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Foreign Policy Challenges For The Next Administration

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Susan Glasser:

Thank you so much Anja, and thank you to all of you for coming and sharing some of your time this afternoon with us. It's a dizzying possible landscape that we can talk about, but I think maybe we'll just go ahead and start with the big questions that have been burning us up since the election over the last few weeks. Steve, your right here next to me. We were talking beforehand. We both were having flashbacks to a panel very similar to this one that we did exactly eight years ago after the first election of Donald Trump, and no one really knew what to expect in terms of foreign policy or certainly in terms of transitions between administrations. You since then have gone on to publish a book called Handoff with your colleagues from the George W. Bush administration about what is it like to turn over things when we want continuity to a large extent in national security right now, continuity is not the word that anyone would have for what President Trump is promising to have starting on January 20th, but disruption the question for many people is what kind of disruption? And I'm curious if you could get us started today with your thoughts about the emerging national security approach and team of the new administration. And if continuity is not the word, what is the word that you are going to be looking for in January? Thank you.

Stephen Hadley:

Well, thank you very much. And it was eight years ago. Same thing all over again in some sense, but I think the question really is, let's start with the issue of transition. What kind of transition will we have? Initially there was some concern that the Trump administration really did not want to do anything of a sort of traditional transition nature that is, I think, clarified itself. They've entered into the appropriate agreements with the various government authorities. Most recently there will be a vetting process that the FBI and others, others will participate in. So I think you're seeing maybe a little belatedly emerging. The outlines of what will be a transition from one administration to another, how good a transition really depends on the outgoing president and the incoming president. And it was encouraging to see that they did have a meeting at the invitation of President Biden, president-elect Trump came, it lasted for over an hour.

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That's a good start. I think if there is going to be a positive transition, it is going to be because those two individuals send the word to their respective staffs that they want a good transition and that will then trickle down through the staff to the two organizations. The most important I think, element of that transition and Susan will have some views on this, is face-to-face conversations among the departing staff and the incoming staff I wrote edited with some others, a big book of the transition memos that we wrote from the Bush administration to the Obama administration. I'm not sure any of them were ever read. What really matters though is the personal tie and the conversations between incoming staff and outgoing staff and the things to be looking for. I think for the Trump people are what has changed since they were last in office and last in government, both in terms of the issues but also the institutions and structures that they will have available to them for managing those issues and start focusing particularly on that. And then secondly, what are the challenges that are going to hit the new administration in the face within the first sixty, ninety, a hundred twenty days? I think that should be the core of the transition and to establish personal relationships. So once the Trump team gets in office and is faced with crises, they know who to call to find out how the prior administration handled it and what kind of learning there is there. So I would hope that that's the kind of transition process we have this time and I think it would serve the country. Well,

Susan Glasser:

Susan, I know you want to get in on this. I guess the question I have is Donald Trump was in the previous administration, but many of the people that he's appointed, in fact were not in the previous administration because he didn't like in many cases and has fallen out with many of those who were his appointees in senior roles and seems to be taking a very different approach. I'm curious, what is your understanding of what kind of a transition you think we're going to be seeing right now?

Susan Rice:

Well, a little bit of history. Good afternoon everyone. I was National Security Advisor during the first transition from Obama to Trump, and I will say that that transition and the subsequent transition in 2020 were both failed transitions in any normal sense of the word. We in the Obama administration were the beneficiaries of a very thorough, very responsible, very generous transition from Bush to Obama. And that's what Steve has written about in his book, and I do hope some of those memos were read by my then NSE colleagues because I know how much work we put into writing extensive compilations of memos for the incoming Trump administration. President Obama said to us, even despite the shock and the uncertainty of the Trump election in 2016, that it was absolutely our mandate and it was imperative that we execute a transition to Trump of the caliber or greater than the one that President Bush handed off to President Obama, for which President Obama has always been grateful. And so we spent months prior to the election working on very, very detailed memos on everything from how do you staff an NSC? How do you budget, what are the issues? What are the dangerous scenarios that could arise in the early days? What should be expected in terms of the calendar for the first six months, I mean hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pages after Trump was elected and he had named General Flynn as his national security advisor designate, I called him, I asked to meet with him. I told him that I would spend as many hours or

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days between that day in November and January 20th as he needed to make this a successful transition. He was gracious. We eventually had four separate meetings over 12 hours, and we tried to give him as much preparation and substance as we possibly could. There were some meetings at the staff level.

His Deputy National Security advisor, KT McFarland, spent time with my deputy. The NSC part of the transition happened, but nothing happened to speak of in the agencies, and that's why I call it a failed transition. The cabinet secretaries had enormous difficulty even getting their phone calls answered by their counterparts who were incoming, and there may have been one or two meetings that occurred, but most of them did not happen. I mean, it was completely, there was zero interest and zero mandate from President-elect Trump to his incoming cabinet secretaries that they had a responsibility to meet with their counterparts. We ran what I think is now legally mandated tabletop exercise with the Obama cabinet and the Trump cabinet. We went through ironically scenarios about a cyber threat, cyber attack. We went through a pandemic scenario and it was like we were talking to zombies. There was no back and forth, there was no engagement.

They had just utter disregard and contempt for whatever knowledge or experience we might want to impart. They just thought that they didn't need it. Obviously 2020 was a failed transition because for the longest time there was no acknowledgement from the president that he was required to hand power to President Biden. So that happened very late in the game and was woefully inadequate. So fast forward to where we are now, and I think Susan, your point is a very good one. President-elect Trump has certainly had the experience of being in that office, but everybody else around him, almost everybody else of any consequence, has no executive branch experience, no executive branch experience. I'm trying to think who Mike Ratcliffe is the only one I can think of off the top of my head who has any, and that's extraordinary when you think about taking over these very substantial institutions and bureaucracies and with the myriad of national security challenges that are out there. And unless the mandate from President-elect Trump is dramatically different than it was in 2016, we're on track for another failed transition, which is already delayed. And the consequences of that I think are really potentially quite serious.

Susan Glasser:

Yeah, I want to get into sort of the world of threats that the new team, whatever it's we'll face. But I do want to ask Jane, given her long congressional experience and understanding of how much it matters to have a team in place, tell us what you think about the prospects for this team. We're all watching in recent days. Obviously the reports around the nominee for defense secretary, Pete Hegseth. Is there an appetite as far as you understand in the Republican Senate for possibly standing up to Trump on any of these nominations? Do you think that's unrealistic? Are we being distracted from the substantive changes that the team is looking for because we've been focused on the array of personal scandals that his nominees have had?

Jane Harman:

Well, first of all, let me express my undying affection and admiration for the panel. I mean, these are my dear friends, in case you missed it. Second of all, I am a trustee of the Aspen Institute and very proud to be one and have been one for a while. My late husband, Sidney Harmon was

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one before me and it is a great institution and it's great that you showed up. Third point, as Anya knows, I call myself the grandmother of the Aspen Security Forum. I was here before it was here, and it has morphed into this gigantic thing thanks to its women, female leadership, Anya Neve and the team. And Leah, I don't know where she is. Oh, and everybody's here. Hello, hello. But forth. As a point of personal privilege, Joe Nye is not here because his late wife, his wife Molly, died this week. And for those oldies in the room who love Joe, this is a huge tragedy for him and she's a gigantic loss. And I just wanted to express on it privately, but my condolences to Joe and my fond memories of Molly, now that I made myself cry, you asked me about the Senate. Can I cry again?

Susan Glasser:

Oh, I'm sure you're not going to cry about that.

Jane Harman:

Well, in case anybody missed it, I served in the house for nine terms. I left during my ninth term, which was in 2011 because I really felt that the partisanship was ruining the place surprise and went to head the Wilson Center for a decade where bipartisanship is prized. I worry about what will happen. I think the Senate in particular is on trial right now, and if it flunks and there's lots of pressure from some in the Trump world to make it irrelevant, if it flunks, it will be irrelevant. And if the Senate loses its advice and consent power, its budget making power and its ability to decide whether or not this country is going to war, I'm not sure what its function is and it's really, really worrying me. I can think of a few events along the way that were tragedies. I mean, I'll say it, Mitch McConnell's, despite his personal feelings, failing to vote his conscience when the impeachment of Donald Trump was before the Senate has made an enormous difference in our country.

And Donald Trump was fair and freely elected for a second term. So I ever, the optimist want this administration to succeed. But I think there have been some profiles in lack of courage in the Senate in recent years. That's the way I would put it. What will the Senate do now? I think that a number of senators I've had conversations with a few know that they're on trial and know how important it is for them to step up. Will they step up? What are the consequences for not stepping up short term? Stepping up will have huge negative consequences, but longer term, if they want to get reelected, if they want to have a legacy, it's possibly the other call. And what am I talking about? I'm not talking about tanking the leader of their party who was just fairly and freely elected president. I'm talking about standing up and doing their jobs.

That's what I'm talking about, which senators used to do all the time. And there are lots of profiles encouraged in the Senate in both parties in history and lots of bipartisan collaborations in the Senate in history. And sadly not now, but so I think the immediate tests, here's one. This is even before confirming the nominees, the budget. Did anyone notice that the fiscal year started October 1st? This is not October 1st. A crucial bill to pass is the National Defense Authorization Act. It's always the crucial bill, I'm sure you're going to ask me later about this Commission on National Defense Strategy, but funding defense and funding not just past defense projects, but future defense projects is crucial. What are we doing about the pending budget? Nothing. We're passing another continuing resolution until March. That's what I was told by a senator a day ago. I don't think that's official yet.

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Good luck with that. So that's the first test. Next test is going to be advise and consent on nominees. And I surely hope that there will be agreement on vetting of nominees by some appropriate transparent FBI process. I can understand some people saying whatever they want to say about the FBI, but there are many competent civil servants in the FBI who know their jobs and should do their jobs and then votes on whether these people should serve or not. And some of the nominees to me seem fine. I don't have to vote on them. They seem fine. Several of them seem terrifying. So we'll see where this ends up. And the Secretary of Defense nominees, so I hear on the public airwaves is in big trouble and he may be replaced by somebody else sometime soon and we'll see if that person seems to be, I would say it a more appropriate candidate for the job.

Susan Glasser:

Thank you. Jane. Kiki, I want to bring you in on this to talk about how the world has changed since the last Trump administration. I do think that the national security picture, if anything, has gotten much more complicated for the new administration. You have ongoing conflicts including one that the incoming president has promised to end in 24 hours. That's going to be a busy 24 hours. I'm not sure anyone expects that to be taken literally. But tell us a little bit about how you see the world of national threats changing and whether in your assessment world leaders are going to approach Donald Trump differently this time than they did eight years ago. What have they learned about our incoming president?

Keoki Jackson:

Well, first of all, thank you Susan. There's a lot there. So maybe I'll just start and welcome everyone and thank you to the Aspen Institute and my fellow panelists here. I am the token engineer here. And I'll just note that as an engineer, we tend to think about things like the laws of physics, which I anticipate will continue through the transition, but also

Susan Glasser:

This is stability that we're looking for

Keoki Jackson:

Indeed. And maybe that's a low bar, but nevertheless, but also things like initial conditions and boundary conditions that are very important as you're trying to think about building a bridge or maybe in this administration or rocket ship to the future. And I really appreciate what Steven noted there around what has changed and also what has changed in the structure. I think those are really important considerations. A couple of things, and I'm not going to get into whether it's the war in Ukraine, I think that we're all very aware of what's going on in the world, but I think it is important, and again, coming from my engineering viewpoint, that we have a very clear-eyed view of what is going on and not just a clear-eyed view, but the ability to communicate that very clearly to the American public and to our allies and partners as well.

And so I think that means, I'll give one example. We need to very clearly communicate what the people's Republic of China means in today's day and age and what has changed. I see Mike Tuman, my colleague is here in the audience, and he has made a very strong case that we are effectively seal a silent invasion. And we say silent because we are not calling out things like

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what I'd call the or he has called the fiction of Hollywood, for example, the failure to call out regularly, some of the attacks on our and prepositioning of attacks in our critical infrastructure. So those are the kinds of things where we need to be very clear-eyed about what is going on in the world. And I'll just add, we also need to be very thoughtful about what else we need to bring into our toolkits. And I will add, maybe just wrap up here, I think that as we think about national security and using all levers of national power, we really need to think about how we're going to use everything in the economic, the diplomatic, the informational regimes as well.

Susan Glasser:

Susan mentioned that tabletop exercise at the beginning of the first Trump administration between the two and that the A pandemic possibility was raised. We all remember there was various scenarios that were briefed. I recall doing an interview with one of your colleagues, Susan, who told me that that was Lisa Mon, who had been the Homeland Security advisor to President Obama saying that was the big thing that she was worried about in that 2017 transition period and wanted to communicate not really on the horizon for the Trump people. And so I guess that's my question as Steve, I'll start with you. What are the things that you see as sort of perhaps the known unknowns here? What are you worrying about that maybe isn't in the top of the headlines, but that the Trump people could be dealing with sometime in the next year in a much more serious way?

Stephen Hadley:

Well, what's happening out there is the traditional international order that we have had since the end of World War II and survived and prevailed in some sense in the Cold War is fraying. It is under attack from Russia, from China, from those that would like to reorder it in a way that favors their interest and favors their values as opposed to the rather democratic basis that the international Order now reflects. When you have this kind of transition or disruption in the international system, a lot starts to unravel. So we've got the challenges. People already know about Russia, Ukraine, what's going on in the Middle East, concern over what China is doing in the region, Taiwan and the like. But there are other things going on that I think are going to confront the new administration, and I think they're going to have a problem that all administrations have the demands for the urgent, the fire drills are going to take up their time and prevent them from pursuing a more longer range agenda.

And what am I talking about? Well, you look at what's happening in Venezuela, for example. This is going to be a challenge for the new administration. To what extent they're going to continue to try to pressure Maduro to reflect the will of the Venezuelan people, which was that he go and be replaced. You have disruption in Pakistan, which people don't pay too much attention to, but a real constitutional crisis in Pakistan. I think Iran is going to be very interesting. There's a succession going on to a new supreme leader, a regime that has really quite brittle, that has been administered a number of setbacks by Israel, which have been helped undermine that regime. And I think in a useful way, there's a question of what is the new policy of the administration for Iran and are we looking at a transition there and what should be our status and approach to that transition?

So I think the number of issues that this new team is going to have facing them in the first six to nine months is really pretty overwhelming. And it is true, Susan said that the nominees for

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cabinet positions are not experienced in government. Hopefully they will bring in under them to work with them and for them, group of people who have been experienced, if you looked at the deputy secretary announcements that have been made, some of these do have experience in prior administrations, prior Trump administration for example. And I think that will be useful for the new administration to have people with that kind of experience.

Susan Glasser:

Susan, I'd love to get your answer to the sort of what's on the horizon. And just another question to throw out there as part of that is Keoki mentioned China, obviously that's top of mind for anyone in the national security space right now. There was to a certain extent, some surprise at the idea that Biden continued some of the policies that the Trump administration had put in place with regards to China. Obviously a very different approach to diplomacy, a different approach to working with partners. But at the same time, this is not the world of 2008 when Barack Obama came to office as far as Washington's view of the threat posed by China. So I'm just curious also if you could speak to that. Do you see is this going to be a confrontational moment in a way that changes the game, or are we going to see more of what we have been seeing?

Susan Rice:

Well, let me try to build on the question you asked Steve in the first instance, and I agree with everything that Steve said. I would put a couple other potential wild cards on the horizon, not to beat the pandemic drum yet again, but in 2016 we had no early warning signs. We had just been through earlier in the Bush administration, the first bout of H five N one, we'd seen Mers, we'd seen Ebola, we'd seen Zika. And so the whole concept of global pandemic was fresh. And that's why we left the incoming Trump administration, literally a pandemic playbook, not just a tabletop exercise, but a how to approach this kind of problem. Right now we are seeing early signs of another potential H five N one challenge in now based in our cattle herds. If that were to morph and jump, we could have something that is potentially serious covid, as bad as it was, really had quite a low mortality rate.

The danger of a pandemic flu, if it really were to be one that is easily transmissible from human to human is that the mortality rates can approach 50%. So that's a whole different ball game. And it is bad enough when you have people who actually are trying to prevent a pandemic. I had hate to see what a pandemic would look like with Robert F. Kennedy as held in human services secretary among the other collection of health officials that have been designated. So that's one thing. Another thing I would look out over the horizon and begin to have some heartburn about as a potential challenge is what may be the beginnings of efforts to roll back and democratic institutions in countries that we think of as reliable democracies. We just saw what happened in South Korea. Thankfully that seems to have been thwarted, but we're seeing Israel on a slow roll in an autocratic direction.

We are seeing very uncertain developments in some of our European partners. And then again, we don't know what's going to happen here. I think we've seen democratic back sliding in many other parts of the world, but not sort of in the core cohort of strongly established democracies to date. And I hope that that is a misplaced fear, but I'm not sure to come to China, I think a lot has changed with respect to how China is behaving, how Xi Jinping has organized his and

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entrenched his leadership. China is not, as you said, not what it was in 2008 or even in 2016. And I think the response from the United States has been substantially bipartisan. And there are differences of degree and emphasis. The tools may not be identical. The biggest distinction is that the Biden administration has approached the competition with China through the effort to strengthen our alliances and partnerships in the Asia Pacific, the Indo-Pacific, as well as in Europe, and to knit them together in a way so that there's a strong western oriented, unified, more unified approach to China. And what we've seen in terms of improved relations, for example, between Korea and Japan, very important element there, Aus and a number of other pillars in that framework.

In the first Trump administration, there was a pretty transactional, some might say, dismissive approach to alliances in the Asia Pacific as well as in Europe. That is going to undermine our ability to be effective in this increasingly intensified competition with China. So I do think that China will be a big challenge for any future administration, but we need to recognize that it's not just China, it's China with Russia, China with Iran and Russia and North Korea in the sort of axis of authoritarianism. And we can't effectively manage the competition with China while handing Ukraine on a silver platter to Russia. Well,

Susan Glasser:

Those are lots of scenarios that I'm sure everyone here does not want to come to pass. Susan Jane, we're talking about what we need to manage such an array of threats that are converging in some ways. You look at the partnership between Russia and China, North Korea right now, this is very different even than what the situation was just four years ago. The conflict in Ukraine has been an accelerant to the integration of those American adversaries. Tell us, Jane, you just did this work on a national commission to look at exactly these questions. Steve, here is the publicist for it. Steve is my publicist.

Jane Harman:

He brought a prop.

Susan Glasser:

Yeah, we're all the unpaid publicist for this. But Jane, I do think it's very relevant to all of the issues that Susan just raised. Tell us, is it possible to have a long-term national defense strategy right now when we have so many internal conflicts and zigs and Zs?

Jane Harman:

Well, I don't know if it's possible, but it's essential. Let me add one thing to the China conversation first, and that is that a longtime friend and leader at Aspen, Nick Burns is our incredibly capable ambassador to China and has been there this whole term of Biden and just does amazing work. He's finally coming home. He better come home next month and he is resigning after 400 years in the foreign service. He's resigning the foreign service. And I mean, we all love Nick Burns, so he should be here if he's watching. Nick, we love you on this. Where's the prop, Steve? Bring that back. That is important. This is must reading for all of you. You going to read the first paragraph? What does it say? Oh, Steve, I do what Steve says.

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Susan Glasser:

I believe that's a whole separate event, Jane, the dramatic reading of the

Jane Harman:

Well. That's right. The threats the United States faces are the most serious and most challenging the nation I can't see this has encountered since 1945 and include the potential for near term major war. Yeah, that was a good sentence to read. This report was commissioned by Congress and eight of us were on it, four Democrats, four Republicans. I was lucky to chair it. Eric Edelman, whom most of you probably know, former ambassador, former senior official at state and defense was the vice chair. And lots of people you've heard of like Jack Keen who's on Fox News all the time that ought to resonate and others were there. And this is bipartisan and unanimous. And why this is relevant to your question, Susan, is the current national defense strategy, which we were critiquing, not trying to repudiate, but critiquing was issued in 2022 just before Russia's invasion of Ukraine and certainly ahead of the meltdown in the Israel and Gaza and in the larger Middle East.

And by the way, we should add Syria to the list of things that have emerged lately, the challenges to the regime there. But at any rate, it says the National Defense Strategy says China is the pacing challenge. Russia is an active challenge and we should manage risk around the world, right? We disagree, we respectfully disagree. We think China is the pacing challenge. But these other challenges, not just from this unholy alliance of four, but from places we haven't thought about yet, and from the disintegration sadly, of the non-proliferation regime and a variety of other things is huge. And what I worry about is that this administration has an agenda and we all know what it is. We don't have to recite it again, but if we are deploying some of our defense resources at the border or around deportation, and if we have, depends on the experience level of various people, et cetera, and we're focused elsewhere and a major calamity happens in the world, are we going to be prepared?

Not just is this administration going to be prepared? I surely hope so. Is this Congress going to be prepared? Keep praying, but are the American people going to be prepared? And one of our points is that the American people are under prepared for the challenges we might face. And this is crucial because public support is necessary, not just in terms of personal sacrifice and financial sacrifice, but in terms of making sure that US leadership gets the underpinning it needs to be successful. And a variety of things have happened on Biden's watch. I'm not blaming Donald Trump for something that hasn't happened yet. I am saying that in this administration, if I could have redone some of it, I would not have left Afghanistan as we did. And I think that that made a huge dent in the US' ability to provide the kind of leadership we needed to provide, not changing our policy, which I was for, but the way we left Afghanistan. And I surely pray that that doesn't happen in Ukraine. I think that would be a calamitous double whammy.

Susan Glasser:

Koke, I know they're going to give us the hook soon, but I want to give you the last word on both of these questions. First of all, you were nodding your head, so I want to hear what you have to say on this question of, as somebody who's been deeply immersed in your previous role at Lockheed as well in long-term, thinking about what we need for our national security, I am curious if you have anything to say about what the sharp partisan division in our own country

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has meant in terms of the ability to plan long-term. And then do you have any sort of thoughts for us in terms of short term to medium term threats that perhaps aren't getting the attention right now that they ought to?

Keoki Jackson:

Well, let me talk first about where I think the partisanship has landed us, and Jane really alluded to this on the budget, certainly on the national security front, the ability to not have budgets on time and consistently is dramatically weakening our ability to plan, to procure, to prepare and to operate in the way that we need an extremely dangerous world. And that's been well articulated by all of our panelists. I will say. And I think Susan talked about wildcard, Steven talked about distractions, Jane talked about calamities. These are all going to happen. So we almost need to take a step back and say, what are the things that we must do? Recognizing that, and I'm sort of simplistic here, I'd put it in the sense of we need more greater deterrence, we need better, and this is including greater technology and asymmetric capabilities. We need it better integrated. And that is particularly important as you asked about the near term, because if we fight in the next couple of years, we will fight with what we have today. And so that means integrating what we have, including with our allies and partners much more effectively to take advantage of the capabilities that are already in our hands. We need it sooner. And so if nothing else, I hope that we see this sense of urgency maintained in the coming administration. And then finally, and I'll note on perhaps a note of optimism here, I do believe that the us, in spite of erosion in our lead, we are still leading in the critical technology areas of the future. And we have a very vibrant ecosystem to continue developing those. And you think about things like ai, quantum, quantum computing, for example. These are the things that are going to confer enduring advantage because they will allow us to accelerate our pace of generation and adoption of new technology. And so we should continue in the short term to double down on maintaining and even increasing our lead in these key areas.

Susan Glasser:

Alright, well I think that's it for our first panel. I could hear them much longer, but I want to thank everyone. This has been a terrific opening conversation. Thank you.