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Fireside Chat with Condoleezza Rice and Robert M. Gates
Robert M. Gates, Partner, Rice, Hadley, Gates and Manuel; 22nd U.S. Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense
Condoleezza Rice, Co-Chair, Aspen Strategy Group; 66th U.S. Secretary of State, U.S. Department of State
Moderator: **David Sanger**, White House and National Security Correspondent, *The New York Times*
Session recording:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlD9cvaPDy4&list=PL7fuyfNu8jfPTKp6PJ2yJugSfxXEDyEqM&index=31

David Sanger:
Well, thank you very much and I'm really delighted to be here with two of the most stellar national security practitioners I have covered in 30 years in Washington. I've probably, at various moments, I'll just do a general apology. I'm sure I've written a few things here and there. I've got the odd phone call always harder from Condi because it was always more in sadness than in anger. I just wanted her to yell at me.

Condoleezza Rice :
No, the worst thing you could hear from the press secretary is Sanger just called and he says, is it true that,

David Sanger:
But it's so much easier when you're out of office. So I thought what I'd try to do is focus our conversation a bit to try to sum up much of what we have been hearing here over the past two days about some of the biggest challenges that we're facing and try to just see if we can ask Secretary Gates and Secretary Rice to put this in some historic context for us, both longer run of US history, but also just their time and experience in government. Terry Rice, let me start with you. You've been writing and thinking a lot about the analogies to this era. You're not a fan of the Cold War analogies, I say as somebody who just put new Cold Wars in a title, but you have interesting thoughts about why the interwar period between World War I and World War II might have some lessons for us. So let's start off there.

Condoleezza Rice :
Sure. Well, despite my advancing age, I was actually not around in the period that I think is most like now, which is the interwar period. There's no perfect analogy, and we all love to analogize because I think there's a level of comfort when things are really chaotic. Have we been there before? And one of the reasons I think people are attracted to the Cold War is in effect we want it. And so it's a kind of analogy that appeals, but I would say that there are a couple of things about the prewar period that are really troubling for me. One element is that we are seeing

territorial conflict between the great powers again, where with China over the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and of course Taiwan. And that brings our forces into very close proximity with one another. When we think about the Cold War, we and the Soviets later on, the Russians learned how to avoid war.

We even had formalized agreements to do it. We really don't have that with China, with Russia, of course, Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine challenges Article five of the NATO treaty in ways that we have not seen again, territorial conquest. And so that's the first element. A second element is the kind of weakness of the international order, and I'll speak to the one that I think is in fact most important, which is on the economic side, the kind of vision of one great big integrated international economy is starting to fail. You're seeing decoupling, you're seeing reshoring of supply chains, you're seeing during covid, my PPE, my vaccines, my travel restrictions. And so again, a kind of weakening of the international order. And then the third has a kind of domestic flavor, if you will, and that's the rise of populism. Again, people who felt that they were left out by globalization and are now finding their voice in people who say yes, you were wronged by those elites.

And I often say the four horsemen of the apocalypse, I call them populism, nativism, isolationism and protectionism, and they tend to ride together. And again, this is something that we saw in the inner war period. Now I believe we have every reason to believe we can avoid the problem this time around, but even in something like technology, we are seeing zero sum game in how we think about the technological arms race. So I think the Cold War is not a particularly good analogy. I hope that the inner war period turns out not to be a good analogy either.

David Sanger:
Let me turn. It's really interesting because I think the core of your argument is we're actually in something much more dangerous than dangerous and less predictable. As you say, the Cold War got into a run. And later on I want to turn to the question that Walter Isaacson brought up a few hours ago and that we've all been debating a little bit, which is the Russia China Nexus. But that takes me Secretary Gates to a piece, a really terrific piece you wrote in foreign affairs that appeared at I think the end of last year. And let me just read back to you a paragraph that I think you opened the piece with because it jumped out at me at the time you wrote it. The US now confronts a group of security threats that are greater than any that have been in decades, perhaps ever, never before has it faced four allied antagonists at the same time, Russia, China and North Korea and Iran, whose collective nuclear arsenal couldn't a few years be nearly double the size of our own. And then you went on to say that what had made this particularly difficult was that our own political divisions have meant that we haven't really been addressing this in any particular way or even discussing it much with the American people.

Robert M. Gates:
Well, I think that, I mean, I stand by what I wrote. The title of the piece, by the way was The Dysfunctional Superpower, and I agree with Conde's description of the Interwar period. I also am disinclined to call it a new Cold War II because I think it's more complicated and more difficult. China in many ways is a much more formidable competitor than the Soviet Union ever

was and has a more global appeal than the Soviet Union ever did. And I think the backdrop is our inability to, as we face these threats, and an earlier panel was talking about nuclear deterrence. Well, all of a sudden we are going to face, first of all, this is the first time since the early 1950s, we have faced heavily armed aggressive adversaries in both Asia and in Europe, and they are heavily armed with nuclear weapons. They will have twice the nuclear weapons we have perhaps by 2030.
And we haven't even begun thinking about what the implications of that are for nuclear strategy, nuclear deterrence. We are talking about modernizing all of our strategic nuclear systems. They're behind schedule obviously, but nobody's talking about are we going to use 'em differently? Are we going to have a different theory of the case in terms of how we deal with that? But the real challenge, and really the thrust of the piece was that in the face of these threats, we have been unable to come together to develop a strategy, a view of the way, a common view of what we think the world looks like, what our strategy ought to be, and how do we go about implementing that strategy. I think one of the critical elements of success in the Cold War was we basically maintained the same strategy toward the Soviets through nine successive presidents, both Republicans and Democrats.

And we are all over the place right now, and we've been all over the place for quite a while. And so we have become unpredictable to ourselves as well as to our friends allies and adversaries, and we can't get anything consequential done. Everybody talks about the need to rebuild our military industrial complex, the need to rebuild these capabilities, but members of the Congress who out of one side of their mouth talk about that, then talk about budget restrictions and the fact that the defense budget will probably stay flat, well then what kind of revolutionary changes do you need to be making inside the defense department? But more importantly that one of the ways that we were successful in the Cold War was that despite taking place against the backdrop of the biggest arms race in the history of the world, we actually never did go to war with the Russians.

And so the competition ended up being a competition of non-military instruments of power, diplomacy, economics, technology, strategic communications, ideology and so on. And we are doing nothing in those arenas. The budgets of those agencies in our country have been cut back, but what's more, there's really not much interest and people, they're not being made a part of whatever national strategy we have. All the talk is about the military. The irony is people talked about the pivot to Asia. The only real pivot to Asia so far has been military. So I think this is kind of the complexity of first of all why I agree with Conde's statement, but also why I am as worried as I am about the threats that we face and the challenges we face, partly because of the magnitude of those challenges, but partly because of our seeming inability to come together in an agreement on how we deal with that over time.

David Sanger:
So that may be in part because we have not declared as a government the challenge the way the two of you have placed this out. And I would argue that that's been the case for the Biden administration and that it was the case for the Trump administration before it last week in an effort to try to at least get clarity on whether or not the government was trying to do something

on this. At the press conference that the President held, I asked him whether there was a strategy for the United States to get in between the relationship between Russia and China, much as Nixon and Kissinger attempted to do with the opening to China. And we got a little bit of a windup of an answer, but when I finally pulled him back to it, he said, yes, we do have a strategy and I'm not prepared to talk to you about it, which I guess I could understand at least for the covert part of it, but you would think much of what you just described from the Cold War were quite public, open economic and communications elements. If you were advising the next President about what the elements of a strategy would be to get in the way of the Russia China relationship and thus the North Korea Iran one that is supporting it, what elements would you think would be the most important? What would that look like?

Condoleezza Rice :
Well, the first thing I would say is don't underestimate them, but don't overestimate them either. Harmonizing their interests is not very easy. It cannot be warming the hearts of an incredibly ethnocentric, xenophobic Kremlin to see China taking the Silk Road in Central Asia. Again, it cannot warm the hearts of the Russians to think that the Indians are going to be pulled away because of course China is their real problem and on and on and on. So don't overestimate them either. Now the other thing is of course they don't have a strategy meeting every Monday and say, what are we going to do here? They do have a common purpose, which is to end the American as they would say it, American international order and push the United States out of international leadership. So how do you counter that? Well, George Kenon had some wonderful words about this at the onset of the Cold War.

He said, we need to deny them the course of external expansion, the easy course of external expansion until they have to turn to deal with their own internal contradictions. So the first thing is deny them the course of easy expansion. That means rebuild military deterrence in a way that Taiwan is not an easy mark, that you can't go past Ukraine to the rest of nato challenge the Iranians with the kds war and the like. So military is a part of this, but to Bob's point, you also have to try to exploit their internal contradictions. And we did that very well with the Soviet Union. Voice of America was by the way, not a propaganda organ. All it did was tell the truth. And because Russians and Soviet citizens knew that they weren't getting the truth, it was enormously powerful. One of the most interesting moments was when the Chinese government was sending out bulletins about air quality and at the American Embassy we put up an air quality monitor and it was quite clear they were lying.

And so there are simple things that you can do to expose the contradictions. And I think one final thing, and this is a little bit controversial these days, look, I really do believe that these are deeply unpopular regimes. Xi Jinping is getting more unpopular every day when you have to use Women's Day to browbeat women into the idea that they ought to have more babies because China, because that's the patriotic thing to do. Or when you're Vladimir Putin and you're sending your youth to camps in North Korea, really, or you're the Iranians and you're now putting up some quote moderate because you're really afraid that your own people might revolt. These are inherently weak regimes. And so using our instruments of strategic communications, but again, keeping open to these populations, I'm a university professor, I want to see as many

Chinese students in my classes as possible. I even want to stay open to Russian students if I can do it. I'd like to see Iranian citizens able to come to the United States because ultimately with all of our problems, this is still the place that people would like to live. And so these regimes are afraid of their own people. We need to continue to work to separate them from their own people, but denying them that external expansion means getting serious about the military threat while you work on what our good friend Joe Nye would've called soft power.

David Sanger:
Secretary Gates, just picking up on that, if I had to go back and pick one moment where we could have begun pushing back on Putin because he much more than the Chinese announced what he was going to do, I would say it was that day in 2007 when you were at the Munich Security Conference and Putin gave this very fiery speech and said there were parts of mother Russia that needed to be restored, and you stood up and said something to the effect of you'd been through one Cold War and you weren't really eager to get into a second one, but the message wasn't really received in Europe even here seven years later. Of course, he took Crimea seven years after that tried for the rest of Ukraine. Why do you think we've had such a hard time waking up to where he was headed?

Robert M. Gates:
Well, I think first of all, there's been an evolution and the Putin of 2014 was a different person than the Putin of 2004 and of 2000 I think where this actually where the turn for Putin actually began was with the color revolutions in 2003 four in Ukraine, Kirstan, and Georgia because he thought we were coming for him next that the CIA, that the US was behind these uprisings. And that's when he started putting limits on NGOs operating in Russia and the National Endowment for Democracy killing journalists and starting killing journalists and opposition people and so on. I think that the one clear cut piece of aggression that Condi and I were in office when he invaded Georgia and we pushed back pretty hard, but there were limits to what we could do just because of the strategic location. But it seems to me that the one place where we could have and should have pushed back much harder was when he invaded Crimea in 2014 because we had actually been signatories to an agreement in 1994 guaranteeing the territorial integrity of Ukraine along with the UK and Russia if they'd only give up their 1800 nuclear weapons. And they did. And so we had a pledge from 1994 and in 2014 we would not have reacted militarily, but there were a lot of things we could have done, sanctions and a variety of other measures then to show this was unacceptable behavior and he basically got away with it.

David Sanger:
So Secretary Rice, as I read the Republican platform that just got adopted when you cut through the capital letters and much of the other elements of it, there was almost no mention of Ukraine as a place to push back. And if Secretary Gates believes that we should have done more at the time of Crimea, it then raises the question, would we end up doing less with the current party that both of you were members of? You may not recognize all elements of it. One of the earlier panels here today noted that China appeared repeatedly in JD Vance's speech last night and Ukraine not at all. So has the Republican party abandoned what George W. Bush laid out in the second inaugural address at this point? Do you think this is just temporary or is this something?

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Condoleezza Rice :
I think we're in a different place as a country, and I think that those of us who had a particular view, lemme call it a Reagan like view of America's role in the world, I still think it's the best thing. Do I think it's sustainable? No. And I'll tell you why. And it's why we have to start to think what of the internationalist vision do we need to preserve in order to play the role that we always have, which is providing a, as I called it, a balance of power that favors freedom. So what do we have to do? I understand that a lot of people want to focus now just on China, but the point that you made about Putin and Xi Jinping and the North Koreans and the Iranians, we have to keep driving home that credibility is not divisible. So what you do in Ukraine is actually going to matter to Xi Jinping.

And I think that's an argument that will carry for even those who perhaps don't want to do what we are currently even doing for Ukraine. That's the first thing. The second is we have to realize that some of these engagements are going to be hard to sustain over a long period of time. I don't know if any American president, I don't care what his name is or her name is, whatever that person is, can sustain 60 billion packages to Ukraine every six months. And so what now can we do with Ukraine to get to a place where Ukraine has a defensible, a reason to believe that they are secure, independent, and potentially prosperous? What does that look like? And for a lot of reasons, we've been unwilling to talk about that. We really can't until the Ukrainians are ready to talk about that. But what does that mean for territory?
At some point, this war, which Vladimir Putin stabilized himself, he threw mass at it. Bob made this point all the time, 500,000 Russians have died in this war, and he's willing to sacrifice 500,000 more if he has to. Ukraine can't do that. And so what is the intermediate game here that gets Ukraine to secure? That is going to be the hard discussion about what is America's willingness to give security guarantees there. I am concerned about some of the elements in the party. I think there you're going to have to make the case that you can't just say, we're going to stop China and not do something about Ukraine. I want to make one other brief point. The panel you just had, those of us who were internationalists and believed in globalization and the integration of China, and let's let capital flow freely and let's let jobs go to the places where it's most efficient.

That was a great macro idea, but it had horrible micro effects. And there are unemployed coal miners and unemployed steel workers and kids who can't get a decent education, who really do wonder why are we doing what we're doing internationally until we do something about the situation here at home, until that we're confident as Americans, again in our ability to access the American dream, it's going to be really hard to sell to the American people that we need to maintain our internationalist role. So I feel the connection between domestic policy, education, good jobs more intensely than I've ever felt it.

David Sanger:
It's interesting.

Robert M. Gates:

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David could I just could just pile on one point on Ukraine on what Condi said, and that is how we think about this and a different way to think about it is what were Vladimir Putin's goals when he invaded it was to conquer the entirety of Ukraine, replace the government in Kyiv with a pro-Russian government and guarantee that Ukraine would never join NATO or the EU. Where is he? The fact is he has failed in that objective. He has in fact seized 20% of the country, but you have a pro-Western government in power in Kyiv. You have the Ukrainians probably with our assistance able to stabilize the eastern front, and you have ended up, he has ended up with a dramatically stronger NATO than he had two and a half years ago. Countries that are actually beginning to spend real money on defense, the addition of Sweden, which hadn't joined in alliance in 200 years, Finland and so on. So yeah, the Ukrainians have not been able to push the Russians back to the Russian border, but they have defeated what Putin set out to do.

David Sanger:
Well, this was a point that President Biden made in the opening dinner for NATO last week, but let me ask you a little bit about what that could look like because what we're dancing around here is at some point we're going to have to have a negotiation that ends this war. And you made the good point, secretary Rice that nobody wants to get out ahead of the Ukrainians on this, but the Ukrainians can't raise it because it's politically the end of Zelinsky if he starts talking about giving up territory. Does an analogy to Korea here work? If you could have told the South Koreans in 1953, sure there is land that you are giving up here or that you may not have great claim to, but in 70 years you'll be one of the top dozen economies, the unconscious economy in the world. Exactly. You'll be making semiconductors that the Americans can't make. You'd have to stop and explain in 1953 what those semiconductors are and that your people would not only be free, but tourists around the world spending money freely. I think they would've taken that deal over the land. How do you get the Ukrainians to that point? Or should we get the Ukrainians to that point?

Condoleezza Rice :
Well, ultimately Ukraine has to get, it's a democratic society and nobody's going to dictate those terms to Ukraine, and I would never say dictate those terms, but I would say that we can start talking about the narrative that Bob just outlined. And I would add something that recently he mentioned to me when the Moscow went down as the flagship of the Black Sea fleet, something big had happened and the Russians cannot successfully completely blockade the Black Sea, which Russians are used to call a Russian Lake. That's a pretty big deal. And so we just need to start to talk about Putin's aims and what has failed and what Ukraine's future could look like and start to make that future possible. I think for instance, if you start to think about the rebuilding of kyiv, of Kyiv of leave, you're talking about the center of a new Ukrainian economy that will be based on knowledge-based economy.

That's where a lot of coders and software engineers are. They're still working. We know companies that still have Ukrainian software engineers that even in conditions of war are delivering. So why aren't we supporting that? Let's support the Ukrainian defense industry, which really is showing signs of being able to do things to sustain itself over time and not just

being dependent on the packages. We need to start talking about what those American security guarantees are going to look like. Because if you add Germany, the FRG to your analogy, they didn't have territorial integrity for 45 years, but both the FRG and South Korea had something. They had an American security guarantee. And so understanding how this package looks for the future, we can start talking about those elements. We can start trying to deliver on those elements. And maybe that then starts to get Ukraine to a point that you begin to wonder at what price and at what cost do you wish to not continue this war, but with what aims? And that's the way that I think I would put it. What are your aims now in this war?

David Sanger:
I am acutely aware of the fact that we are the last thing between this group and the cocktail hour, which is a dangerous thing, which is

Robert M. Gates:
Probably a good thing given what we've had to say.

David Sanger:
Yeah. So I just want to conclude with one question to each of the same question to each of you, which is if over the past 30 years we sort of miss this turn of the Russians and the Chinese coming together of them turning to come up with an alternative system to our own, what do you think we might be missing now that a few years from now when we gather the Aspen Security Forum, we're going to say we really wish we were paying more attention to, spent a lot of time on AI this time we spent,

Condoleezza Rice :
I should just say first one of my elements is win the technological arms race, right when the frontier arms race in technology. And you know why? Because whatever problems we're going to discuss about AI and synthetic biology and the dangers therein, we've got to run hard and fast. You know why? Because we will have investigative reporting, we will have congressional hearings, we will have whistleblowers about, the Chinese will not. And so these technologies have, the democracies have to win the race. But David, let me just, you know me, I have to question the premise of the question.

David Sanger:
I would be disappointed if you didn't.

Condoleezza Rice :
I'm not so sure that we quote missed it. I think with China in particular, we made a bet. We made a bet that a country that had a fundamentally different political system could be integrated into an international economy of largely democratic capitalist states. The G seven was all countries that were democratic and capitalist. And we said, okay, we're going to take that bet because 1.4 million billion people unmoored is not a good idea. And for a while, the bet worked.

David Sanger:

It worked until Xi Jinping came along.

Condoleezza Rice :
It worked until Xi Jinping, and I don't usually do the great man theory, one guy mattered that much. But we used to say, you cannot have economic liberalization and political control. And Xi Jinping says, yeah, you're right. I'll take political control. And so I think it's not that we missed it. I think that we tried for something that I think was the right policy. And in the final analysis, it hasn't worked.

David Sanger:
You took a, and you could say the same about Russia,

Condoleezza Rice :
And you could say the same about Russia.

Robert M. Gates:
I would say that actually it was a good bet because what happened in 2013, our bet was that a richer China would be a freer China. And guess what? From the late 1990s till 2013, that was the direction China was headed. More private entrepreneurs, more openness, more open debate, the internet getting information. All of a sudden natural disasters or governmental got reported and people knew about them and so on. The irony is it was Xi Jinping who agreed with us that a richer China would be a freer China. And that's what he set out to reverse in 2013, and that's what he spent the last decade doing. All the steps he has taken inside China, economically and politically have been to reverse things that were happening before he became the big man in China. So my final comment would be sort of looking ahead, and it goes back to something Condi said earlier, if there's one big thing I think we're not paying enough attention to as part of a strategy, it is her point about the fragility, the brittleness of public support in China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

But the first three in particular, and maybe I've got my old CIA hat on here, we have neglected the kind of strategic communications programs we had all through the Cold War directed to the East Europeans and the Russians about what was really going on in their societies. And as Condi said, even in our covert programs, the benefit we had was all we did was tell the truth and they knew it was the truth because they witnessed it every day. We're not doing things like that in these three countries in particular, Russia, China, and Iran. And they accuse us of doing it all the time. So if they're going to accuse us of doing it anyway, why not? And I think part of our strategy is getting under the skin of these guys and also getting the word to their people about what's really going on in their countries because we will end up confirming what most of them already know. And I think that's a big arrow in our quiver going forward. They're trying to do it here. So I'm not getting the argument why we shouldn't be pressing back.

David Sanger:
Well, you have reminded me why covering you two was such a fascinating intellectual exercise as well as a daunting one. And you've reminded all of us here about how to go up 30,000 feet

from what we've been discussing each along the day here for the past two days, and I think prepared us really well to hear from Secretary Blinken and Jake Sullivan tomorrow about what they've learned in the past three years of dealing with all of this. So I thank you both and I thank all of you.