



MAY: General H.R. McMaster is a soldier and a scholar, and these days a commentator, one might even say a pundit. His recent essay for *National Review* is titled “Preserving the Warrior Ethos”, a contrarian theme in an age where the dominant culture valorizes victims and too many political leaders failed to grasp the nexus between military strength and diplomatic effectiveness. He’s here to discuss that and other subjects with me and Bradley Bowman, senior director of FDD’s Center on Military and Political Power, which General McMaster chairs. In addition, he serves as the Fouad and Michelle Ajami Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution. I’m Cliff May, and I’m glad you’re with us too, here on *Foreign Podicy*.

So General, listen, I didn’t mention all your credentials and all your affiliations. The list is too long and life is too short, but I do want to give you a quick plug for your podcast. If people don’t know it’s called *GoodFellows*, which might suggest you have conversations with Robert De Niro and Ray Liotta and Joe Pesci, but actually it’s with Niall Ferguson and John Cochrane. These are always stimulating discussions. I learn a lot from them, so I just want to suggest people listen to *Foreign Podicy* on their way to the grocery store or the shooting range or Pilates class or whatever and listen to *GoodFellows* on the way home because it’s always a fascinating discussion.

MCMMASTER: Hey, thanks Cliff. And thanks for the great clarity that you and Brad and FDD bring to the most important challenges and opportunities we’re facing internationally. I mean, you really do a tremendous job. I’ll admit that I listen to your podcast when I turn down the volume for the instructors on my Peloton is what I do. I listen to you instead, Cliff, you and Brad.

MAY: By the way, I just have to say, I can imagine Marty Scorsese casting you in *Goodfellas*. You’ve got a good look. You’d have to work on your accent because you you’d need a New Jersey or a New York accent. Actually, if you think about Anthony Fauci, you could just cast him the way he is with his accent because he would say things like, “How am I funny? You think science is here to amuse you?” Anyway, I digress, but I like it.

Let’s start with the warrior ethos. I’m curious, what inspired you to write that essay now?

MCMMASTER: Well, I’ll tell you, Cliff, I think that every few years we return to false assumptions about the nature of war. I see it happening again. In a previous essay I called it the vampire fallacy because you just can’t kill it. It comes back about every decade. Really lately, it’s really strategic bombing theory in a new guise. The next war will be fast, cheap, efficient, and waged at standoff range. Now, of course, because of the range of technology associated with artificial intelligence, really the next war will be in the realm of certainty rather than uncertainty. It’s going to be waged in cyberspace rather than physical space or a combination of both, which is really what’s going to happen I think. We create this kind of pipe dream of the next war really being fundamentally different from all those that have gone before it.

Of course, a lot of the assumptions associated with future war these days involves that we need a much different force, really. A force that doesn’t really adhere to the warrior ethos, which is an ethos based on values and principles, associated with courage, toughness, and the willingness to sacrifice. I think that we don’t hear that enough anymore. We tend now to hear about how America’s warriors are cast as victims, right? As those who don’t have authorship over their future. I think all this is wrong, but it’s also even more than wrong. It’s dangerous because I think we could have an impact on the military’s culture that creates vulnerabilities in the force.

I think this is also associated with an assault, I think, on military culture, from these reified philosophies such as critical race theory and post-colonial theories. I try to describe these threats to the warrior ethos in the essay, describe why it’s important and then what we have to do to preserve it.



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MAY: It occurs to me, Brad, you may want to talk about this because you edited a very good monograph that, of course, General McMaster contributed to that made the point that you have to—let me put it this way. You hear the phrase all the time, “well there’s no military solution.” Well, that’s right and it’s wrong. There may be no purely military solution, but there’s often no diplomatic solution without a military component behind it and a threat of military force.

Again, if it’s one thing, if you’re talking to Canada about an argument over lumber, but it’s very different when you’re talking Xi Jinping, or you’re talking to Vladimir Putin or Khamenei. They do not want to come to a compromised settlement. If they feel no threat, then your diplomats are essentially impotent. And I think we’ve seen this in numerous negotiations, of course, not least with the negotiations with the Taliban where they understood what we wanted was to leave Afghanistan. What they wanted was for us to leave Afghanistan. So how do they do that in a way that’s most beneficial to them and least beneficial to us? Go ahead, Brad.

BOWMAN: Cliff, I think you said it well. And General McMaster I think has written about this more eloquently than anyone during the 20 year war in Afghanistan. We heard many American leaders, even military leaders, say there’s no military solution. This seems to be a reflexive phrase that we hear particularly from Americans. Yet the Taliban and their al-Qaeda partners seem to have found a military solution. We even sometimes hear the Secretary of Defense — at the Manama Dialogue recently — talk about how the military is only part of the solution or that the focus for the Department of Defense is diplomacy.

My goodness, I would argue that the focus of the Department of Defense should be fighting, and winning wars and that diplomacy should be led by the State Department. So there’s this rhetoric that you might want to just kind of brush aside that’s just rhetoric, but I really think it speaks to something deeper that goes to the heart of what General McMaster’s writing about in this article. That we need warriors and we need to have a healthy warrior ethos. And this is not just a job for West Point or a few military officers, this is a job for our nation.

MAY: You write, H.R., in this essay, the lost war in Afghanistan and I think you’re right to call it a lost war. The lost war in Afghanistan evokes memories of the lost war in Vietnam. You might want to elaborate on that because you also wrote the book on the lost war in Vietnam.

MCMMASTER: Yeah, I’ll tell you Cliff, I think that one of the dangers associated with the lost war in Afghanistan, a war that was lost because of self-delusion that led to self-defeat. And essentially, it pains me to say this Cliff, but surrender to a terrorist organization is what occurred in Afghanistan. I think the danger is that we’ll learn the wrong lessons. I do believe we learned the wrong lessons from Vietnam.

There’s a great short essay by Conrad Crane, my old colleague in the history department at West Point who wrote an essay called “Avoiding Vietnam.” He essentially said that after Vietnam, we said, “Okay, we’re just never going to do that again.” That meant really fighting a counter insurgency against a determined enemy that required not only military victories on the battlefield, but the consolidation of gains to get to a sustainable political outcome. That’s what was required in Vietnam. What that really demanded was the integration of what we’re doing militarily in Vietnam with what we’re trying to achieve politically. But our efforts there were disconnected, right? The political and military efforts.

Our military and political efforts in Afghanistan were also disconnected. I mean, Cliff and Brad, how the hell does it work? You say to your enemy, “Hey, we’re leaving. Here’s the timeline for our withdrawal. We’re no longer going to target you as an enemy, and we want to negotiate a favorable settlement on our way out.” And so, what we failed to do,



Cliff and Brad, I think, is recognize continuities in the nature of war and to actually use those continuities as a test to see if we have an adequate policy and strategy in place.

War's an extension of politics. Well, of course, everybody knows that. I mean, that's like the Geico commercial, right? Clausewitz said that. But what that means is if you don't have a plan to get to a political outcome, and if you're not using military force to support your diplomatic efforts, then you're not recognizing that continuity. War is human. People fight for the same reasons Thucydides identified 2,500 years ago: fear, honor, and interest.

Now, what do you hear these days? Oh, our relationship with Afghanistan is entering a new diplomatic phase. Diplomatic phase with who? Hibatullah Akhundzada, who encouraged his teenage son to commit mass murder by suicide, right? We don't even consider the ideology and emotions that drive and constrain our adversary, and then the war's uncertain. The future course of events in war depends on what the enemy decides to do as well as our plans. But instead we assumed linear progress, and announced years in advance. Exactly the number of troops we're going to have on the ground, what they're going to do, and what they're not going to do.

And then finally war's a contest of wills. I think across three administrations our leaders failed to describe to the American people what was necessary to sustain our will, which is hey what is at stake in Afghanistan? And then what is a strategy that will deliver a favorable outcome at an acceptable cost? I think the neglect of these continuities was evident in Vietnam and it was evident in Afghanistan as well.

MAY: In your essay you talk about what defeat means. I think most people don't understand it. Tell me if I'm going too far here, but if you define defeat as the enemy no longer having the capability to accomplish his objectives, well by that definition one could say that the U.S. was defeating the Taliban. Not had defeated, but was defeating because the Taliban's objective was to take over the entire country, to take not just the countryside, which is where they were, but also to take the urban areas. When Biden came into office, the Taliban held no cities, no provincial capitals whatsoever. So in that sense, we were defeating the enemy. It's just that it can't be put in the past tense. It requires determinations and patience to keep the Taliban defeated.

Rather than saying, "Okay, we're doing fine. We're not doing brilliantly here. There's things we'd like to be doing better. We'd like the Afghans to do more." Although we're doing probably more than most people understand and doing better than people understand. But this is a reasonable outcome, the Taliban's not able to accomplish their objectives, but that was never explored or explained to people as that's why we have a small force there as well as a small European force. And that's what's going to take. It's substantially less than, for example, we've had in South Korea for the past 70 years. We've got 28,000 troops, so fewer troops than we have in Germany or in other parts of the world. That's maybe what it takes given the kinds of enemies we have now, which are not tank divisions coming across the plains of Europe.

MCMMASTER: Absolutely. This is, again, Clausewitz said that winning in war requires convincing your enemy that your enemy's been defeated. In this case it meant convincing the Taliban and their jihadist terrorist sponsors and their Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence sponsors that they couldn't accomplish their objectives through the use of force.

Of course, we did the opposite, right? We bolstered their confidence by giving them these timelines. And then for a brief period when President Trump put into place the South Asian strategy in 2017, I think the Taliban and the Pakistanis, I know both of them said, "Okay, hey, now we got to change our approach because the Americans said they're not going to leave on a timeline. They are targeting us actively." We made the Taliban, again, a designated enemy, which is crazy that they weren't because they were killing our soldiers and committing mass murder of Afghans on a daily basis.



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But then later the endless war crowd, their voice won out over Trump at least and he sends out Khalilzad to surrender to the Taliban, which is exactly what he did. There's no other explanation for what he did. In fact, not only did we surrender and withdraw, but we actually took actions that strengthened the Taliban and bolstered their will on our way out. First, not insisting that the Afghan government be a party to the negotiations. What effect did that have? That emboldened the Taliban and weakened the Afghan government.

After we negotiated with the Taliban, they talked to the Afghans, they said, "Hey, what are we talking to you for? We just defeated the world's only superpower. Why would we talk to you?" Then we forced them to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners. Some of the most heinous people on earth. We engaged in a ceasefire with them while they were continuing their mass murder attacks against the Afghan people, bombing girls' schools, assaulting a maternity hospital and gunning down infants and expectant mothers, Cliff. And then we didn't do a thing about it. We just stood by. They're not attacking us.

I think we did everything we could to encourage them, but also, we delivered a series of psychological blows to the Afghans from which they couldn't recover. And again, this goes back to a continuity of the nature of war, right? I mean, war is a contest of wills, and we did everything it seemed diplomatically and militarily to bolster the enemy and to undercut the will of our allies who had actually – Afghans, nearly 70,000 of them gave their lives fighting on a modern-day frontier between barbarism and civilization. We abandoned them at the end and it's shameful. It really is shameful.

MAY: You mentioned a concept that I wanted to talk a little bit more about. Brad, you might want to start on this, but I'd like to hear both of you, and that's this concept of the endless war or forever war, which is being used both on the right and the left. It strikes me, and I want your thoughts on this, that it's a really bogus concept because the notion that wars should last about five years and end in a ticker tape parade, you can only believe that if you know nothing about history where wars have lasted often for centuries.

Now, they may be more intense at various points and less intense, but that's what happens. In fact, we don't get to decide how long wars last. Our enemies will. The jihad against the West has been going on really, for 1,400 years. China has what's called a 100-year marathon, which will entail at various times conflict and at various times, it'll operate in other ways. It'll prepare for conflict, as I think the Chinese are now doing by establishing ports that can serve military purposes almost everywhere in Africa, on the Atlantic, throughout South America, other places.

This is a serious misconception that a lot of people have, because it's being propagated again by people, and not least think tanks, Brad, on both the left and the right.

BOWMAN: Cliff, I think you're right. You and I wrote about this in the December 2020 chapter in "Defending Forward" about how, and General McMaster knows this better than anyone based on his study of history, that warfare is the norm, sadly. Sadly, warfare is the norm and peace is the anomaly, and it's easy to destroy and hard to build.

So, when you have something like we have in the United States where we're arguably enjoying an unprecedented combination of peace, security, and prosperity, we take that for granted foolishly at our own peril. We have something here worth defending, and we should say so. And to me, this goes back to the warrior ethos. If we're going to ask our sons and daughters, husbands and wives to deploy into danger and stand between us and those who want to kill us, we have to speak the truth.



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The truth is that what they're doing is noble and what we have is worth defending. Those who suggest that we can just end wars like we did in Iraq in 2011, by withdrawing, or as we did in 2021, a decade later in Afghanistan, we can just end them by withdrawing, they don't understand history the way General McMaster does. They don't understand our adversaries. Our colleague at FDD, Aaron McLean, published a piece a day or two ago in *The Wall Street Journal* where he talked about our failure to understand our adversaries.

We have this kind of arrogance and as General McMaster wrote about in *Battlegrounds*, a strategic narcissism, where we think everything is in response to us. Like, "Well, Putin's doing something bad in and around Ukraine, so therefore, it's the expansion of NATO. It's got to be the expansion of NATO," or, "If we just withdraw from Afghanistan, they won't hurt us." Or, "The Chinese, if we just establish a few more Confucian Institutes, maybe in our universities and allow them to propagandize our young, maybe they'll like us more."

There are actually just evil people in the world. There are authoritarian thugs who only respect power. They're going to do what they're going to do. The question is how you respond. I think beginning with the truth is a good place to start.

MCMASTER: Yeah. I'll tell you, Brad, I really agree. And our colleagues at FDD, Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, they've done a great job with this as well. They point out – I think their phrase was that, "it's not an endless war, it's our enemies waging an endless jihad against us."

Those who propagate and promote the endless war narrative, they say, "Well, we need a more modest foreign policy," but their position is actually quite arrogant because as you pointed out, they're assuming that our enemies or adversaries have really no aspirations except those that are in reaction to what we do. Well, actually, Vladimir Putin does have an agenda of his own, to restore Russia to national greatness, to get over what he perceives as the humiliation or the honor lost during the breakup of the Soviet Union and the associated drive to establish Novorossiia.

So, we have to recognize that our enemies, our adversaries are driven by emotions and aspirations and ideologies that go beyond those that are in reaction to us. I'm reminded, there's a great book actually, by Christopher Coker called *Can War Be Eliminated?* To give you the *CliffsNotes* version, no pun intended Cliff, the answer is no. Okay, in the book, but it's a really great long essay book on the idea that, hey, sometimes wars choose you rather than the other way around.

In the book, he quotes G.K. Chesterton who I highly recommend. I mean, his collection of essays in defense of sanity I think is much needed, or much needed these days. But Chesterton said, "War may not be the best way of settling differences, but it's the only way to ensure they're not settled for you," or oftentimes, it is. So I think that it is really an arrogant phrase, this endless war, assuming that wars end when one side disengages.

And what's so sad about this is this story especially, I'm like, what the heck was I doing studying the history? Because nobody pays attention to it anymore. I mean, we should've learned this from the complete withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011. I think it was 2011, yeah. December 2011. Lloyd Austin was there and knows better because we declared the endless war over.

Of course, three years later, ISIS is in control of territory the size of Britain and became the most destructive terrorist organization in history and compelled us to go back. So, wars don't end when one side disengages.



MAY: A couple other points in your essay that I wanted to bring out, and you touched on them, but I wanted to talk a little more. One is that foreign propaganda is intended to demoralize troops, political leaders, others, but we now have some pretty powerful domestic propaganda that appears to be aimed at achieving the same goal. I'm talking about the narratives really of the woke ideology, and you mentioned I think briefly, *The 1619 Project*. What they convey is the message that America is simply not a country worth fighting for and never has been.

If you're a young man or a young woman, do you think going into the military to defend a country if you by the narrative, which I think is an entirely false narrative, we can talk about that, that you see in *The 1619 Project*, that *The New York Times* where I used to work put out, which won a Pulitzer Prize and is now being pushed into our public schools around the country when they're open which is not very much of the time.

MCMMASTER: It's being pushed over Zoom as well, I'm sure. You're exactly right. I mean, what if young Americans decide their country's not worth defending, because they've been told that every problem that we face is structural and institutional and that our country was founded to preserve slavery rather than founded really, to gain independence primarily, but founded also on principles that ultimately made that horrible institution unsustainable. That's the true narrative.

Not that we should ask students to conform to a contrived happy view of our history, but this curriculum of self-loathing that was prevalent in the university, that has its ties back to deconstructionist philosophies of Foucault and Derrida. And then manifested itself in post-colonial theory, in which really all of the ills of the world prior to 1945 were due to colonialism and all the ills of the world after '45 were due to capitalist imperialism.

This is the kind of thinking that is foundational, that was foundational to Marxism and to fascism. These deterministic theories in which you teach people they have no agency, except if they come together to tear it all down. So what I worry about is not only this orthodoxy of self-loathing and the diminished will to maybe defend our freedoms that we all enjoy. But also that what does this leave you with? If you're taught that you have no agency, you're left with a combination of anger and resignation, and we're telling the young people, "Hey, you can't build a better future. You can't work together."

Then of course, what these elements of critical race theory also teach young people is that they are defined by their identity category rather than by the content of their character, as Martin Luther King said we ought to be. He dreamt that his children would be defined. It also then teaches young people you can't empathize with others. You can't put yourself in other people's shoes. You should categorize yourself on a strata of relative victimhood, unless you're cast in the role of an oppressor.

What happens is this leaves people angry and resigned, and I think it creates an equal and opposite reaction in terms of other forms of bigotry and racism, because this is in itself racist. You see this interaction on extremes between white supremacy and various forms of bigotry and racism with this nonsense of critical race theory. It creates centripetal forces that are pulling us apart.

And if it infects our military, and this is what I wrote about in this essay, is the way it has infected academia, I mean, I think it'd be an utter disaster. I mean, just look at what occurs on college campuses. I mean, are these places where these days people can come together for meaningful, respectful, tolerant discussions about the challenges we face?



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It's not. People want to cancel each other right away. They're intolerant of views. I think there's a backlash starting against all this. I welcome it. I think what we ought tell our young people is, "Hey, apparently our generation screwed this up, Cliff and Brad, now you've got to sort it out. If anybody tells you that you have to adhere to a certain orthodoxy, you ought to be deeply skeptical of that and read alternative perspectives." I think it's our younger generation that can save us from ourselves.

MAY: I want to point out that these ideologies are reactionary, regressive, and pre-modern. When I say pre-modern, an important characteristic of modernity was the idea that your life is not determined by immutable characteristics of birth. You're in the aristocracy, you're in the peasantry, you'll be there forever. You have no chance because that's how you're born.

There is such a thing as merit, you can earn, you can build, you can have talents and you can utilize them and become something that your parents weren't. Now we're saying, "No, you can't. If your skin is a certain color, that must determine your status in society." Again, it's an attack even on modernity. Go ahead Brad. I see you wanted to add something.

BOWMAN: Yeah, no, just like General McMaster mentioned, and G.K. Chesterton earlier, he also included at quote in his warrior ethos article from Chesterton that I really appreciated. The quote is, "The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him," and General McMaster knows from firsthand experience, and he mentions in the article, soldiers fight for their fellow soldiers, but they also fight because they love something.

If we're teaching our young people that our country is not worthy of love and defense, then why as he said, would we ever defend ourselves? And the response to these arguments is "Well, look at this, look at slavery, which is a deplorable evil in our country's history. Look at this, look at that."

And again, I think General McMaster's so right to identify our national creed. Our national creed is not based on blood and soil. It's based on the ideas embodied in our Constitution, in our Declaration of Independence, which I would dare say is the most noble national creed in the history of humankind. To the degree that we've been able to accomplish something successful is because we have identified a truism that's worth defending, and we've spent our national history trying to live up to that creed with all of its imperfections.

So, if that's not something worth defending, I don't know what is, and that's why we swear an oath not to a race or to a party or to a person, but to a constitution. That constitution is worth defending and we fail to defend it, and again, I think at our own peril.

MAY: This is self-indulgent, but it's relevant, I think and I can't help myself. Look, I shared this with Brad earlier, H.R., but I want to share. So my wife was recently cleaning the house and she came across a letter written on Christmas 1944 by my father who was then 22 years old, and was serving in the South Pacific.

Okay. He was Sergeant Major in the Third Air Task Force Wing Squadron, U.S. Army Air Force in the South Pacific. He served in New Guinea, Borneo, and the Philippines. And on Christmas 1944, he writes this letter home and he talks casually about the Japanese sending out, "A load of suicide squadrons to try to knock out his convoy as it was landing." He says, "Our P-38s," which I had to look up, it's a thing you guys know, it's a single-seated fighter aircraft, "got most of them before they reached us. But of course, some got through."



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He clearly in this letter hated the Japanese because they were America's enemies. He clearly also, I thought he admired the Filipinos and especially the guerilla fighters, who he called "really tough boys." His letter ends with, "Well, kids, got to quit now. The lamp is low." He was 22 years old, and I don't think he'd ever been out of New York City before they sent him to the South Pacific.

They only were getting letters like once a month at that point and sending out occasionally. But when I read that and then I read your piece on the warrior ethos, I thought, "Here's this kid from Brooklyn who –

MCMASTER: He didn't really need any trigger warnings.

MAY: No.

MCMASTER: He wasn't retreating to a safe space. I mean, I think that what's happened is that we have – and I write about this in the essay, we have valorized victimhood. And of course, this is connected to this robbing of agency, telling people you can't really influence the future. You're a hapless recipient of structural and institutional fill in the blank problem.

I really am concerned about how our collective will to improve our society – There are a lot of improvements to make. I mean, we have to acknowledge that racism and prejudice continue in our country. The Civil Rights Movement helped us get rid of de jure segregation and inequality of opportunity, but de facto segregation and inequality of opportunity continues right? I mean, we should all be disappointed that the number of obstacles that you have to overcome to take advantage of the great promise of this country, which is still determined in large measure by what ZIP Code you're born into and what education system you can access as a result of that. Okay, so let's get to work on all this. And so, I think that what your father knew at age 22, is that he was in a fight, he was not a hapless recipient of enemy action right? That he and his fellow soldiers had agency and we're going to win. I think that's the attitude that we want to have on the battlefield essentially. But it's also the attitude we need to have about continuing to improve our country and to build a better future.

MAY: I'm going to shift a little bit to something that I – ask you a question, I really don't know the answer on this. And that has to do with what Russia is up to right now. Because we're recording this in early January, we'll probably release it pretty quickly. And from what I understand, if Putin decides to go into Ukraine, he'll do it in late January when the ground is really frozen and his tanks can go anywhere. They don't need to stay on the roads any longer. I think, and I could be wrong, that there are real signs that he may be very seriously, I don't know that he is made up his mind, but maybe very seriously considering, "This is the time when I do what I want to do." Now there's a school of thought, and it's kind of prevalent that says, "Oh, he fears NATO and we made him feel insecure, and if we just make him feel more secure, he won't do this." I don't quite buy that.

I've been following Putin for a long time. I mean, he and I were in college together, literally. I was an exchange student at the University of Leningrad. He was there at the same time. We didn't actually go out and drink brewskis together, but I know we were there at the same time. He wrote a very interesting, in July, a 5,000-word essay published under his name, and I think it was certainly his thoughts, where he makes it absolutely clear that he believes Ukraine is not a separate country and never should have been called a separate country. I think he thinks of himself as a czar. The czars were the czars of all the Russias. All the Russias meant Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, particularly. Those are the three Russias. And he thinks it's just, it's wrong.



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Now, but my question is this, have we made a mistake in making NATO too large and expanding NATO to all these small countries, many of which have very limited military capabilities, which really are not going to come to the aid in a serious way of other NATO members? It's going to be left to us. We've also allowed, and we complained about this, even Germany errs not to contribute to the collective security the way they have promised to and should. Would we have been better off to keep NATO a small group of nations that are military capable and will defend themselves when we go and say, we're going to defend all these different countries?

Does it make an opportunity for somebody like Putin to say what he's saying now, which is, "I want you to guarantee Ukraine will never be part of NATO. I want you to guarantee that no NATO arms will be sent to Ukraine. In other words, I want you to guarantee that I have a sphere of influence that includes Ukraine." But then by the way, what else is this going to include, the Baltic countries, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia maybe down to Moldova? How far will he go? My guess is he'll go as far as he thinks he can go because appeasement doesn't generally work with people like Putin. I'll leave it there for your thoughts.

MCMASTER: Yeah. I mean, I think, Cliff, those who argue that we offended Putin by allowing NATO expansion are saying that we should have given Russia veto power over free nations who voted to join the EU or to join NATO. Why would that make any sense? And of course, Putin is actually making a great case for the expansion of NATO right now. Because this kind of intimidation, the invasion of Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea is what you would've seen in the Baltic states had they not been members of NATO. Or maybe in certain territories within Poland or the quarters of Kaliningrad – so I think he's – what he's done, not only here in the Ukraine, but going back to 2007 with the cyber attacks on Estonia and on the Baltic states, and then the invasion of Georgia in 2008, the sustained campaign of political subversion.

Remember the attempts to rig elections in Ukraine multiple times. To poison a candidate for President in Ukraine. I mean, look at the attempted coup, and the plot to assassinate the President of Montenegro when he won the election. I mean, I think there's so many examples right of Russian aggression. Again, this argument that we caused this, I think is fundamentally wrong and I think we're not doing enough to deter Russia. You've seen really the demands that he's made are basically to get NATO to disavow NATO. That's what he's – and so I think what this does is actually makes the argument that NATO is more relevant than ever to deter conflict.

We have, I think, through collective security, NATO prevented great power conflict for almost 80 years. And I think that if we don't continue that commitment to NATO, we already see what's going to happen. And I think what we're missing these days – it's great to threaten economic sanctions, but why isn't there a combined joint task force, a NATO task force, in Romania right now, a NATO ally? Because part of what Putin's doing to Ukraine is it is meant as an object lesson to Romania, to Bulgaria NATO members to say, "Who's your daddy", basically. He wants to turn the Black Sea into a Russian lake. So I think from a deterrent perspective, we're not doing enough militarily.

MAY: Well, slow down on that just a little bit. Two parts. Would you actually consider sending troops in to defend Ukraine? Or would you simply say, he should know whether or not we're going to do that? That's what deterrence means, he should worry that we might. Of course, Biden has taken that off the table and I don't see the strategic benefit of having done that.

MCMASTER: Well of course. This goes back to your original point that you made at the outset. "Hey, there's no military solution", that mantra you hear all the time. Hey, well, Putin is organizing a military solution right now. Right now for Ukraine. So, if we don't do anything militarily to project power in the region broadly, then I think what we're doing is



encouraging more aggression on his part. Remember as this crisis began, we had some destroyers patrolling in the Black Sea. We pulled them back, quite conspicuously. What did he do right after that? He fired really in the path of a British destroyer that was transiting adjacent to Crimea. Putin will take anything he can get until he meets strong resistance. Not only diplomatically and economically, but also militarily.

I mean, if you think about – remember in Syria early in 2018, when Russian mercenaries and proxy forces attacked our forces in Syria? Well, you know what happened is, they got crushed. They got crushed, because I don't think they really even understood the way that we could project power with joint capabilities. And we destroyed that entire attacking force – almost the entire attacking force. I think that's the reason we haven't seen more Russian aggression against us in Syria. So I really think that, we don't want to precipitate conflict certainly, I would not deploy forces into Ukraine, I don't think that's necessary. But I think what I would be doing is airlifting a whole bunch of defensive capabilities into Ukraine right now.

I mean, think about what we would have want to do to help Israel prior to the 1973 war. That's what we should be doing. Something, I think on a scale that's analogous to that. Not the name scale. But we should be, I think, supporting Ukraine's development of their defense capabilities in some of the critical areas that they still need. That's tiered to layered defense capabilities, but also, I think more Javelins, anti-tank capabilities. Not to precipitate conflict, but to demonstrate to Putin that the Ukrainians are prepared to inflict costs on him to go way beyond the cost that he's factoring in right now, the anticipated cost that he's factoring in right now.

MAY: This gets to something Brad, I've heard you talk about a lot, which is that we should – our troops should never be in a fair fight. The essence of American strategy, and I think it's hard for Americans to understand strategy because you have a different President every four years, and there has been certainly in recent years, a tendency to say, "Everything my predecessor did was stupid and wrong and I'm going to change it." So you can't have a long term strategy, but the most basic thing is that your forces are clearly superior to your enemies or any combination of your enemies. That is not the goal of the current administration I fear. I don't think most people in America have been convinced that, yes, we have to have forces that are so superior that they deter and defeat if they have to, or less likely to have to, because they're seen as overwhelming. If they think they can beat us, then they're more likely to try.

BOWMAN: Yeah, no, I think that's right, Cliff. I mean, we're looking at roughly 100,000 Russian troops on Ukraine's north, on its east and in the south. And when I say south, I'm talking about Crimea, which of course is part of Ukraine and Putin illegally invaded and annexed it. We're talking about main battle tanks, self-propelled howitzers, infantry fighting vehicles, multiple launch rocket systems, short-range ballistic missiles – surface-to-air missiles. So, and Putin's doing this in a way, it's very shrewd right where it's not clear whether it's preparation for an invasion or a training exercise, and that's perfect for him right? Because what's he doing? He's using hard power as a means, at a minimum, to elicit concessions at the negotiating table or to prepare for an invasion.

All right, that's what he's doing, and General McMaster has cited the great quote from former Secretary of State, late George Schultz, "The shadow of power." He's casting the shadow of power over the negotiating table to, at minimum get concessions, or to prepare for an invasion. What is the concession he wants? He wants, as General McMaster said, he wants a veto over the decisions of Kyiv, of Ukraine. He wants to be able to call the shots in Ukraine and for Americans and for listeners, that's really the question. Do you believe, in 21st century Europe, whether we should have might makes right authoritarianism, that he who's strongest calls the shots and tells other countries what to do or do you believe in the rule of law, territorial integrity and national sovereignty?



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So, this gets to the question I think of NATO, expansion. And General McMaster said this. If we're going to say, "No, it's a mistake for NATO to expand, because we might offend Russian sensibilities", you're basically saying, "Okay, we're going to give Putin a veto over his neighbors, and we're going to buy into a sphere of influence", a doctrine that John Carey says is something that should be relegated to the 18th or 19th century.

Evidently Putin didn't get the memo, that in the 21st century it's not polite to use military power to seize territory – well, he didn't get that memo. Most of our adversaries haven't got that memo and we need to wake up to that fact. This gets back to the role of hard power and the warrior ethos in securing our country.

MAY: You read also H.R., that as the U.S. was conducting the humiliating retreat from Kabul, the Pentagon was doing what? It was developing a climate strategy in response to the President's guidance to prioritize climate change considerations. I mean, is that really the job of the military? Shouldn't the Pentagon be thinking about how to fight wars of the present and of the future, as opposed to how our soldiers can fight climate change?

MCMMASTER: Yeah. I mean, I think, how about the State Department, Department of Energy? I mean, of course the military has a role. The military develops novel means of generating power that can help reduce carbon emissions and so forth. The military will have a role like it did in developing mRNA vaccines, and with investment in science and technology. But that is not the principle mission of the Department of Defense. And what I'm concerned about is, it's just going to be another distraction, and again, it can also not only affect our ability to plan and prepare and develop future forces to deter war, and if deterrence fails to fight and win. But it also can have a desultory effect on the culture itself, right? If the military forgets what it's for, then how do you maintain the ethos that is essential to combat effectiveness?

MAY: Last month the Pentagon estimated that Beijing is increasing its nuclear arsenals, and at the end of the decade could quadruple it to at least 1,000 warheads. Beijing is ahead of us in hypersonic missiles which, I'd like to know your view, but sounds like it could be something of a game changer. These are the things that we absolutely, it would seem to me, need to be concentrating on. And yet that doesn't seem to have penetrated with our current leadership, and maybe not to – well, I'll leave it to you whether the previous administration understood all this. I know H.R., you were trying to make these points clearly to the President and I'm sure it was, well something of a struggle.

MCMMASTER: Well, I think that there's this idea that you can again, make diplomatic headway without doing so from a position of strength. We saw this in the nuclear arena, play out with the reluctance to get out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), which I recommended as soon as I became National Security Advisor that we ought to do, because I knew as, in my job, as to helping design the future Army, that Russia was violating the treaty. By us adhering to a treaty that nobody else was adhering to okay, that, first of all, that's not a treaty if only one side adheres to it. But we were denying ourselves the development of very important capabilities, especially land-based, long-range precision fires and we were not pursuing hypersonics the way that we needed to.

I think we rectified that by pulling out of the INF treaty. But now, I mean, does that mean we can't get back to the table to negotiate a reduction of some of the most destructive weapons on earth, as we see China accelerating its program, we see Russia engaged in a whole range of disruptive nuclear capabilities and a doctrine. Their doctrine is called Escalation Domination. And basically, what Putin is saying is, "Hey, I'm willing to use nuclear weapons in Europe", and then say to the United States, "Hey, you can either sue for peace on my terms, or I can threaten you with Armageddon." Okay, how's that not destabilizing? So, I think – but the only way we're going to get back to it is the way that we did, I would say in the 1980s, which required the deployment, remember, of Pershing II missiles to Europe to answer the threat from the SS-20s from the Soviet Union. And it was only after we had that intermediate range



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capability that the Soviets came to the table, and there was probably the most significant arms control agreement was the elimination of a whole class of nuclear weapons. Well, what happened? The situation changed. Russia violated that agreement under Putin, and we have another whole party to this competition with China.

But there are those in the administration, I think, who argue today that we need to get to an agreement as an end in and of itself. Actually, we need to get to an agreement that actually improves our security. We can only do that really through strength, and not only nuclear strength, but also demonstrating the conventional type capabilities that convince the Chinese Communist Party that aggression on Taiwan, for example, can't work in an acceptable cost, or to convince Russia that they can't accomplish their objectives in Europe through the use of force.

MAY: Yeah. And I think we've been seeing that particularly over the past year, not just the past year, but in the negotiations that have been taking place with the Islamic Republic of Iran, where this administration seems to want an agreement. If it's a good agreement, wonderful. If it's a bad agreement, that's okay too, as long as they get to an agreement. Having negotiations with an adversary that won't even deign to negotiate with us at the same table in the same room, what an insult and a humiliation that we accepted that. Why not say, "If you won't sit down with us, then fine, we have nothing to talk about and we'll play out the hands?" But no, they said, "Okay, well, you won't talk to us. Well, we'll talk through other interlocutors." That just strikes me as a –

MCMMASTER: Well, I mean, I think it's fair to say, Cliff, I think it's fair to say that we are projecting weakness across the board.

MAY: Well, that's right. Yeah.

MCMMASTER: I mean, the surrender and withdrawal from Afghanistan, the saying, "Hey, we'll only use military force after you invade Ukraine," to Russia. I mean, how does that make sense? I really just think that there have been a series of decisions that are emboldening our adversaries, which makes it super dangerous. I mean, as we entered this new year, Cliff and Brad, I don't know what you guys think. I think there's a very high potential for a cascading series of crises. I mean, you already have the Iranians attacking our forces at Al-Tanf, using drones, threatening to do more of it. You just saw that the Iraqis shot down a couple of drones, that on the anniversary of Soleimani's assassination, with killing, I think justifiably certainly because he was an active combatant against us and was organizing attacks against us at the time. But I think these drones were oriented on a U.S. position at the Baghdad airport that were just shot down.

You see Putin marshaling against Ukraine. We've had a series of cyber attacks. You have China becoming more and more aggressive in the South China Sea and vis-à-vis Taiwan with the over flights and so forth. I mean, I really think that these adversaries will at least be opportunistic, and if there is a crisis in one area would be encouraged to precipitate a crisis in another.

MAY: Let me mention – Go ahead. No, go, Brad. Go, Brad.

BOWMAN: Yeah. Sorry. Just very quickly. General McMaster and you, Cliff, understand this well, but some of the listeners may be less familiar with it. I mean, we use the word deterrence a lot. Deterrence has two major components. When we talk about is someone deterred, it's the perception of the adversary that matters. The perception of what? It's their perception of our ability and will, our military capability and our will to use it. So you can have the most potent and capable military in the world with the ideal warrior ethos, but if our political leaders aren't willing to use that capability,



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then an adversary is not deterred. So if you buy that argument, then the disaster in Afghanistan, to the degree that it affects perceptions of the will of our leaders to use military force, can have global consequences.

So, big surprise, if we see a more aggressive Moscow or more aggressive Beijing based on their perception that we have less political will to use force to defend our interests. So that's why in my opinion, when you hear those arguments, oh, "hey, that Afghanistan thing didn't go so well, but now we need to get busy with China", I think that view is foolish for all kinds of reasons, but it ignores the damage that we've done to our global deterrence because of the declining perception of our willingness to actually use force to defend ourselves.

One other quick point I've written on this a lot is that I do, I share General McMaster's concern. I also worry that we could confront multiple major crises at the same time. We've seen growing military training and exercises between China and Russia. They are not allies in the way that we think of allies. I don't want to overplay that. They got along. There's lots of issues there, but we have seen strategic level coordination between China and Russia. We've seen Naval exercises. We've seen land-based exercises. We've seen exchanging of best practices. So it's not inconceivable that we could have a conflict in Ukraine and simultaneously Xi decides now is the moment to roll the dice in the Taiwan Strait, and that very quickly creates capacity problems for the United States in our allies.

MCMMASTER: I would add cyber attacks and threats to space assets. Absolutely, yeah.

MAY: Well, and Brad, you anticipated what was going to be my exit question, which is exactly that. By the way, also not well known, you guys will know it, we now have drones supplied by Iran in Venezuela pointing at Miami, which could reach Miami. This is getting, as far as I can see, very little, if any attention from the administration. I think Brad, I agree with what you said, but I think it does go further. I think there is a de facto axis or alliance among the major authoritarians of the world. Venezuela is supported by Russia and China and the Islamic Republic of Iran currently, and there are increasing relations between, it's really a Sino-Russian Alliance that has been if not blossoming, certainly developing. China is helping the Islamic Republic of Iran. So it's not inconceivable that they sit down and say, "You know what? We can help each other." How about—

MCMMASTER: The trends, Cliff, might be in the wrong direction there too. Look at Nicaragua and look at the recent election in Peru and in Chile, which I think are left-leaning governments. Hey, this is back to the '80s, man. I mean, it seems like we're going back to the '80s.

MAY: By the way, you anticipated a column I have coming out this week early. Today is January 4th. It comes out tonight, which says that the extent to which our adversaries are establishing themselves as hegemony in South America is not well understood. We have the Chinese opening ports that can be used for military purposes. We have Tehran throughout the region extending itself. We have Hezbollah working with Narco cartels, hand in hand and helping them. Ever since John Kerry back in 2013 announced to the world that the Monroe Doctrine no longer applies, that has been seen as an open door, an invitation to our enemies to say, "Fine, we're coming into South America," and they are. We have leftist regimes, Nicaragua, you're right, Peru, absolutely, for sure it's Marxist, Leninist, Venezuela.

Even though one out of five people have fled Venezuela because of poverty, Venezuela is still hugely powerful, along with Cuba, where Obama decided I'm going to reopen diplomatic relations with Cuba. I'm going to have my picture taken under a portrait of Che Guevara totalitarian, violent extremists, and has gotten nothing in exchange for that. On the contrary, over 150 dissidents and protestors were thrown in jail last month. Cuba also is part of this authoritarian alliance. I just don't know that if the Pentagon, and this is my last thought, is thinking about the fact, what if Putin goes



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into Ukraine, Xi goes into Taiwan, Khomeini goes into Iraq and Venezuela maybe shoots a few rockets at us at the same time, or a few drones at us just to show that it can, and then I don't know, maybe North Korea decides to push on the door, and they all do it at once. Do we think that we in this White House and this administration and this Pentagon can say, "Yeah, we thought about that and we have a plan"? I leave that. I mean, honest thoughts?

MCMMASTER: I mean, Brad, I'll ask you to talk about this, because Brad has so much experience on this in terms of defense budget and budget preparation from the perspective of the Hill. One of the things that I was really concerned about years ago was that these defense planning scenarios in the Defense Department, which are classified and we can't really talk specifically about them, but they tend to look at discreet problem sets and not recognize how interconnected these challenges can become. I think this of course drives people to the answers they want, which is typically smaller military forces, a smaller defense budget. So, I think that's the wrong path. I think when you get this defense strategy that comes out here, it's going to be more of the do more with less nonsense that I think we saw during the Obama administration, which created a bow wave of deferred modernization that we still have not yet addressed. So, I think there are real defense vulnerabilities at a very dangerous time.

BOWMAN: Just three quick things, really. General McMaster's being kind. I would defer to him on all these issues, but three quick points related to that. One is that we hear a lot from this current administration, which is making a good effort here about integrated deterrence. I mean, I'm all for integrated deterrence, because on the surface, what does that mean? As General McMaster said many times, it's integrating all tools of national power to achieve better results for the United States and our allies. Who couldn't be for that? But when you look at some of the statements coming out and some of the talk around the National Defense Strategy that this administration is going to release in the coming months, it appears to me, I worry as a cover for spending less on defense. I'm not saying that just because I want to spend more on the defense for the sake of it.

If you look at the five major threats we confront as delineated by the 2018 National Defense Strategy Commission, for example, we have China, Russia, North Korea, Iran and terrorism, and they're all worse than they were in 2018. So I don't know how this administration can suggest that we should have a static or declining defense budget when all five of those threats are worse than they were. And it gets to these issues of capacity and war plans that we can't get into.

And then very quickly lastly, because I know General McMaster has to run here in a minute, is the competition with China, to your point, Cliff. It's a global competition and it's a multifaceted competition. Just look at what China is doing in Central and South Asia. Cliff, you and I had a podcast with the previous Commander of Southern Command a while back. China's investing heavily in energy and metals and mining in the region. They're sending COVID vaccines there. They're bribing reportedly El Salvadoran politicians. Their PLA has engaged in arm sales, military exercises, military education, and port calls in Latin America. So, I'm all for us focusing on the Indo-Pacific and Europe and the Middle East, but we have to be truthful and honest about what China is doing in our own backyard and respond accordingly and that's not all DoD's problem, but it is a DoD problem as well.

MAY: All right. I know this hasn't been a cheery conversation, but I do think these are urgent ideas that need to be discussed much more. Thank you so much, General McMaster. It's always instructive and always useful for me to listen to you and learn from you. Brad, same to you. It's great to have you as a close colleague. Thanks to all of you for being with us, listening to us, and we want to hear your ideas, your thoughts, your criticisms. Please write to us. Thanks again for being with us here today on *Foreign Policy*.