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The World at Risk: Navigating Modern Threat Landscapes

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Session recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0RIsoVHEhLw>

Walter Isaacson:

Great. Welcome to our panel on stage. Thank you. All those who want to stay and listen, have a seat. Those who don't go back into the lobby. Thank you all for doing this, Jane, Beth, John, after all these years, I'm going to start with a very historical sweeping question, which is ever since Bismarck, this idea of realism in foreign policy is if you have more than one adversary, you try hard not to let them get together and you try to have better relations with each of them than they have with the other. That was behind Kissinger's trip to China. It's something that our patron, Saint Prince Crotaught us and now we're in a historic period that I don't think I can remember where we have four major allies and we keep pushing them closer together. Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, others. How bad is this and how do we get out of that? How do we break that? You want to start? Take a microphone.

John McLaughlin:

I think Walter, that's a great place to begin. It's very bad. This is the distinguishing characteristic of our world right now. In other words, it's not the 1930s, it's not the Cold War, it's none of that. We do have, our adversaries have now formed a group and on the other side and our side, we've formed alignments that were advanced. NATO has grown as everyone knows, we now have a trilateral agreement with Japan, Philippines, and the United States and a comparable one with Japan, Korea, and the United States. And we have Aus, which everyone has talked about. So there's a sort of forming of blocks in the world, which is very much at odds with the kind of realism that you talked about. And how do we get out of this? I'll be very brief because I have a view that at the heart of this is the Ukraine problem.

If we did not have Putin invading Ukraine and all of the problems we're dealing with connected with that, Putin would not be going to North Korea. He would not be doing that. The Iranians would not

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be building a Russian plant for making drones. All of those things stem from the aggression in Ukraine. So how do we get out of it? It's not a simple solution, but I would say we're going to see more of this until Russia is beaten the ground in Ukraine or until there is some kind of Ukraine agreement that offers security to Kyiv.

Walter Isaacson:

I know that David Sanger asked this question in some ways to Biden in the last press conference, which is what could you do to help separate, and I'm just going to say Russia and China and maybe I'll let you address that more specifically.

Beth Sanner:

Well, I think, am I on here? I think that this idea that we can somehow split these countries is overstated. The United States has some agency obviously, but I think we sometimes overestimate our ability to do that kind of thing. We have to understand that Russia and China were already close. Putin and Xi were already best friends. They had already met more bilaterally as leaders than any other two leaders in the world that I know of. And so this has solidified their alliance small A, but I think we have to be careful about that. At the same time, I think that we just, the last thing we should do, I'll say what we shouldn't do. What we shouldn't do is decide that we can only fight China and that none of the rest of this matters because it's all linked.

Walter Isaacson:

Wait, wait, let me interrupt for a second. Why would we decide we'd only fight China? You could almost decide the opposite, which is we have to focus on Russia, let's have more of an accord with China

Beth Sanner:

Because that is exactly what the advisors to President Trump are saying. And it's the elephant in the room that no one at this entire conference has really talked about for some reason. But I mean that's absolutely, in the Bloomberg interview yesterday with President Trump, he was asked whether he would defend Taiwan if he attacked by China and he said no. And certainly JD Vance is of the bridge Kolby School of saying that we can't afford to fight Russia. But look, all of these things, as John said, are completely linked. Iran is going to be more of a threat in a couple of years because what Russia is doing with them, the strategic agreement between the two countries is on the verge. And certainly we're already seeing progress in North Korea according to the intelligence community, public remarks as a result of this relationship, there are differences between what China and Russia want, but I'm not sure that we have the ability to actually be, we could be too cute by half.

Walter Isaacson:

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I want to get back, Beth, you did raise it and said it was Elephant in. We haven't talked about it. So after I let Jane speak, we can go right to that point of what would a Trump foreign policy do on it. But let me let Jane have her words here.

Jane Holl Lute:

So I think I take a very different view because I spent half my adult life in the US government, in the military, or serving as a political appointee and half on the outside at the un. And in other international efforts, I think this moment has brought us, the past 75 years have brought us to this moment. And that 75 years has been divided up into four segments, it seems to me. And there have been four strategic questions which have guided US foreign policy and in fact, I think policy of much of what we call the West. And the first period was immediately following World War ii. And the big strategic question at that moment was, how do we prevent World War iii? And the big fear of that moment was the resumption of war in Europe. Again, how do we respond? We responded with multilateralism aggressively after the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The period that characterized the sixties and the height of the Cold War was how do we prevent nuclear annihilation? This was the big strategic question shaping US foreign policy and defense policy. The big fear at that time was that we would blow ourselves to smithereens. And the answer to that was multilateralism again, in process and institution with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the big question that dominated internationally was, my God, the US is that much more powerful than anyone else. What will it do with this power? And we answered that question unilaterally. And then with nine 11 and the Gulf War in 2003, the big question that has dominated in all of the conversations that I've been in is, my God, how fragile is the American commitment to democratic values and the big fear in the post Cold War period, we had no fear. We didn't fear anything. In the current age, we fear everything. So what has brought us to this point are these big strategic questions, these big moments. And frankly, what we're forcing the world into is micro lateralism and we're reaping that these are not countries that will choose either the United States or China. These are not, or countries. These are and countries. And they are moving to an agenda of micro lateralism relationships based on issues, based on contacts and interests.

Walter Isaacson:

I'm going to turn to Beth because you said it hasn't been discussed enough, the tectonic shifts that might happen with a Trump Vance administration, everything from NATO commitments, multilateralism that Jane talked about, tariffs, tariff, war, whatever. Tell us what you think the seismic shifts or maybe non seismic would be of a Trump Vance like foreign policy.

Beth Sanner:

So I don't think we really know yet, but let me just take a step back here and reflect a little bit on what Jane has said. I think it's a great framing. And I think where we are right now, we're at this point where all of the assumptions that we have about how the world works from technology to our

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relationships, to who is who in the world and who are we aligned to, all of our assumptions about international organizations and whether they're work or not, these are all either under question, under challenge or falling apart before our very eyes. And that creates in all of us this sense of we really don't know what's going to happen next. And I think that the Trump idea of a return of a Trump presidency where we have people speaking not for him, project 2025, for example, advisors, then you're seeing an interview with Trump where literally is saying the opposite of what an interview with JD Vance said the previous day.

None of us really know, but we can look at a couple of statements. And the one on Taiwan, for example, is completely the opposite of what many of his advisors, Robert O'Brien, Pompeo, others have said about the importance of doubling down. JD Vance doubling down on Taiwan. Trump just said, oh no, not defending them. And they're stealing our technology. Basically they're an enemy. I think that the big change for me is how does a president Trump view alliances, relationships, partnerships, and jointness? Because every panel I have listened to has talked about the importance of collaboration, that we cannot face a China threat by ourselves. And yet many of the statements that we've read from President Trump call assumptions about that very idea into question.

Walter Isaacson:

John, did you want to pick up on that?

John McLaughlin:

Well, I think Beth pointing out that there's a difference between what Trump says and what his advisors say tells us one thing we don't know what to do about China. And most administrations when they come in, this one may if it comes in may be an exception, but most of them don't end up doing exactly what they say they're going to do because they discover the world is not the same as it looked from the outside when you're on the inside. So I don't think we know what to do about China. What disturbs me a little bit is that too many people talk about going to war with China as though that's not a bad idea or that we should simply prepare for it. But I would like people to think about the consequences of a war with China. Think about the replenishment issues, the logistical issues. Think about losing a carrier or two, which would probably happen on the first or second day of a war. That's 3000 casualties or more. Is the American public prepared for anything like that?

Walter Isaacson:

By the way, if there is a conflict with China, do you think it becomes a global one in which Russia supports China?

John McLaughlin:

I think inevitably it would be a war that involves more than China and the United States. Most of the Asian allies are equally alarmed about China. But I think my own view about dealing with China is, yes, prepare for the worst, but put the emphasis on deterrence. Deterrence. And that's not easy.

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What is deterrence? The three Cs of deterrence are communication, credibility and capability. Well communication. We have to be very clear about what our expectations are with the Chinese capability. We have a way to go. They're way ahead of us as the National Defense Commission pointed out on. They're outpacing us in many areas, particularly in the naval capabilities and so forth, and credibility. I think we have an issue there too. We have to make sure that in some way what we say and what we express as our values in other parts of the world are delivered. So on Ukraine, we better prevail in Ukraine. We being the West and our allies, we better figure out a way to have Ukraine come out in a way that is clearly a defeat for the kinds of things that the Chinese have allied themselves with in supporting Putin.

Can I pick up on that? I'm driving toward not a war with China, but a way to deter them in a way to live with them in a way that serves our interest.

Walter Isaacson:

Yeah, but when you talk about we have to have a victory in Ukraine, if there's one thing I think I can sense of the Trump Vance where they are aligned, no, we are not going to continue to pursue the war. We have more of a relationship with Russia than the current administration would have. What happens in the next administration on Ukraine policy and what would that mean? I'll start with Jane and then

Jane Holl Lute:

I mean, I think in order to answer that question, you sort of need a theory of the case of what's America's role in the world. And that to me begins with a sense of what do we need at this moment in our history? I think we need four things. I think we need a safe and secure place where the American way of life can thrive. And that's not just within the borders of the United States, but within the community of states within which the American way of life is so deeply rooted. I think we need a dynamic economic engine that can generate new wealth. That's a high bar. We can't do that by ourselves. I think we need strong friends and allies, and I think we need predictable relations with others. That's a pretty low bar. That's really about when we talk about the rule of law. So wars are known not just by what they destroy, but by what they create. And what will the war in Ukraine create after all this destruction? And that's the question that the next administration, whether it's Democrat or Republican, will have to answer. I'm a croc realist unapologetically, and that's where my analysis begins. What does this country need?

Beth Sanner:

I had the pleasure of working for Brent Crot in the NSC and boy, I learned a lot from that experience. And I think that that's right. I mean it's about interests and what is our core interest. Our core interest in terms of Russia, Ukraine is that Russia doesn't win and redefine the global rules and order, right? Because that is what is at stake. So if people don't want that, they don't care about Ukraine, fine. I don't care if you care about Ukraine, I do, but I care about the fact that what is at

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stake here in terms of US interests, and I think we have to understand that as we approach this, there is an inherent contradiction and tension between things that are involved here, peace, justice and cold hard interests. And none of those are going to be fully satisfied. But we've got to find a balance and we have to be more open about the idea that these things are intention.

Walter Isaacson:

John, as I listened to JD, I actually read the speech of JD Vance last night. It was pretty clear that he would not agree with this panel, and it's pretty clear that if they get into power, it's not likely that we'll go for an all out victory in Ukraine. It's been, I think 14,000 deaths for the past two years. The front has moved back and forth a few hundred kilometers for 14,000 deaths. In retrospect, was there a solution and is there a solution to this war or do we just have to either win it all out or advance Trump say, no, we don't have a dog in this fight, let it be lost.

John McLaughlin:

Well, the issue with all wars, the question so often asked is how does it end? We don't know how it will end yet. It could end with something we would call a Ukrainian victory. It may end honestly with some kind of negotiated agreement in which Ukraine doesn't achieve all of its objectives. If some way can be assured that the Ukrainian state is still secure in a post agreement world. And Chris Ali has talked about that. So how come out of this, how do we make this go in the right direction? I think the way I analyze it is that you have to go back to Kovitz. What's the center of gravity here? Putin's standing on a rather solid platform right now. His population is either with him or indifferent, but certainly not fighting him. That's the first thing.

Here's the core thing. He thinks he can outlast us and he has good reason to believe that even reading JD Vance's speech. So I don't know what JD Vance and Trump are going to do, but here's the thing. I think Putin has to be convinced that he's not going to outlast us. That's the key thing. How do you convince him that that is So I can think of two things, and here I'm a bit critical of the NATO summit. I think the NATO summit should have traced a much clearer path for NATO membership for Ukraine with achievable steps, plausible, achievable steps over a period of time, so defined that would tell Putin something. These guys are in this for the long haul. Certainly they're in it for that period of time. And second, instead of struggling month by month, year by year to figure out how much we're going to support Ukraine, if we can imagine a Congress in which it would be possible to have a legislative agreement that provides multi-year support to Ukraine, predictably, that is another thing that would tell Putin, these guys,

Walter Isaacson:

Wait, but you're

John McLaughlin:

Kidding yourself. Well, I'm not kidding myself. I'm stating

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Walter Isaacson:

They almost couldn't pass it this, they're not going to pass a multi-year agreement.

John McLaughlin:

Well, not as things stand, I'm going back to your point about realism though. If I'm just being realistic and asking myself, how do we come out of this in a good way? I'm laying out conditions that may or may not be achievable, but which in their absence almost certainly agree that this war will grind on and that we will not come out in a way that we judge to be favorable to our interests.

Walter Isaacson:

John has written about how sometimes surprises come because of little incremental steps we didn't pay attention to. One of the things happening in Ukraine, it seems to me is there've been little incremental steps that make the use of battlefield nuclear weapons more thinkable. Is that going? You're nodding. Let me let you just take it over then.

Jane Holl Lute:

So my first assignment in the army was in Berlin. We were surrounded by 17 GSFG Soviet divisions. We exercised conventional infantry tactics and in city fighting tactics against the Soviets. And we did it. I was there for four years and every single exercise ended with a detonation of a tactical nuclear weapon. Everyone index.

John McLaughlin:

Has that become more likely? I don't think so. Again, one has to say the chances aren't zero. Okay, with nuclear weapons, you can't just shrug your shoulders and say, don't worry about it. But a couple of things militate against it. One thing is if he were to use nuclear weapons, the Chinese could not support him. They have a no first use policy. I think they're serious about it. India has a no first use policy. They're not supporting him, but they're tolerant. Many of the members of the bricks, by the way. And that's another way in which this war has stimulated a group that was moribund has now increased its strength by 10 members. And why is that happening? These are countries that are uncomfortable with having to choose between the east and west choice that you Ukraine has given has presented to them. So I think that those are the things in the mix here at this

Walter Isaacson:

Point. Real quick. I'm sorry,

John McLaughlin:

Go ahead. I'm saying that chances aren't zero, but I think that there's a disincentive for him. Now. We know what his doctrine is. The doctrine is if his conventional forces are going down, he's going

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to use tactical nuclear weapons. So I don't want to say it wouldn't happen, but I think the chances are low. Beth?

Beth Sanner:

Yeah, I just think that we have to understand where we are in our deterrence policies right now in our deterrence thinking. I think there's kind of old think in the way we're approaching deterrence, and I don't think we're kind of grappling with the idea that right now it's about coercion by countries that have nuclear weapons. I don't think that we're handling that well. John just went through the three Cs of nuclear deterrence, and I think that you can look at each one of those and understand, but look, we are on the path for North Korea to be presenting us with some really critical dilemmas related to their nuclear program. We could see ourselves in the same place even with a proto nuclear state in Iran. We have to be doubling down, I think, on our ability to not just use deterrence by denial, but we have to be serious about our clarity in terms of our willingness of deterrence.

John McLaughlin:

I don't want to leave the impression that I think the Putin's threat to use these weapons is inconsequential. It's actually one of the more important things that's happened in Ukraine because it has brought to the fore something that most people had forgotten about nuclear war, nuclear non-proliferation, nuclear agreements have all been suffering and people are now thinking about nuclear weapons again. Now the downside is that countries that might, one of the first things a new administration has to do is to assure allies that the nuclear umbrella is still there. I don't know what JD Vance said about that, but if you don't do that in Asia, knowing that China has now gone to on their way by 2030 to about a thousand warheads. Yeah, a thousand warheads. And they're not in any arms control agreements and they don't want to talk about it. And Putin has stopped talking about the people I know who've been to Russia recently, say even the arms control professionals aren't allowed to talk about arms control anymore. So we are in a more dangerous nuclear world. I'm just saying. I'm not sure he's going to pull the trigger.

Walter Isaacson:

Beth said a couple of things that I'm going to ask Jane to jump up, which are two possible nations that over the next five years become nuclear powers. You mentioned North Korea,

Beth Sanner:

And we can also add South Korea as potentially a power we can add

Walter Isaacson:

Saudi Arabia. Well, I was going to go one at a time. That's

Beth Sanner:

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The reaction, but go ahead.

Walter Isaacson:

North Korea first, how does that change the world?

Jane Holl Lute:

Oh, I think we are in the throes. We are in a massive, we're well into a 20 year period of global reordering. We're well into it. These are street cars. To use an old phrase, whether North Korea develops nuclear weapons and how does the cascading effect move from there? There are other clusters of countries that see you need a nuclear weapon. Ukraine gave its up and look what happened to it. You asked this question about how's this going to end in Ukraine? I wrote my dissertation for Condi Rice and Steve Krasner and Alex George on how wars end, why they end when they do. And one of the problems that we're facing in that analysis, it was clear to me that the closer you are to actual fighting, you look retrospectively. Look how far we've come. The further away you are, you look prospectively. Look how far you have to go. So we can answer questions about whether North Korea or any other country will develop a nuclear capability when we can't even answer the question that is right in front of us. A hot war raging on the shores of nato, the most capable military alliance in history with no definitive answer for it.

Beth Sanner:

You just have to say, and to that, because North Korea does have a full fledged nuclear capability. They have theoretically the ability to hit the United States with an ICBM, any part of the United States. The only question is, is the warhead going to explode as expected? And I would say that that's going to be a bad day. Whether it does or not, I don't think that that will happen. But the whole idea here is that by just on China or just focusing on Russia, we're kind of missing the point that we have a really complicated threat filled world. And if we are only single-mindedly focused on one threat, I will guarantee you, as John has pointed out, that there will be surprise eyes the last, that's

Jane Holl Lute:

Not even the biggest threat.

Beth Sanner:

And that's not none of, I mean, look, the Houthis are screwing with us in ways and bleeding us, not the biggest threat. Yeah.

Walter Isaacson:

Anyway, John knew about,

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John McLaughlin:

I was going to say this is one of the real downsides of this partnership that we've seen develop between Russia, North Korea, and Iran.

Walter Isaacson:

Exactly.

John McLaughlin:

As Beth points out, the North Koreans, by most measures, seem to have an ICBM capability. What they don't seem to have is a guidance capability for it. And they don't have, I don't think the assurance that they reentry vehicle can survive the atmosphere. These are things Russia can help them with. Iran on the other hand, has a missile program, but it does not have an icbm. It's not been able to get to that level. It's building a drone plant for Russia in Russia. And if I were Iranians, I'd be asking the Russians for some help with that ICBM program. And there have been times in the past where the Russians have helped with the missile program and they've been involved in every phase of the Iranian nuclear cycle. So there are things that are going to come out of that partnership that are going to make the world Jane talks about even more complicated. You

Jane Holl Lute:

So Beth was just asking me, I kept saying it's not the biggest threat. It's not the biggest threat.

Walter Isaacson:

Yeah,

Jane Holl Lute:

No, I mean, the biggest threat is that we will lose faith in each other. That is the biggest threat. It is clearly the biggest threat that we will lose faith in each other. Abba Ivan is said to have said with the us, anything is possible without the us Nothing is possible. We believe the former, we don't believe the latter. We need to start believing that.

Beth Sanner:

And General Keen, I think was so good on this yesterday, and I wish we could just clone him. And what I really worry about is that no matter who is elected president of the United States, that person will not be able to speak to all presidents like FDR did at the time of need. When Americans needed inspiration and reassurance and where we needed to organize ourselves into a unified force. That is what we need right now. And so that's why polarization is so bad. Who speaks

John McLaughlin:

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To us? Wait, Farris. Go ahead, John. I was going to say, the other thing that was very impressive to me in that panel on the National Defense Commission was Mara Rodman's observation about the need for a whole of society understanding of some of what this group has been talking about in the whole forum. If we're contemplating the kind of war that people talk about, the, here's an interesting statistic. I just came across from the World War II period in 1941, the United States produced 3 million cars during the entire World War II. Only 139 civilian cars came off the assembly line. Are we prepared for that kind of societal upheaval that would come along with a major war of consequence? It might not be at that level, but we're not prepared for,

Walter Isaacson:

I really do want to go to audience questions, and I know I've got about 900 more of my own, but any of the rising leaders or whatever have a hand up or anybody else

Question 1:

Like the Confederacy prolong the Civil War with selling its cotton. Russia's selling oil using tankers that are illegal environmental threats. What can we do to stop blood? The main artery of this is financing the Ukrainian

Walter Isaacson:

In a broader sense, why have we been so abjected our failure to have sanctions on Russia that really worked

Beth Sanner:

Because of the price at the pump? So again, this gets back to your societal question. It's that are we willing to make the sacrifices? The price cap is a good effort, but it didn't work. But we're not really willing, just like we're not really willing to uphold sanctions against Iran right now. Seriously, because of the oil issue. It's why we have a dalliance right now with, well, I don't want to say dalliance, but we're working with Venezuelan in some ways, right?

Turning a blind eye. All of this has to do with some bread and butter issues here at home. And the reason is because the American public actually, they don't get it.

John McLaughlin:

And we've turned to sanctions too often. It's the weapon of choice. And most countries have figured out how to circumvent them. It hurts them. But in Russia's case, they're on a war. The economy is on a war footing now. Russians say they've got plenty of money. It's prosperous right now. So I don't think sanctions have worked, and I don't really have an answer for how we stopped because the Chinese and others want to buy their and

Walter Isaacson:

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The Brex. Yeah.

Well, when I first came to the Aspen Strategy group many, many years ago, and then this form eventually came out of it, one of the questions, I think Strobe Talbot put it up was a discussion topic, which is the POGO question, which is, we've met the enemy and it is us. And I think as we look at our American democracy and what you all have just said, all three of you in your wrap ups, we really do have to get our house in order too if we're going to meet these future threats. I want to thank Jane, I want to thank Beth, and I want to thank the great John McLaughlin. Thank you all.