

Foreign Policy Choices for 2021 and Beyond

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00:01: Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome back to the Aspen Security Forum. We're going to have a session now with my friend Tony Blinken and my friend, Gerry Seib, called Foreign Policy Choices for 2021. Let me introduce both of our panelists.

00:16: Tony Blinken really doesn't need an introduction to most people who are watching this. We became friends and we worked together long ago for President Clinton at the National Security Council. He's had a very distinguished career in public service. As many of you know, he was staff director for the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the Obama administration. In those eight years, he was assistant to President Obama and Principal Deputy National Security Advisor. He was the National Security Advisor for the Vice President Biden, and he was Deputy Secretary of State for President Obama and Vice President Biden.

00:52: He is now senior foreign policy advisor to Vice President Biden and the Biden campaign, and it's great to have Tony Blinken with us. He's going to be interviewed by Gerry Seib. Gerry is executive editor, Washington editor of the Wall Street Journal. He writes a weekly Capital Journal column, which I read and all of us should read. Gerry's had an extraordinary career. He has reported from the Middle East in the 1980s and '90s for the Journal. He covered the White House at the end of the Reagan administration, the entire George HW Bush administration.

01:28: He's interviewed every American president since President Reagan. He's part of the team at the Wall Street Journal that won the Pulitzer Prize for their reporting on the crisis of 9/11, and he has a book coming out, which we just talked about briefly, on August 25th, Gerry's book, We Should Have Seen It Coming about the conservative movement in the Republican Party will be coming out, a book to read. Really a pleasure to have Gerry here and Tony. So great to see you here again at the Aspen Security Forum. Welcome to both of you.

01:58: Thanks, Nick.

02:00: Thank you. So Tony, let's start with a scenario. Joe Biden walked out of the White House in January of 2017 as Vice President. Let's say perhaps he walks back into the White House in January of 2021 as president, how will the world have changed in the intervening four years? How will he have changed in the intervening four years?

02:23: Gerry, first, it's great to be with you. Nick, thanks so much for having me. Wonderful to be with all of you, virtually. So, Gerry, what has changed? I think in a word, pretty much everything. The Vice President's talked about this. If he is elected president, he would inherit a divided country at home and a world in disarray, and the two are inextricably linked because our own ability to be a force for progress in the world and so to protect and advance our own security, our own prosperity, our own values, depends a lot on the strength and vitality of our democracy at home and that's very much challenged in this moment. But I think globally, we have a time of, to state the obvious, extraordinary economic, demographic, environmental, geopolitical change. Just over the past four years, technology and information have accelerated a shifting of power and alignments among

nation states, a diffusion of power away from nation states, and growing challenges of effective governance within them.

03:24: So I think what's changed is the need to do two things. We have to approach this with equal doses of humility and confidence. Humility, because we now face the most challenging and complex international security landscape, I think, in decades, and we can't just flip a switch and make everything right, but confidence because it remains within our capacity to shape a better future in which our people are more secure and more prosperous, and opportunity is safeguarded. I think the big thing, though, the elephant in the room, is COVID-19, and arguably, Gerry, that is the greatest challenge for the United States has faced since World War II. It's killed more Americans than died during World War I, and more Americans have perished than in every war the United States has fought since 1945 plus 9/11 combined. The recession unleashed represents, I think, the deepest downturn since the Great Depression, millions of Americans unemployed, threatening entire sectors of our economy, and of course, there are so many tails that could wag the COVID dog.

04:27: We're looking at an emerging markets, debt prices, food insecurity, more migratory upheavals, humanitarian disasters, more protectionism, more nationalism, more xenophobia, all of which can ricochet back on the United States. And so I think that in a sense, the biggest and most acute change, driven even more by COVID-19, is kind of a central dilemma. On the one hand, this should be a wake-up call that our own fate in the United States is inextricably linked to events beyond our borders. But the dilemma is this, when we have mounting transnational dangers, unprecedented interdependence, we have to find collective and sometimes even global responses, but we have rising nationalism, eroding faith in government, faltering international institutions, the diffusion of power that I mentioned, and resurgent great power competition making that very cooperation increasingly difficult to achieve. So we have a lot of work to do if there is a Biden presidency, and very quickly, I'll just say a couple of quick things in thinking about this environment and how we address it.

05:39: I think the Vice President believes that true security for our people requires investing in them, investing in our democracy, investing in our solidarity with the rest of the free world, and investing once again in our global leadership, so we have to start to rebuild the foundational strengths of the United States, promoting innovation, reinvigorating alliances and partnerships with other democratic nations. And that in turn, becomes the core for collective defense and high standards of international cooperation across the whole range of policy issues, and it would give us some negotiating leverage and the attractive pull of a strength and community of democracies to try to shape more cooperative responses to these very, very big challenges.

06:23: So, Tony, as you just suggested... And by the way, Tony and I will talk for about half an hour and then I'll pivot to questions from the audience, so keep that in mind. As you just suggested, you know, when the coronavirus is dealt with, we will still be left with China as the paramount strategic challenge, the most important bilateral relationship in the world, and one that's become much more troubling. And as the Trump campaign will remind us endlessly over the next 90 days, a lot of these adverse trends, the South China Sea security problems, intellectual theft happened on Joe Biden's previous watches in the Senate and in the White House. So the question is, how will Joe Biden as a president view China, a partner, a competitor, rival, enemy? What and how?

07:05: Probably some combination of all of the things you just said. China clearly poses a growing challenge across a multitude of dimensions economically, technologically, militarily, diplomatically. Arguably, the biggest challenge we face from another nation state writ large. And as you've suggested, we have to contend with one dimension of this, which is an increasingly assertive China that uses its economic might to coerce others and reap unfair advantage, that tends to ignore international rules to advance its own interests, that asserts unfounded maritime and territorial claims that threaten freedom of navigation, represses its own people, democracy in Hong Kong.

07:46: So this is a huge, huge challenge, but here is the... I think here's where we have to start from. We have to put ourselves in a position of strength from which to engage China so that the relationship moves forward more on our terms, not theirs. And the problem is this: Right now, by virtually every key metric, China's strategic position is stronger and ours is weaker, as a result, I believe, of President Trump's failed leadership. Think about this, Gerry, the President has in effect helped China advance key strategic goals, weakening American alliances, check. Leaving a vacuum in the world for China to fill, check. Abandoning our values and giving Beijing a green light to trample human rights and democracy in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, check. And then maybe worst of all, debasing our own democracy by attacking its institutions, its people, its values virtually every day, and so reducing its appeal with regard to the competition with China. And that's almost checkmate.

09:00: So the problem is this, I think we have to think about it this way, in many ways the challenge posed by China is less about their strength than it is about some of our self-inflicted weaknesses. Put another way, this challenge is about us, the competitiveness of our own economy and workers, of our democracy and our political system, of our alliances and partnership, of our values. All of which I believe President Trump has done so much to undermine. All of which are actually fully within our control. So what would a Joe Biden do? Make sure that we're investing in ourselves, in our workers, in our technology, in our companies. Make sure that we're renewing our own democracy to show its resilience, to show its attractiveness. Make sure that we're working with our partners not against them, and putting values back in the center of our foreign policy.

09:50: That's how you engage China from a position of strength. And by the way, that's also the best basis upon which to advance cooperation with China on issues where we clearly have mutual concerns, whether it's climate change, global health, non-proliferation. I don't think it's too late to be smart and tough at the same time, that's what we need to do.

10:09: So one of the items that was supposed to fill the vacuum that you just referred to was the Trans-Pacific Partnership, TPP, negotiated by the Obama administration, championed by Vice President Joe Biden, the Democrats walked away from it. Wasn't sent to Congress for ratification. President Trump has ditched it. What does a Biden administration do? Does it come back, does it come back in its current form or after some prolonged renegotiation is there an attempt to relaunch TPP?

10:36: Well, I think the Vice President has spoken on this before, and he said that if we were going to re-engage TPP, we'd have to renegotiate it. But the problem is the world and the other original TPP partners have moved on and they have worked in agreement with China. Many of the

provisions that we negotiated into it were negotiated out. That's usually problematic. I think the idea behind TPP is a good one. Its realization may have fallen short in some ways, but the idea behind it is a good one. A high standards, a race to the top agreement in which the rights of workers, or the environment, transparency, are all front and center.

11:13: And by the way, even in its original conception, it applied to China, that would require China to take steps to undo some of the unfair advantages it gives itself through state-owned enterprises. So that's positive. And I think the other idea behind it, that would have to again be realized in a different way, is China needs to face a choice. If 40% or 50% of world GDP is together in a high standards race to the top agreement, if that could be achieved, then China has to decide whether it wants to be part of that or left out. And if it wants to be part of it, it would have to adhere to those high standards. But at this point, given where we are, given some of the deficiencies, something like that would have to be renegotiated and whether that's possible or not, I don't know.

12:05: So that's an if quest, you said, if it's going to be revived it would have to be renegotiated, that's not a commitment to do that.

12:13: That's correct.

12:14: So it's possible TPP just vanishes forever in a Biden administration.

12:18: Yeah, I think the principles behind it might be resurrected and moved forward and made better in some other form. That's certainly possible. But the larger point is this, if you're dealing with some of China's excesses in commercial diplomacy, in trade or, for that matter, in technology, which is obviously a vital chapter, are you better off going it alone? Are you better off inflicting a massive tariff war that does more damage to yourself than it does to China? That's what happened in the case of President Trump. He started a tariff war, it did terrible harm to our own farmers, our own manufacturers, our own consumers.

13:04: If you look at some of the numbers, and Gerry, you know this, the numbers I've seen about a \$1200 loss in average American real household income, cancelling of the temporary benefits for American families that they got from the tax cut, farm bankruptcies were up I think 20% last year. Farm income was down almost a billion dollars even after taxpayer-funded subsidies. And then of course, the manufacturing recession that was wreaking havoc even before the pandemic. So do you do that? And at the same time, do you alienate the countries that should be with you because they are similarly aggrieved by some of China's practices by starting tariff wars against them and by constantly insulting them. Or do you work together with other democracies and similarly aggrieved countries to set the highest possible standards, and then take that weight and apply it to dealing with China. I think the answer is self-evident.

14:02: So one more China question, then we'll move on. But in the Middle East, where I used to live and work, people talked about creating facts on the ground. In a way China has been creating facts on the sea, in the South China Sea, artificial islands, territorial claims. Is that a fait accompli or can those be rolled back, is there a way to roll that back?

14:22: Well, I don't think it's a *fait accompli*, but it is a big challenge. But I think, again, what you have to do is a few things. You would have to reset the foundation to be able to approach China from a position of strength. And as I said, that requires in the first instance actually investing in ourselves, reinvesting in our own alliances, making sure that we have the appropriate deterrent capacity. By the way, you'll recall that the rebalance to China under the Obama-Biden administration did those very things, including, for example, deploying about 60% of our naval assets to the region. And then I think you have to be very clear, very direct, and make your views and what you're going to do known.

15:11: Let me give you a quick example. During the Obama-Biden administration, China unilaterally declared an air defense identification zone, basically requiring airplanes flying through international airspace, not Chinese airspace, to identify themselves to the Chinese government. Vice President Biden went to Beijing, he saw President Xi Jinping and he said to him very matter of factly, "We will not recognize the air defense identification zone, we're going to fly our planes through it." And that's exactly what we proceeded to do, flying our bombers through it. Similarly with freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, which the Vice President was a strong advocate of. So I think if you're clear, direct, and you back up your words with deeds, the government of Beijing will respect that.

15:56: Let's turn to Iran, the nuclear deal, JCPOA, is it back on day one of the Biden administration?

16:05: Well, let's think about where we are, first, because there's a lot of digging out to do. When President Trump walked away from the JCPOA, the Iran deal, an agreement that was verifiably working to block Iran's path to nuclear weapons, he promised in effect a better deal. And he also said that the pressure he would exert would make Iran less dangerous. Unfortunately, the opposite has happened. Iran is building back its nuclear capability. President Trump effectively freed Iran of its commitments, and now Iran now admits to enriching uranium at higher levels. It's using more advanced centrifuges than ever before. And by the calculations I've seen, the breakout time necessary for Iran to have enough nuclear material to create a weapon has decreased from more than a year under the deal to a handful of months now. And it will get shorter and shorter if we continue this way.

16:57: Inspectors have been blocked from some Iranian sites, all of this under President Trump's watch. And then at the same time, in withdrawing from the deal, the President has isolated us from our closest partners and also encouraged Russia and China to move closer to Tehran, thus undermining our own ability to work with the very countries we need to check Iran's destabilizing actions beyond the nuclear file. The President, as you'll recall, Gerry, also promised that pressuring Iran with new sanctions that our allies opposed would stop its aggressive behavior in the region. Well, what did we see? The opposite, it became more aggressive, not less. It responded to President Trump's sanctions by targeting oil tankers in the Gulf, infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, US troops in Iraq, downed an American drone.

17:46: And as all of this was kind of spiraling up, President Trump brought the United States pretty close to a possible war with Tehran on several occasions. He sent thousands of additional US forces to the Middle East at a time we should actually be ending the so-called forever wars. And then

you'll remember this, after Iranian-backed attacks on that Saudi oil facility and the death of an American contractor in Iraq, there was our own retaliatory strike against Qasem Soleimani. No tears shed over his demise, but that's got to be done in the context of an actual strategy. Well, Iran then launched a dozen ballistic missiles at a US base, traumatic brain injuries to more than 100 US service personnel. The bottom line, by walking away from diplomacy, by acting erratically, President Trump has made conflict more likely.

18:34: And the nuclear program is actually now advancing instead of being stopped, which brings us to something I think that's happening right now, because this is going to be important too come next January, that's the arms embargo which expires in October. Secretary Pompeo has been talking about now the US launching an effort to extend it indefinitely at the United Nations. As best I know today, and maybe this will change, but as best I know today, not a single ally is on board with that indefinite extension. So Russia and China can probably keep their veto ink dry at the Security Council. And the administration may complain about the sunset of the conventional arms embargo, but it was a main element... Or rather, I should say, a main element of that embargo was negotiated and put in place by the Obama-Biden administration through the hard work of disciplined and competent diplomacy.

19:32: And of course, we insisted in the JCPOA itself on powerful sanction snap back provisions. There's only one catch, snap back needs to be invoked by a participant to the nuclear agreement. And in pulling out of the Iran deal, the administration literally headlined its press release, "Ending US Participation in the JCPOA." So legally, maybe it'll make whatever arguments it wants to make, but legally, it seems to be on pretty shaky ground in being able to use the very snap back provisions that we negotiated.

20:06: And so there's a lot of irony in what I'm hearing from the administration blaming the Obama-Biden administration for the sunset of the conventional arms restrictions, because much of that was actually put in place by our administration in the first place, and we could have probably extended those prohibitions from inside the deal through a unified front with our allies. Now we risk blowing up the United Nation Security Council with implications for North Korea and other policies vital to our security. So that's the long backdrop, that's the foundation. So if Joe Biden's elected President, what he would do, he's been very clear about this, is he would seek to build on the nuclear deal to make it longer and stronger, if, if Iran returns to strict compliance. And then we would be in a position to use our renewed commitment to diplomacy to work with our allies, as I said, to strengthen and lengthen it, but also we'd be in a much better position to effectively push back against Iran's other destabilizing activities because we would once again be united with our partners instead of isolated from them.

21:17: More broadly, if you look at the Middle East and the Trump's administration's approach to it, President Trump's personal approach to it, it seems to be very clear that his goal is to shrink the American footprint, to recede from the region on the not unreasonable logic that Americans are tired of what you refer to as endless wars. Would the Biden administration continue that trend line?

21:40: Well, President Trump has said he's doing that, but if you actually look at the numbers, he's increased our forces in the greater region, I think at last count by about 14,000 or 15,000 over what he inherited. So it's a strange way of saying you want to end these wars by actually increasing our

true presence significantly. At the same time, there have been these almost schizophrenic erratic actions where seemingly on a whim or following a conversation with President Erdoğan, the President unilaterally, without, apparently without consultation too with our own Defense Department, never mind our allies, never mind Israel, immediately concerned, announces a withdrawal of forces from Syria, a small number of forces who are leveraging their presence in very, very important ways to make sure we can not only defeat Daesh but keep it defeated.

22:37: So I think we're already in a head-spinning position between what the President says and what he actually does. But I think it's fair to say that if you look hard at our interests, if you look hard at where the world is going, we are generally speaking over-leveraged in the region. And there are ways of achieving our security and advancing our interests with a lot less, and I think, for example, we have to distinguish, Gerry, between massive deployments of US forces indefinitely without a clear exit strategy into conflicts that really aren't about us in the first place, to, for example, having a small presence of primarily special operators in very small numbers who are leveraging 10, 20, 100 times their numbers in local forces who take on a problem that may affect us.

23:35: And Syria is a very good example of that when it comes to Daesh. We had I think at its height, a couple of thousand special operators and support in country, they were leveraging 60,000 or 70,000 Syrian democratic forces, and that successfully took the fight to Daesh, took back Raqqa, eliminated the geographic caliphate. We need to be able to distinguish between those kinds of things.

23:58: Let's turn to Russia, still a hugely important bilateral relationship, but an increasingly troubled one. Narrower question for starters, the Trump administration... One of the issues in that relationship is the need to renew the START Agreement. The Trump administration has argued that at this point, given the strategic importance of China and its advances as its strategic competitor, those talks ought to include not just Russia with China as well. Do you agree?

24:25: That's an excuse for never getting to a renewed agreement. Yes, there is an issue with China and its own arsenal, although it's infinitely smaller than ours and Russia's. But if we try to do that, whatever the benefits would be, it would take forever, it might get nowhere and meanwhile new START and the advantages that it brings would expire. So no, the first thing that we should do, and that a Biden administration would do, assuming that Russia wants the same thing, would be to extend new START. Strategic stability, for all of the huge difficulties, profound difficulties in the relationship, is a positive, it's good for the United States, we should extend it.

25:05: And more broadly, is it time for a reset with Vladimir Putin, and if so, how do you do it?

25:11: So I was doing some reading the other day and I, thinking that Russia might come up. I just want to read you something very briefly, a quote, and this will be a foundation for answering the question. So the quote is this, "At the bottom of the Kremlin's neurotic view of world affairs is traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity. Russian rulers have invariably sensed that their rule was relatively archaic and foreign. To this was added as Russia came into contact with an economically advanced West, the fear of a more competent, more powerful, more highly organized societies. For this reason, Russia's rulers have always feared foreign penetration. Russians will participate officially in international organizations where they see the opportunity of extending

power or of inhibiting or diluting the power of others. Efforts will be made to disrupt Western national self-confidence, to hamstring measures of national defense, to increase social and industrial unrest, to stimulate all forms of disunity. Poor will be set against rich, black against white, young against old, newcomers against established residents."

26:33: So that quote is from George Kennan in his Long Telegram from 1946, and it sounds eerily up to the moment against that backdrop of what has been a constant thread in Russia's attitudes toward the world that existed in some manifestations before Vladimir Putin and probably will continue after him, but that Putin has added an accelerant to in many ways. What do we have? We have unfortunately, tragically and inexplicably President Trump standing with President Putin on the world stage and saying that he took President Putin's word over that of our own intelligence agencies when it comes to interference in the last elections.

27:22: We have the President, of course, taking a two by four on a regular basis to NATO, treating it like a protection racket instead of the most vital and important of our alliances. And we, of course, have maybe the most egregious behavior that I've seen and really can't explain, which is when confronted with evidence from the intelligence community that Russia was placing bounties on the heads of American soldiers in Afghanistan, the President ignored it. And maybe even worse than doing nothing, what did he do? Apparently, he spoke to President Putin a half a dozen or so times after this intelligence appeared in the President's daily brief, the most important intelligence the President receives, and by the President's own acknowledgement did not raise the issue once. And even invited President Putin to Washington and tried to invite him back into the G7.

28:23: So we have a big, big problem here that is almost inexplicable, so what is to be done, to coin a phrase. I think a Biden administration would first of all, confront Mr. Putin for his egregious actions, not embrace him as this president has repeatedly done. We would not trash NATO, we would seek to strengthen it, strength its deterrents, invest in new capabilities to deal with all sorts of challenges in cyber space, in outer space, under the sea, artificial intelligence, electronic warfare, some of which come from Russia, others are more broad, and of course provide robust security assistance to countries like Ukraine and Georgia in the western Balkans. We would look to impose real meaningful costs with coordinated actions and sanctions, exposing corruption. And you need to be very clear and specific with Mr. Putin about what's at risk. But there also might be some incentives as to what he could gain through trade, through investment, through a seat at the table, if Russia changes its actions that would help relieve their growing dependence on China.

29:36: We would need to build our own resilience by hardening election infrastructure, by getting dark money out of politics, by pushing tech companies to deal effectively with disinformation. We'd need to focus on strategic stability again, as you've started with by extending new START. And then finally, I think we have to look at new ways to engage people to people ties, to support civil society, very, very complicated, because Russia makes it so hard, but there are ways to do that. So there needs to be a comprehensive approach to Russia that has much more clarity, much clearer declaratory policies and a President who doesn't have an inexplicable relationship with Vladimir Putin.

30:18: So I have about 10 more questions I'd love to ask you, but let me not occupy the time, we have a lot, not... You won't be surprised, a lot of hands raised for questions from the audience. So

let's start with Charles Seegers and then go to Laurie Garrett. I think you need to make sure that your computer is unmuted and that your video is on as you seek to ask a question.

30:39: I hope you can hear me.

30:41: Hey, Charles. Good to see you.

30:43: Very good to see you, thank you for all your hard work. It's been quite informative. Quick question, not a lot has been talked about the African continent and the emerging nations in Africa. How important is that to our national security and where has the Trump administration failed in their foreign policy there today?

31:01: Well, I think it's usually important, in ways that we tend not to unfortunately to focus on. I think when you look at it, this extraordinary growth of a youth population, that in and of itself, if a quarter of the world's population in the coming decades is going to be from Africa, by definition, we have a need to engage it more positively, more productively. At the same time, I really worry deeply about the effect that COVID-19 may have particularly in Africa with less resilient health infrastructures, although with a younger population, maybe the consequences won't be as grave with COVID-19 itself. I hope that's right. We'll see.

31:51: But we do need to be thinking in ways that are very different from the way we're approaching it now, because frankly, it's being, the continent's mostly being ignored. So some of the things I think we need to do, and I know that President Biden would do, first, I think we want to try to engage a multiplicity of African countries as actual partners in pursuing some of the interests that we have in common. On the security front, global health, climate change, freedom and democracy, shared prosperity. We have... The Vice President's talked about actually convening a summit with African leaders as well as US and Africa business leaders regularly during his administration, this is building on something that we did during the Obama-Biden administration.

32:40: And if you do that regularly and have that kind of connectivity and then have the need, when you have these meetings for actual deliverables, that's one way of making progress. I suspect President Biden would travel to Africa pretty early in the administration and try to re-energize some of these relationships. But also we need to re-energize our own diplomatic corps and actually fill key ambassadorial positions and other positions in the State Department and make that a priority. There is a huge economic challenge, Charles, as you know, Africa has slipped into recession for the first time in 25 years because of COVID-19, and that stalled growth is threatening to roll back years of progress in terms of reducing extreme poverty.

33:29: So I think there's an imperative for us, but also for other countries, as well as the relevant international financial institutions, to work with governments in Africa, to work with the US private sector to try to jumpstart growth across the continent, so that they can return to becoming some of the fastest-growing places in the world. But last thing I'd say is this, and I come back to the first point. I think by, last I checked, the population is something like 1.3 billion people across the continent, the median age is 19 years old, there's an incredible resource there, in the continent's young people.

34:10: So that's again something that we tried to engage in the last administration, but I think we need to put those kinds of efforts on steroids, including working with the public, the private sector, civil society partners to try to jump start initiatives, economic opportunity to harness some of the innovation and energy. I remember being in Nigeria a few times in... Oh, I guess it was 2015, 2016. And one of the striking things there was, I think there were something like at last count, almost 70,000 registered NGOs. There is an extraordinary talent pool of young people, extraordinary minds, and we have a huge, huge incentive to try and channel some of those minds and that youth and that energy into moving the continent forward and moving our relationships forward.

35:06: So we'll go to Laurie Garrett and then Ambassador Deborah McCarthy after that.

35:22: Thank you. There's quite a lag time in getting it to the unmute. Sorry about that. Tony, clearly, there is no strategic plan for confronting COVID-19 in the current administration. But I've also scoured every bit of Biden campaign literature and can find no evidence of a strategic plan on the Biden side either, although there are large shopping lists of tactics. Any strategy begins with what is your strategic goal? Would the Biden administration support a strategic goal of eradication, elimination, containment? What would it be? Thank you.

36:04: Thanks, Laurie. Good to see you and thanks for the extraordinary work that you've been doing for a long time on these issues. I'm not sure I would fully subscribe to the premise of your question. I think there is clearly a strategic approach there, I'm going to dig through the new website and make sure that if it's not there, it's put there. But you know, you've forgotten more about this than I'll ever know, and I don't pretend to be an expert, but I think there are a few basic principles that make some sense.

36:39: First of all, with regard to where we are now with COVID-19. We have utterly botched the initial response. In the absence of therapeutics, in the absence of a vaccine, the measures that needed to be taken to protect populations and to protect the economy have been woefully, tragically absent. And so for a Biden administration, first of all, a lot would depend on where we actually are, come next January with regard to the virus. Do we have a vaccine? And then if we do, or vaccines plural, do we have the right plan to manufacture, distribute in the right way. In the absence of a vaccine, hopefully by then, hopefully there are therapeutics, but then I think we have to see whether the various strategies with regard to testing to tracing to stockpiling, all the things that we need to do that we didn't do, can still be put into effect.

37:37: But stepping back from this, look, thanks to some of the work that you've done, work that others have done on this, previous administrations saw pandemics as a growing emerging threat to global health and to the United States. And we worked to put in place programs and people to prevent, to detect, to deal with them as best we could, including in China. And so our administration, the Obama-Biden administration had a strong CDC presence in China. We famously had a dedicated White House office within the National Security Council focused on pandemics. We had, as you know very well, a program literally called Predict to try to detect the emergence of pandemics, so I love it when I hear from President Trump this was unpredictable. Well, I guess if you eliminate, as he virtually did, a program called Predict, maybe that's right.

38:36: The problem is, the administration came along and under-funded or dismantled virtually all of these efforts, and I'm not saying... Because we'll never know whether any of this would've actually helped us in some way to deal with this particular pandemic, but when you take down the defenses you've put in place, the early warnings you've put in place, the mitigation things you've put in place, then you've got a problem. And of course, we had one.

39:03: Then, when the virus struck and the Chinese government withheld critical information, denied access to international experts, this was the moment to insist that China live up to its responsibilities as a great nation and as the apparent point of origin of this virus. But instead, President Trump repeatedly praised their transparency and cooperation for the better part of two months when they were doing exactly the opposite, and then, and this again goes to a strategy point, he walked away from the WHO in the midst of a pandemic, instead of working to reform it from within, ceding our leadership to China and making it less likely that the WHO could be a vehicle for actually, for example, investigating what happened to make sure that we can learn lessons from this pandemic and put in place measures and strategies to make it less likely that it happens again, or if it does happen again, to much more quickly mitigate the downsides.

40:00: So I think we would look and act on putting in place these people, these programs and the resources on prevention, on mitigation, on detection. We would look, and this is, I think, a different area, we would look at our own resourcing to make sure that critical supplies and critical technologies could be sourced in the United States in the event of the re-emergence of a pandemic, so we weren't dependent on anyone else for them. And we would actually implement international cooperation and leadership, again, something that's been totally AWOL.

40:35: I just... Let me end with this. When we had past crises... Well, nothing's really been of this dimension, but when we had large global challenges in the past, the international... The United States, whether it was a Republican administration or a Democratic administration, took the lead in working to forge international cooperation and coordination. I'm thinking of HIV/AIDS and the extraordinary work that the Bush administration in that moment did, saving, I think, millions of lives. I'm thinking of the financial crisis in 2009, where American leadership and engagement, bringing countries together in a coordinated response to the economic crisis, I think significantly mitigated its downsides, as bad as it and allowed recovery more quickly. We've been totally AWOL internationally from dealing with COVID-19. That needs to change too. That also has to be part of the strategy.

41:30: I should note here that we were originally scheduled to end at 5:00, Tony has kindly agreed to stay on for a few extra minutes, so we'll go to about 5:10, if that's okay. So we have time for a few more questions. Ambassador McCarthy, and then Maxwell Bone.

[pause]

41:57: I think...

42:02: Hello.

42:03: I guess we're going for Maxwell Bone. Go for it.

42:04: Okay, hi, thank you, Mr. Blinken. A few days ago, you said that the Biden administration would oppose any efforts to single out Israel, be it at the UN, be it through BDS. I'm curious where you personally and where you think a President Biden would draw the line between criticism of Israel for things such as annexation of the West Bank, an increase in settlements, and where you would stand up against criticism that you may deem to be unjust of the State of Israel. Thank very much.

42:38: No, thank you, I appreciate it. Look, I think the Vice President starts from two propositions. One is that he resolutely supports the relationship between the United States and Israel and has what he would call an iron-clad commitment to Israel's security, a commitment, by the way, that's been there again through Republican and Democratic administrations. Israel has never been, until now, unfortunately, a partisan political issue, and I think it's very bad for the United States and for Israel that some would try to turn it into one. But the Vice President equally believes that the best way, maybe the only way to guarantee Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state, and to make sure that Palestinians have a state to which they're entitled, is through a two-state solution, as distant as that may appear.

43:37: And so for him, any unilateral action by either side that makes that already difficult prospect even more difficult is something he opposes and he's been very clear in his opposition to annexation, in his opposition to settlement expansion, precisely for that reason, as well as to his opposition to things that the Palestinian Authority does or doesn't do to make the chances for two states more distant than they are.

44:05: With regard to BDS and with regard to actions that he sees as unfairly singling out Israel, he opposes those too, but he also fundamentally respects the right of Americans to free speech, so people should be able to say what they believe, and he will say, if he disagrees, what he believes. He also believes that we should do our best to have our criticisms and conversations with our closest partners like Israel, between us, and see if we can get change and move things in a better direction that way. So that's how he'd approach it.

44:52: I think we have time for two more questions. So we will do Michael Colt and then Steven Keenan. Michael.

45:07: Okay. Am I on?

45:07: You're on.

45:08: Hi, Mike. I can hear you. Good to see you.

45:11: Hi. I haven't done... Okay, my video here, very briefly, thank you very much. This was an impressive tour de raison that you're giving us. Quickly back to strengthening alliances and dealing with Russia, the troop withdrawals from Germany. I wonder if you could say a few things about that and where you would stand on that issue and how the Vice President sees that move.

45:34: He's been very clear on this. I think he sees the announcement of these troop withdrawals as incredibly short-sighted, incredibly counterproductive, and in effect, instigated by President Trump's pique at Angela Merkel and at Germany, not the strategic interests of the United States. And it is going to undermine the NATO alliance, it's going to harm US-German relations, and it's a gift to Vladimir Putin. So I don't think we could be any clearer about that. Secretary Esper tried to do an ex post facto justification and put some strategic lipstick on the pig, but it's still what it is. And the President was very clear that moments after Secretary Esper tried to rationalize what was being done, the President came out and acknowledged, admitted that he did it because he believes Germany is not paying its dues to NATO, which as I think everyone in this audience knows, is a profoundly misguided statement, one the President's made repeatedly, so that's what this is about.

46:50: And ultimately, it just is part of a long continuum of actions that have undermined the alliance. And basically, the President tends to treat it as a protection racket. They pay or we don't stay. Never mind the profound interests that we have in being there in strengthening and sustaining the alliance. This is not a gift that we give to others, it's profoundly in our own self-interest. So one of the... To me, at least, most profound tragedies of the last few years has been the dissing of our allies and closest partners and the embrace of autocrats around the world. And it's particularly, Mike, acute at a time when democracy to some extent is in retreat.

47:49: We have a democratic deficit. Of the 40 or so countries that have been rated fully free for decades by Freedom House in the '80s, the '90s, the early 2000s, fully half are sliding back on various metrics of democracy. So this is the very moment when countries, democracies around the world are calling out or looking to the United States to be a leader of the free world. And at that very moment, by constantly embarrassing and insulting allies and embracing adversaries, honestly, President Trump seems to have suited up for the other team. I don't understand it, but it's weakened us dramatically and it's also taken the floor out of the perception of the United States in the world.

48:39: Look at the surveys that Pew does on a regular basis, others. Right now, the United States, in terms of who you trust, which leader you trust to conduct world affairs in a responsible manner, we are now on par with Xi Jinping in China and Vladimir Putin in Russia. And in terms of respect for leadership, that has dropped by 60, 70, 80 points among most of the world's democracies from where it was under President Obama to where it is now under President Trump. And that is a grievous problem for our own security, for our own prosperity and for our own values, and it needs to be corrected.

49:25: So one final audience question from Steven Keenan.

49:40: Thank you for a very great conversation. And once again, the Aspen Institute has shown itself to be truly bipartisan. But at this moment, I'm not. Tony, I wish you the best for getting sanity back into the White House. I don't think that we need to look at the 2016 elections for Russian involvement with President Trump's personal life, it goes way back. And he's clearly in Putin's pocket, in my opinion. Most likely, we have the first time ever in the history of the United States where a sitting president knows the minute that he's a private citizen, the Southern District of New York has an indictment waiting for him, and that's a pretty dangerous situation.

50:29: But my question to you, Tony, is, is that I just read recently... I'm in Colorado and we're one of six states that have done very successful mail-in balloting. But I'm not seeing anything from the Vice President Biden campaign, and I'm a big supporter of Susan Rice being his selection. Susan can patch up our international relations. President Biden can do what he's great where he's got empathy and heal the nation, our nation. But my question to you is that it seems to me looking at two congressional races in New York, and it's been a long time and the voting is not finished yet, don't you think that the campaign needs to be... Just as... You're not knocking on doors.

51:23: Jenn Ridder is an excellent selection to be doing your... That position, but you're not knocking on doors. Don't you think the cam... And I think that's a good idea. Don't you think that the campaign should be reaching out publicly, encouraging all the states to gear up for a massive amount of mail-in ballots. I like the idea that someone mentioned earlier in the forum that we know by 11 o'clock, election night, that we're going to have a sane president again. Thank you.

52:01: Tony, don't pass up the chance to tell us to the vice presidential choice will be.

52:05: Well, I don't know, and if I did know, I couldn't say. I can just say, generically, that Susan Rice, there is no one tougher of mind or warmer of heart than Susan. I worked for her for two years, she's a remarkable person. But I have no idea where this is going. The Vice President will make his decision on his time. And I know. Given the people who are in contention, it's going to be a good one.

52:36: But to your point, look, I couldn't agree more. And here is what I can tell you. Our campaign has the most comprehensive voter education and protection program of any campaign in modern history. We are spending more money, we're deploying more people than ever, including in 2008 or 2012 or 2016. With these very clear objectives, making sure the American people have the opportunity to vote. Whether it's by mail, whether it's early, whether it's day of. And I think you'll see increasing manifestations of that effort, including a very significant information campaign in the weeks ahead. The first vote is, I think, five or six weeks from now, as states begin early voting.

53:25: But you're right that there are incredibly unique pieces, to state the obvious, to this election. We already had a fragile election infrastructure, but that's been massively compounded by COVID-19. Normally, you would think that whoever the American president it is, he or she would be leading a national effort, working with governors, working with states, municipalities, localities, to ensure that we could have a safe and democratic election in November. That's what every past president would have done. That's what this president should be doing. And of course, that's not at all what is happening.

54:01: So there are significant efforts that are underway and that will again, I think, be more and more visible to register folks, to educate folks about how to vote. We have vote by mail that of course is endangered in part by the failure to replenish the Postal Service's budget. Democrats in Congress are fighting to make sure that happens. It's unbelievable to me that the American people would accept the gutting of the US Postal Service, it's one of their... Forget the election, even. It's one of the lifelines that we have in the midst of COVID-19.

54:37: We obviously have lots of interesting challenges, you're right, that these primaries have sort of put on full display. I mean, small examples. One is in some jurisdictions, a lack of scanners. So you get a huge influx of mail-in ballots that the locality is not prepared to deal with, because it doesn't have enough people. The way you normally would deal with it is to have a scanner so that you can pretty rapidly move through them. But if you don't have a scanner or you've only got one instead of five or six, then you've got to count everything by hand. And then if you don't have the people to do that, especially because COVID-19 has made it harder to attract seniors, who typically are folks who work the polls, you've got these problems that are feeding on problems.

55:19: Anyway, a long way of saying, I think, not just us, not just the Democratic Party, but a whole host of groups have identified these challenges, are putting resources to them. But this should be a national effort. Democrats and Republicans and independents should be working together to make sure the vote goes forward safely and democratically. And it boggles the mind that there is not a national effort being led by the president of the United States to make sure that happens.

55:49: Tony and Gerry, thank you for this illuminating conversation. Tony, I know you've got probably your 18th Zoom meeting of the day to go to. I just wanted to say, I thought it was so important that you started, one of the first points you made, you started with getting our own house in order, building America. And when you talked about US-China relations, it's not just what the Chinese doing, what are we going to do at home to strengthen ourselves to compete. To me, that's probably the most important national security issue right now, starting at home.

56:20: So thank you for explaining that, thank you for giving us a very good sense of what Vice President Joe Biden stands for in this campaign. And Gerry, thanks for being a great moderator. I hope everyone's going to buy Gerry's book, which comes out on August 25th. Thanks to you both.

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