the gentleman about in the sixth row right there. Yes, please.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Okay. So, hello. My name is Kai Sarto. I'm, I'm a student from George Washington University. So thank you for great, great discussion about the strategy when it comes to talking.

Military strategy and doctrine. The 1984 Weinberger doctrine is one of the most important doctrines in modern United modern US because it stated that the use of force should should be last result and require the clear objectives and public consensus. So how do you evaluate the recent war on Iran based on the 1984 doctrine and should the United States government did not adopted it?

O'HANLON: Mara, you wanna start and we'll just work

down?

KARLIN: Yeah. So the, the Weinberg Doctrine is also known as the Powell Doctrine. He he was Weinberg's Senior Military Aid and, and popularized it as well. I would note, it says a couple other things as well that, that I find a bit problematic. It kind of ignores the whole point of deterrence.

The, it's, it's quite binary in terms of how it thinks about the use of force. It also goes against kind of the deity of this field, Kasowitz, insofar as the view is your objectives should never change. You go in with one set of objectives, you stick with them no matter what happens. And that just feels terribly a strategic.

But the elements that you cited in the Weinberg doctrine, you know, the, the importance of dedicating your yourself to what you are engaged in, that, that probably makes sense while recognizing invariably a lot of countries, the United States in particular, has to find a way to walk and chew gum when it is involved in conflicts.

And then of course, this point on engaging your public. I mean, I think in a democracy that's actually a really important thing. It would be an understatement to say that is not what has happened in this current conflict.

FREEDMAN: Yeah, I mean it was an important speech and of course in the context of what had happened in Beirut and the blowing up of Marines.

And Weinberg saw this is of indication 'cause he never wanted to be in Beirut in the first place. And you know, there's a fascinating debate with George Schultz, who was secretary of state at the time, sort of saying, you only wanna fight the fund wars. You know, sometimes you just gotta do difficult things.

So it was a really important debate and the criter and what it suggested with is a checklist of criteria against which you should judge interventions. Now. Now in, in 1999, Tony Blair did a speech at Chicago, which I have some role in, which set out five criteria, which I was, I still think are pretty good criteria.

One, are we sure of our case? Two, have we exhausted diplomatic options? Three, are the military feasible things we can do? Four, are we prepared for the long haul? And five is did

our national interest, which was a bit of a catchall and actually was used by Blair with Iraq to say, yeah, our national interest was staying close to the us.

So even all the other criteria failed on Matt, it succeeded Nonetheless. I think there are good questions and, and as a result of the inquiry, I sat on the Kott inquiry, there's now so-called kott checklist that planners are supposed to use, just to be sure include legality. A long, neglected topic.

As one of the things you should take care of, what the Chicago didn't mention but was in Weinberg, as Mara's noted, was public opinion. And I think that was a gap in, in Chicago. You've gotta be able to bring your people with you. And if you surprise them and you don't prepare it and you don't have a debate and you don't discuss possibilities and things go wrong, then you own it.

There's nobody else to blame. And I think that you are already seeing with this war it, you know, it started off as an unpopular war. It's becoming, becoming more so because you don't, you know, they hadn't thought it through. So, I think these checklists are useful. They're no more than that.

I mean, so, because you've gotta weigh one against the other and sometimes you just have to do something, you know, is really difficult and hard. But, you know, the situation demands it. But I think they're useful.

O'HANLON: Was that before or after the Kosovo war?

FREEDMAN: During,

O'HANLON: during,

FREEDMAN: during. Thank you. April. April, 1999.

O'HANLON: Thank you, Josh. Anything to say?

ROVNER: Yeah, on the, the public opinion part is really important and I, I think that the, the backstory is, is fascinating as, as, as Laurie put that this was on the heels of, of Lebanon, but this is also related to Vietnam, especially for Colin Powell. Right. And the, the idea that Vietnam was a violation of all of that.

We weren't sure what exactly we were fighting for. There was a famous song at the time, 1, 2, 3, what are we fighting for? Right? And, and, and, and he

Speaker 5: just died.

ROVNER: I know. Country Joe. Country Joe or ip. So, so that was there. And, and so for a long time in the United States, there was this, this, this necessity to make sure that people are on board.

But we live in a different time now. And I, I I, I look at the story changing after nine 11 because what. Successive American administrations learned was that big land wars get unpopular pretty fast, but airstrikes, intelligence driven, special operations raids just not that salient for most of the public, most of the time.

Right? So, so the US in, in every single administration, going back to George W. Bush, has conducted this kind of counter-terrorism with great energy, and it really has only occasionally

flared up in, in the public debate. So, fast forward to, to Trump 2.0 and, and President Trump clearly likes this, this idea of being able, being able to use intelligence and special operations and air power and unmanned vehicles to achieve these rapid strikes at basically low to no political cost and, and be done with it, right?

The problem, of course, was that the last one hasn't succeeded quickly. And again, he's stuck and public opposition is rising, and this is becoming a problem.

O'HANLON: We'll do a couple of questions together as a final round, and then I'll work down from Josh Laurie and Ma to each answer whichever questions they'd like and offer any concluding thought or two as well.

So why don't we go here to the third row and then right across, and then you also had it in your hand up. Maybe we'll try three. If, if we can stay succinct please.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thanks. Robert Ge from The Economist. Quick question. How should Trump try to get himself out of the mess he's in, in

FREEDMAN: Iran's? An easy question.

Succinct question.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you. I wanna ask this for Mr. Freedman in particular.

O'HANLON: Who are you?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Oh, I'm Finn Olson. I'm a student currently interning here in DC for the semester.

KARLIN: Great.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I wanna ask this, Mr. Freedman in particular, but also one of the other panelists opinion on this. In a world where leaders, where the international system is being taken somewhat for granted, where leaders like Putin and she, and even Trump to an extent can kind of push the authority around.

And then of course we talked about, you know, the the UK and the EU sort of sep being separated from the United States in terms of alliances and stuff like that. Do you think the, do you think that the EU and the United Kingdom have the ability to go it alone? And if that is the case how would they do that in a way that is marrying means and objectives?

O'HANLON: Thank you. And then we'll go here for the final question.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Steven Snyder, independent researcher if Europe views Russia as its primary security threat and the United States views China as its primary security threat, does this mean that NATO will continue to decline post-Trump?

O'HANLON: Okay, great. So, Josh, do you wanna start and just pick one of those or, sure.

However you like.

ROVNER: Sure. The, the, the easiest way for Trump to end the war is to declare victory. Mm-hmm. And he can do that, right? He, he, he could legitimately say we have badly

decimated, if not destroyed, Iran's nuclear program. It's ballistic missile capability. It's launchers, it's stockpiles, and it's navy.

And we've decapitated the regime. So what remains is, is a hollow version of our, of our former enemy. Right. And so if he wants to, Trump can say, I solved this longstanding problem. I solved this, this once powerful regime, which bankrolled these terrible militant organizations. I took care of that. Right.

And I took care of their weapons program. And I, I've no longer, and I've, I've taken care of the threat. Whether or not that's true or not, people will debate, but he can say that. Right with a straight face and he can say, now watch the stock market. Go up and watch oil prices go down, declare victory, and move on to something which is something else on the agenda before the midterms.

FREEDMAN: Sadly he's tried that and I don't think it works, and I don't think it works because of the straight to form moss and the attacks on cattle or the Emiratis, the Saudis, and so on. I mean, here it's broken. So the until you can restore confidence in traffic from the Gulf to the rest of the world, he hasn't worked.

Because gas prices here will still keep on going up. There'll be shortages of fertilizer, all the things that we know are already starting. So, unfortunately under that, what we always assume, that's what Trump can do more than anybody else. And he can always do it with a straight face. But I think the problem is that nobody else will see this as a conclusion of the war because the Iranians want things from the Americans now.

They wanna promise not to do it again. They want to argue for reparations.

ROVNER: Yeah.

FREEDMAN: And they think they've got some leverage over the situation. So that's the difficult, I mean, no, I think there are things that can be done, but I don't think the Americans can just walk away from it. Their allies, especially in the Gulf.

I mean, people who've lavished quite a bit on Trump, they want their plane back. They will be furious if you start something like this and you leave it where it is. So I think there is, I don't think it's impossible to, to imagine what negotiations look like. And obviously there's lots of conversations, if not quite to the level that, that Trump claimed.

Going on, but I don't think it's easy. Otherwise, I think he would've already done that. I mean, he did do it. So we've won. But turned out not really on the transatlantic question. Inherent limits are I mean I think Europe is in a bind on this. I would say the view is we are taking on the heavy lifting on Ukraine.

We are accepting that we're gonna be mainly responsible for European security. And this, this is right our continent. We're rich. We should be able to manage these things, but we'd really, not really don't wanna do it in opposition to the us. We'd like them to still hang around. We'd like them still on particular on the nuclear guarantee, not to withdraw it, however, credible or incredible we may think it.

So I I think that their view is you do what you can. But there's gotta be quite careful. And it comes back to priorities. There's certain things that absolutely have to be done in terms of

amounts of ordinance, artillery, developing their own drones and so on, which don't necessarily fill in for things that only the Americans can provide.

And I think that's just a difficulty therein. So the longer this goes on, and if relations deteriorate further, this will become harder. But it, you know, it, it's a predicament. It's, there's no easy solution. But you can see the hedge I'd describe it as hedging. That's basically what's going on.

O'HANLON: Thank you, Mara.

KARLIN: I'll just take the, the last question. So if the Europeans are prioritizing Russia as their primary threat, threat, and. The United States. I don't know that I would say that is the case with this administration, but let us just hypothesize the United States sees China as its biggest threat. Is that catastrophic for NATO?

I actually don't think it is. I think it is important that NATO members at least perceive however, threats to be similar. I don't think they have to rank them. So the order matters less. It's more an issue of perceptions. And I would use, of course, the case study of Afghanistan where NATO ends up getting very, very involved.

And it was actually on neither priority list as of September 10th, 2001. And I would say throughout the war, it was not top of the European priority list the way it may have been for the United States for, for much of that. Now the danger here is there are many, particularly in the Trump administration, who don't see Russia threat as a threat as all.

And I think that's the thing that could be highly detrimental to NATO's success.

O'HANLON: Thank you all for the privilege of hosting this panel and having the conversation. And thank you all for being here. Please join me in extending our appreciation.