



Axis of Aggressors: H.R. McMaster on Defending America's Interests

September 26, 2024

Featuring LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster and Bradley Bowman

Introductory remarks by Clifford D. May

MAY: Well, welcome, everybody, and thank you so much for joining us for today's event, hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm Cliff May—I'm the Founder and President of FDD—and we're pleased to have you here. We're pleased to have those who are in person, of course.

Some will be tuning in live; some listening to our podcast version of this very interesting and important conversation. It's Thursday, September 26th, and today's panel will discuss the rising threat from what we've been calling here at FDD—and others as well, I'm glad to say—an Axis of Aggressors.

That would include the rulers of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. I would say, increasingly, Venezuela, Cuba, and there are others who are joining this club. They're working increasingly closely together; not just economically, but also militarily. They pose a serious threat to the United States and to other free nations, and it's a threat that American leaders, we would argue, are not addressing in any serious and effective manner.

Vladimir Putin's goal is to destroy the Ukrainian nation-state. Ali Khamenei's goal is the extermination of Israel, and of as many Israelis as he can kill. Brutal wars are currently being waged against both Ukraine and Israel. Xi Jinping threatens the people of Taiwan. Kim Jong Un will take over South Korea if he can. 28,000 American troops in South Korea are preventing that.

To address these and related issues, we are pleased, we are honored, we are privileged to be joined by General H.R. McMaster. As it's well known, General McMaster served as U.S. Army officer for 34 years, including deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, and he was National Security Advisor from 2017 to 2018, 13 very intense and active months.

He has a new book on that experience; it's called, "*At War with Ourselves*." As I wrote in a recent column, it's a riveting read. It's not political. It's brutally honest. And we're proud that he serves as Chairman of the Board of Advisors for FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, CMPP.

Moderating the conversation will be Bradley Bowman, the very capable senior director of CMPP. Brad served previously as national security advisor to members of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees, as well as an active duty U.S. Army officer, Black Hawk pilot, and an assistant professor at West Point.

Just a few words about FDD: For more than 20 years, FDD has operated as a fiercely independent, nonpartisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, we do not accept, have never accepted, will never accept any foreign government funding.

For more on our work, please visit our website—fdd.org—and follow us across social media, including YouTube, X, and Instagram. That's more than enough from me.

Brad, over to you.

BOWMAN: Great.

Thank you, Cliff, so much. Welcome to everyone in the room. Welcome, everyone, Lieutenant General McMaster. Thank you so much for —

MCMASTER: Hey, Brad, good to be with you.

BOWMAN: — being here again with us, and really value your role as Chair of our Center on Military and Political Power, and our longstanding friendship and the mentorship you've provided to me through the years. So, thank you for all that.

MCMASTER: Well, hey, thanks, Brad. It's great to be with you, and I just really admire the great work that FDD does, and the Center for Military and Political Power, in particular, the monographs you guys put out. I mean, I learn so much from you every time we interact, and every time I read your publications. So, thank you.



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BOWMAN: Well, thank you. I've learned so much from reading your new book. Congratulations on your new book—"At War with Ourselves"—and I do recommend that folks take a look at Cliff May's September 4th column, review of that book. I feel like we need about three hours. Unfortunately, we don't have that. There's just so much that we could talk about. So, if it's all right, we'll just jump right in.

I noticed, in your book, you describe a February 2017 meeting, an all-hands NSC [National Security Council] meeting there, in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, where the NSC staff was assembled, and you solicited their responses to six questions. You describe this in the book. I won't list them all, but the first one on that list was, "What are the top priorities?" What are the top priorities?

It's presuming the top priority of the NSC staff and the top priorities for our country, and to me, that seems like such a great question to ask as you're coming into your first week in such an important job, because, you know, as we say in strategy, you've got to begin with the end. What are you trying to accomplish? What's the objective?

And so, if I may, let me ask you now, seven years later, the very question that you asked the NSC on that day in February 2017. What are America's top priorities right now?

MCMASTER: Well, thanks, Brad. I mean, what you're talking about was my second full day on the job, you know, having gotten the job quite unexpectedly on a Monday, a President's Day, and then I flew back with the president from Mar-a-Lago to Washington. And I didn't live in Washington, so they had Osprey aircraft fly me back to my home in Tidewater, Virginia.

I packed a bag, came back on Tuesday, and started work Tuesday afternoon, in the West Wing of the White House. So, I think this was actually Wednesday; maybe it was Thursday of that week. And what I wanted to do was to really have a discussion about what the NSC staff is supposed to do, what our mission is, what our vision is, but really, what is the substantive work that we have to help the president do, and the decisions we have to help the president make, to really shift the balance of power in the world back in favor of the United States?

My impression at the time was that we had been complacent in the 1990s, and into the 2000s, based on some flawed assumptions about the nature of the post-Cold War world. And we had vacated some critical arenas of competition that had – that our adversaries had filled that vacuum and were shifting the balance against us from a geostrategic, geoeconomic perspective.

And I think that what we did—you know, what we did in—I know what we did in that week was, we identified 16 first-order challenges to national security. And we began to organize framing sessions around those challenges to apply design thinking to those challenges, and to make sure that we had a common understanding of the nature of the challenge, what our goals and objectives are, what was at stake for us, what were our vital interests that were at stake, and then to identify the key obstacles to progress, as well as opportunities we could exploit.

And the framing papers that we used for each of these 16 challenges really ended there. So, we would have a discussion first about the nature of the challenge we were facing, before we got into, "OK, what are we going to do about it?" And then the second part of the meetings, these were called principal small-group framing sessions.

It was then about, "hey, what are your ideas," to the principals, to the members of the president's cabinet, the Principals Committee of the National Security Council, of how we can integrate all elements of national power—and efforts of like-minded partners—to overcome the obstacles to progress, and take advantage of the opportunities, and advance and protect American interests, really, in the area of our security, our prosperity, and our influence in the world.

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And I'll tell you, those 16 challenges are kind of enduring, it turns out. They're all still live issues today. To give you a sense of some of them, you know, how to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS, and make progress toward a resolution of the Syrian civil war—a big task, right?—in a way that not only ensures the enduring defeat of ISIS, but limits Iranian influence in the Middle East, and in a post-civil war Syria; Iranian and Russian influence that's still a live and very complicated, difficult issue.

Another was, you know, how to prevent China from establishing exclusionary areas of primacy across the Indo-Pacific region, and creating new spheres of influence globally that allows China to tear down the existing international order, and rules of international discourse, and replace them with new sets of rules that are sympathetic to their authoritarian form of governance, and their status mercantilist economic model.

A lot of words there, but, you know, that's kind of the challenge associated with China, and it's still a live issue. So, you get a sense for some of these geostrategic challenges. Some were succinct but difficult, like, you know, how to stabilize Iraq, and ensure that Iraq is not aligned with Iran.

Others were really cross-cutting challenges involving domains of competition, rather than a geostrategic, or geopolitical, competition. For example, how to maintain access to critical capabilities in space, and to ensure U.S. dominance in space. And what we, you know, I think belatedly came to the realization, it's a contested domain.

There was obviously a cyberspace challenge, a biomedical challenge which turned out to be quite relevant, you know, by 2020. So — but these are all still live issues, and what we wanted to put in place is a process; a process to give best analysis to the president, to get the president's approval of the problem framing, send that out to the Department of State so we can get to work on developing options for the president, options for integrated strategies, that would advance and protect our interests.

So, that was the very beginning of it, soliciting everybody's input. And then, you know, I went back, and took out a legal pad, and jotted down those 16 challenges, sent them out to the — to principals and asked for their approval of that. And as well as, you know, the process we had in mind, as I described, to frame those challenges, to develop those options, present them to the president and, once he made a decision, to really implement some very radical shifts, actually, in U.S. foreign policy.

BOWMAN: So many of those issues you just discussed, as you said, are still very relevant. I'm reminded of the bipartisan, congressionally mandated National Defense Strategy Commission report that came out in July. That effort was led by Jane Harman and Eric Edelman. Eric Edelman is also on the board of our Center.

I just want to read — for those of you that haven't seen that yet, I just want to read — this is the introduction to that report, and then ask you a question about it, if I may. Here's what this bipartisan, congressionally mandated commission of some of those most serious defense experts wrote.

"The threats the United States faces are the most serious and most challenging the nation has encountered since 1945 and include the potential for near-term major war. The United States last fought a global conflict during World War II, which ended nearly 80 years ago. The nation was last prepared for such a fight during the Cold War, which ended 35 years ago. It is not prepared today."

That's the first paragraph. The Commission describes with concern the emergence of what we're calling here an Axis of Aggressors—Cliff mentioned that—China, Russia, Iran, North Korea. The Commission concludes with this quote, *"This new alignment of nations opposed to U.S. interests creates a real risk, if not likelihood, that conflict anywhere could become a multi-theater or global war."*

Do you think that's a fair assessment of the Commission?

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MCMASTER: Absolutely. It's a fair assessment, and I think it's a call to action, and urgent action, because this isn't a new revelation, right? I mean, I remember in 2015 and 2016, my job was to help design the future Army, and I remember engaging with people in the Office of the Secretary of Defense about the defense-planning scenarios, and being quite critical of them, and saying, these scenarios are designed to give the answer that you want in terms of force structure and force sizing.

And the assumptions that underpinned a lot of these strategies were that these wars would be very quick, you know, any kind of conflict would be fast. It would mainly be just a big targeting exercise, and the war would be waged from, kind of, standoff range. There would be no need to shape a sustainable political outcome.

And then also, what these defense-planning scenarios didn't do is acknowledge the potential for simultaneous conflicts, and at the very least, that hostile regimes would at least take advantage of our preoccupation in one area to maybe accelerate objectives in another. Now we're seeing this really, very explicit cooperation.

And I think there's — there was a recognition, certainly, in the Trump administration, and it's in the National Security Strategy, it's in the National Defense — really, in the National Security Strategy more than the National Defense Strategy, is that we are suffering from a huge bow wave of deferred modernization. That's a bill that, like, you're ultimately going to have to pay, you know?

And what we haven't — what we didn't have is, really, the ability to field, because of the budget, the countermeasures to the PRC's [People's Republic of China] countermeasures, the PLA's [People's Liberation Army] countermeasures, the Chinese military's countermeasures to our exquisite capabilities, which we had assumed, under the Obama years, that we could have this kind of third offset, is what it was called; that we could have, really, an overmatch over potential enemies by maintaining our technological advantages.

And in particular, that fewer and fewer more exquisite, and more expensive, platforms could have a bigger impact over wider areas. So, in fact, you had Secretary Ash Carter, someone for whom I have tremendous respect, and admired, and was a great mentor of mine over the years, you know, he said that the Department of Defense is over-structured. Our forces, our Armed Forces, are over-structured.

And what he meant is that we could cut capacity, and trade that off for even more exquisite capabilities. I never — I believed that that had bottomed out, you know, in the early 2000s, actually, with our enemies deploying tiered and layered air defense, offensive cyber capabilities, counter-satellite capabilities, electromagnetic warfare.

You know, they took apart a lot of those differential advantages associated with these exquisite platforms; platforms that could, kind of, fail catastrophically based on those countermeasures. So, what we needed were capabilities that, hopefully, as we are in our advanced stage, me especially, that degrade gracefully, rather than fail catastrophically.

And capacity matters. I remember, as we were writing the National Security Strategy in 2017, I kept writing in—and if you go to the defense part of that Strategy, it still holds true, you know—that the capacity matters, you know, and the Department of Defense kept taking it out because, like, because they were so stuck on the whole, you know, the old way of third offset.

In the report that you just mentioned, I think one of the bar graphs that's up front in the report is really important. It shows the percentage of U.S. military spending relative to GDP [Gross Domestic Product] over time. And you see a big drop, during the Obama years, of percentage of GDP, while we were still fighting two active wars.

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So, a lot of that money was still going to operations budgets. We weren't procuring what we needed. So, we have this, kind of, triple whammy right now, you know, to paraphrase what Mackenzie Eaglen has said, over at AEI [American Enterprise Institute], about this time. We had, you know, we had a bow wave of deferred modernization, we have capacity issues, and we have a recruiting problem now, too.

So, we need a sense of urgency, and I don't see it, Brad. Do you see the sense of urgency that we need? I mean, the Biden administration budget, actually, when adjusted for inflation, is a real reduction.

BOWMAN: Yeah... It's such an important point. I'm reminded of Walter Russell Mead's op-ed that you may have seen.

MCMASTER: Yes.

BOWMAN: He talks about, you know, shrugging as we're confronting potentially World War III. That sounds like hyperbole but, you know, and here are the numbers. We're currently spending, on defense, just the Department of Defense, about 3.1 percent of our GDP on defense. 3.1 percent.

OK, that's interesting... You want another number? Here's one: Of federal spending, 11.7 percent. Those are 2024 numbers straight from the Pentagon. OK, so compared to what? Those are near post-World War II lows, both in terms of GDP and federal spending.

So, anyone telling you that defense spending is bankrupting this country doesn't know what they're talking about... We can have a debate about entitlements. I don't do entitlements, but let's be clear: It's not defense spending, OK? And so, if you are buying what the Bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission is saying, that this is the most challenging, most serious and challenging environment we've seen since 1945, then why the heck would it make sense to be spending so little on defense? I don't know.

MCMASTER: Well, you know, it goes back to what George Marshall said. And when you looked back at the 1930s, he said, when we had the time, we didn't have the money.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

MCMASTER: And when we had the money, we didn't have the time, you know? And I think the case to make to the American people, and I think there is this big strain in the country, and I know FDD is very much aware of this, of skepticism about sustained commitments abroad, military commitments, but even sustained diplomatic efforts abroad, because a lot of Americans are saying, OK, we have a lot of problems here at home.

What are we doing, you know, worried about the rest of the world? I think there are two arguments to make. One is that challenges to our security that develop abroad can only be dealt with at an exorbitant cost —

BOWMAN: Right.

MCMASTER: — once they reach our shores. Of course, that's the primary lesson of 9/11. It's also the kind of lesson associated with COVID, from a biosecurity perspective. But then also, I think, you know, just the reality that, heck, it's a lot cheaper to prevent a war than to have to fight one.

BOWMAN: That's right.

MCMASTER: You know, and I tell this story in the book about President Trump visiting Pearl Harbor on the way to our Asian odyssey, a long trip. It's maybe too long of a trip. But as we're on our way there, I think it really dawned on him.

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I mean, not that he hadn't thought of it before, but as he's talking to Admiral Harry Harris, in the context of being in Pearl Harbor, about the massive People's Liberation Army—Navy in particular—buildup relative to our forces, you could see that, you know, we no longer had the deterrent capability that we had, you know, in previous Taiwan Strait crises, for example.

So, I think, you know, I think it dawned on him. But still, even in the Trump years, I think there are still people who are budget hawks. There are people who have different ideas, people who think that you can achieve what you want to in defense spending just by more efficiency in the Department of Defense. And believe me, there's room for that.

I mean, I think you could randomly kidnap people out of the Pentagon, probably, and nobody would notice the difference in operations, but — in some offices, right? But, I mean, I — you know, so, I mean, there's an argument for that. But really, there is a need for a vast increase in investment in defense to address this bow wave of defense modernization and deferred modernization, and then also, the capacity issues.

BOWMAN: Yeah. I think you're so right to highlight capacity as a concern; capability, what can you do, capacity, how much of it can you do. And the last quote I mentioned there was a multi-theater war, right? And our assumptions about, oh, our adversaries are going to be nice enough to only present us with one major war at a time.

MCMASTER: Yeah, right.

BOWMAN: Well, that's, hello, 1991, [they] we want [their] assumptions back. That assumption is no longer a safe assumption, in my view. And so —

MCMASTER: That's the RSVP fallacy, right? You know, thank you for your kind invitation to the war. The United States politely declines.

BOWMAN: Right. So, I mean, we clearly see strategic coordination going on between these four Axis members. And we see them helping each other, making each more capable in their respective area of aggression, sharing intelligence on us. And so, it's so important that our assumptions, our war plans, our contingency plans, our defense budget, and the capacity of all our services matches the reality we confront.

I want to move on to our, you know, our little trip around the world here in a minute. But last question on this: Is there cooperation among the Axis members, including particularly, maybe, between Iran and Russia, that you find particularly concerning?

MCMASTER: Absolutely. And I think what you're seeing is more and more evidence of what all of us kind of knew — you know, suspected was happening. It's the material support now that is quite obvious, in terms of the Shahed drones and the missiles, for example, being provided to Russia from Iran, so they can continue their onslaught against the Ukrainian people.

And what are they getting in exchange? They're getting, I think, technical assistance for their missile program, and probably for their nuclear program as well. They also are getting a lot of diplomatic cover, and informational support, in what FDD did a fantastic report on: Cognitive Warfare [Combat], which I highly recommend to everybody.

Just the way it's framed, I think, is a very clear way of thinking about various forms of information warfare being waged against us from the Axis of Aggressors. And, you know, I mean, Vladimir Putin hosted Hamas leaders. It was like two days after — two days after October 7th. He said, you know, "*Hamas has no greater friend.*"

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You know, and so, I think anybody who was doubting it, including a lot of my Israeli friends—and I wrote about this in the book a little bit as well, with a conversation I had with Prime Minister Netanyahu to say, "*Hey, Russia's running a bait-and-switch on you in Syria.*" You know, and — but Israel was hedging with Russia because, you know, Putin was, you know, he's the best liar in the world, you know.

And he had told the Israelis and others, "*Hey, just stick with me here on keeping Assad in power. And what I'll do is, over time, I'll work to reduce Iranian influence in a post-civil war Syria.*" Which is a big lie, obviously, and Assad is much more reliant on Iran's proxy army than he is on Russia to begin with.

So, I think you're seeing, now, the evidence is right there. And the whole — remember the whole propaganda campaign that Russia has run, you know, around the world — along with China — I find it hard to believe that they developed that on the fly. You know, I would not be surprised if there wasn't pre-coordination, you know, between Iran and Russia on helping them deal with the blowback, the aftermath, of the horrendous attacks of October 7th.

BOWMAN: In your book, you describe the role that you tried to play, and played, as national security advisor to affect, what you described — I think, rightly — “the most significant shift in U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War.” And that was going from cooperation and engagement to competition with the People's Republic of China.

And you also talk about, in the book how, particularly during your 13 months, it was hard to get decisions, but when you had some of those decisions made, sustaining them over time, both within an administration and across them. Here's my question: Do you feel that the positive elements of the China transition that the Trump administration initiated has, essentially, been maintained by the administration? Do you think they're carrying out that policy more or less correctly now, vis-a-vis China?

MCMASTER: I do. I do. There's still this tension between competing effectively with China and trying to win the competition, which I think we should. I'm very sympathetic to the essay that Matt Pottinger and [Rep.] Mike Gallagher wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in the last issue. It was often — it was mischaracterized by a number of people.

But I think, you know, they're making the point that if you're in a competition, you should be in it to win. And I think we should, instead of trying to manage it, because when you try to manage the competition with China, the Chinese just play you, you know? And every time they establish a new format for dialogues, I mean, there is a real price to talking. A lot of people say —

BOWMAN: Win-win — win-win dialogue.

MCMASTER: Right. Yeah. Win-win means China wins twice. It's what win-win means, you know? And so just look at what they're doing. I mean, with all the various, you know, programs that they're running to gain, really, I think, primacy, you know, and to create exclusionary areas of primacy, to get locks on critical supply chains, and be able to use, you know, their economic position for coercive purposes, you know?

And so, I think that we have to be in to prevail in the competition. But it has been an element of continuity between the Trump administration and the Biden administration. The Biden administration has fallen into that trap of trying to manage and, you know, what China also does is they hold out the prospect of some kind of impending liberalization.

China's open for business as they crack down, like, on any kind of, you know, auditing function, or any firm that could provide any kind of transparency into their market. And they crush their tech sector, or whatever. You know, it's just — they don't — they say — they have a completely different message from what they actually do, you know?

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And they'll say, for an international audience, something quite different from what they say internally. So, I think it's really important to treat primary sources like primary sources with China. Frank Dikötter, you know, the great historian of the Chinese Communist Party, he said the problem in the United States — and in the West broadly — is, we tend to treat primary sources in China like they're secondary sources, and secondary sources like they're primary sources.

So, I think the message is, like, don't fall for it. You know, we should stop being chumps about it, and notice when they tell you like, they really want to cooperate on fentanyl or on, you know, on climate change. It's all — it's not true, you know? And so, we have to actually organize ourselves to win the competition.

BOWMAN: I want to move to the Middle East. In some of your interviews about your book that I've watched, you've spoken, I'd say, with real moral clarity on what happened on October 7th, and Israel as our best ally in the Middle East, and the nature of Hamas and Hezbollah.

And as we speak right now, obviously, in the last three or four days, we've seen a significant escalation in combat between Hezbollah and Israel, a little downturn in the last 24 hours. There's talk of maybe a ceasefire. Prime Minister Netanyahu's made his comments. He's got a speech before the UN General Assembly.

Would just love to hear you talk about, if you're willing, what happened on October 7th, the nature of the threat from Hamas. And there was one quote you made in one of the interviews I saw, where you said, *"If you're pro-Palestinian, you need to be anti-Hamas."*

MCMASTER: Right, right, which is astounding to me that that's not more normal, you know, is to be — if you're pro-Palestinian, you need to be anti-Hamas. Hamas is an organization that has diverted billions and billions of dollars of assistance away from the Palestinian people, and into its terrorist infrastructure.

Their leaders have enriched themselves at the expense of the Palestinian people. I wish, and maybe it's out there, you know, there should be like the equivalent of "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" of Hamas leaders, and then quick cuts in that film to the destitution of the Palestinian people.

Hamas is an organization whose charter has in it to destroy Israel, and kill all the Jews. It astounds me when you hear people say, *"Oh, we're for a two-state solution, but we don't think that Israel should destroy Hamas."* I mean, actually, the destruction of Hamas is a precondition for getting back on a path to any kind of enduring peace between Israel and the Palestinians, or any kind of two-state solution you can imagine.

One of the biggest obstacles, always, to making any kind of progress — and this is the effort that Jason Greenblatt and Jared Kushner promoted in the Trump administration, which, I think, in retrospect was laudable and, of course, wasn't going to work — but what it did is, it really came up with, what could a two-state solution look like that would be palatable to Israel?

And that's on a shelf now, right? It didn't get anywhere. The Palestinians left that process. But, you know, it began with Gaza not being under the control of Hamas. And if you're Israel, how could you, you know, cede any kind of territory on a permanent basis, knowing that an organization like Hamas would take it over?

And if you had a Hamas-like problem in the West Bank, how would that work?

BOWMAN: Yeah.

MCMASTER: So there has to be, kind of, the real security guarantees that others have been working on for years. But it begins with the destruction of Hamas, I believe. It's also important to recognize that Hamas is, in many ways, kind of a death cult.

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I mean, they wanted the Palestinian people to suffer, and to take casualties, because this has been part of their strategy. Don't take my word for it; take the Hamas leadership's word for it. That is what they said right after the Israeli response, as early as October of last year.

So, I think that, you know, there's a fundamental inconsistency in calling for ceasefires, and then saying you're for a two-state solution. This is what President Biden did at UNGA [United Nations General Assembly] like, yesterday. It was like, the sentences were right next to each other. It doesn't make any sense to me.

BOWMAN: We were talking earlier about — and I overuse it, I admit it, but, you know, former Secretary of State George Shultz's quote that negotiations are a euphemism for surrender if the shadow of power is not over — I'm paraphrasing.

MCMASTER: Yeah.

BOWMAN: And, you know — for so long, we had UN Security Council Resolution 1701 calling for Hezbollah to move to the Litani River. We have thousands of UN peacekeepers in southern Lebanon, they're sitting there and watching Hezbollah start to attack Israel on October 8th, the day after the worst —

MCMASTER: Right.

BOWMAN: — single-day attack on Jews since the Holocaust, doing absolutely nothing —

MCMASTER: Again, using the population as human shields, right?

BOWMAN: — and so, I'm all for — I'm a big fan of diplomacy, development, and defense, all tools of national power, effective diplomacy, as you know far better than me, is fundamental to securing our interests. But diplomacy is not an end in itself. And when international organizations' and diplomacy fail to accomplish their objectives, sometimes, you have to escalate to get a better status quo.

And that seems what, with more than 60,000 Israelis displaced from their homes, a country the size of New Jersey effectively shrinking, I don't know what choice they have, other than to use the power they have to reestablish their sovereignty and territorial integrity in the north.

MCMASTER: Absolutely. Yeah, I think there's a fundamental misunderstanding, just like there is about, you know, the destruction of Hamas being, really, a precondition for any kind of progress toward an enduring peace. A fundamental misunderstanding of diplomacy, and what it is, and what diplomacy can and cannot achieve, especially in the area of conflict resolution.

You know, there can be no favorable diplomatic solution to any problem involving conflict that doesn't reflect the military realities on the ground. And try to find an example of that. You can't find an example of that. And so, you see the same kind of, you know, wrongheaded thinking afflicting the approach toward Ukraine as well, right? That, hey, we can just have a ceasefire, and negotiate a settlement.

Well, not until Putin believes he's losing. Not until Ukraine can regain enough of their territory, such that it's acceptable to them. Otherwise, Putin will continue the war, and Ukrainians will see the cost of continuing the war as lower than the cost of any kind of a ceasefire, or an agreement of some kind, that leaves them in a rump state, that can be so readily coerced by, you know, by Russia.

I think this is — this goes back to, kind of, a misunderstanding of how the wars in the Balkans were resolved. And this idea that Ambassador Holbrooke, as talented as he was, and energetic as a diplomat, went to Dayton and got the Dayton Accords, because he was a good diplomat. No, it was actually because of the Croatian counteroffensive against the Serbs that set the conditions for it.

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I mean, but if you think about how we have approached diplomacy, even in context of U.S. wars, it's actually ludicrous. The great captains of history would come back and think we'd lost our minds. I mean, when does it make sense to give, you know, in this case, the Taliban, a timeline for your withdrawal, and then negotiate with them, and think you're going to get a favorable settlement?

Or under the Obama administration, after the reinforced effort in 2009, 2010, to give the timeline for the withdrawal of that reinforced effort, and then to stop targeting the Taliban. See, really, the Taliban is not really the problem.

BOWMAN: The very same speech at West Point, right —

MCMASTER: Absolutely.

BOWMAN: — announced, *"I'm going to increase the number of troops, and then we're going to withdraw."*

MCMASTER: Right.

BOWMAN: It's like, oh?

MCMASTER: Right.

BOWMAN: Yeah, not great. The — it seems like an obvious statement, I guess, you know, a leading national security priority for the United States should be preventing any effort by Hamas to rearm. And if we're going to prevent Hamas from rearming, right, almost all the weapons they used on October 7th, or a large portion of them came across from the Sinai, came across from Egypt, either under the border there, or through the Rafah Crossing.

MCMASTER: Yeah.

BOWMAN: And so, it seems to me, if we want to prevent another October 7th, and we want to defeat Hamas, we have to prevent them from rearming, and that means supporting efforts to have an underground barrier between Gaza and Egypt that prevents future tunnels for rearming, and gets control of that Rafah Crossing. And it seems to me that the United States should be doing pressure on Egypt to work with Israel on that. Do you agree with that premise, or would you push back?

MCMASTER: No, I agree. What is going to be necessary for the hell that is Gaza to get better, you know, for the Palestinian people there, is the destruction of Hamas; but Hamas isn't just going to go away. Even if you really destroy Hamas, you hunt down Sinwar, which I hope happens in the next few days, if it hasn't happened already, there are still going to be remnants of Hamas around, and they're going to be the only people who still have guns, right, in Gaza.

So, if you have that — if that's the situation, cells will come back, and there can be no alternative political order to emerge, other than Hamas. Because as soon as you say, *"Oh, yeah, I'll be the mayor of Gaza,"* guess what's going to happen? You're going to get a bullet in the head.

So, it's important to have a peace enforcement force there, that has the authorities, and the capability, to go after these cells as they come back. It can't be the IDF, because — I don't think — because the relationship between the IDF and the population in Gaza is not going to be conducive to developing the human intelligence networks that are necessary to rapidly identify and preempt the reemergence of some of these cells. It has to be a multinational force.

The Egyptians should probably be the backbone of that force. They can be enabled by very capable Emirati special operations forces, for example. The Jordanians have their own hands full, but they have some capabilities. I mean, heck, Ugandans. I mean, it doesn't matter.

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As long as they are seen as pro-Palestinian population, and they can earn the respect and legitimacy, be seen as legitimate by the population, to give space for an alternative political order to emerge. Is that going to be the political — the Palestinian Authority? Maybe in the short term, but obviously, the corruption of that organization and its lack of legitimacy is a problem.

But I think what must happen, over time, is that you're going to have to show the Palestinian people in Gaza that the primary cause of their grievances and their hardships and their suffering has been Hamas. And that's when, only when, Gaza is under the control of an organization other than Hamas, should the spigot be turned back on for major rebuilding and humanitarian assistance.

So, the population could see the dramatic difference, right? And the importance for them to choose, you know, an organization to lead them, a political organization that is not a terrorist death cult, that is determined to destroy Israel and kill all the Jews. Because there can be no enduring peace under that kind of an organization.

So, can I envision that happening? Yes, theoretically. But I think, again, who wants to be the mayor of Gaza? Who wants to have responsibility for the aftermath of the war? Nobody does. So, it's going to take, I think, the United States using all of its persuasive power, its incentives and disincentives, to get others to do it, you know?

BOWMAN: Mark Dubowitz, our CEO, has been saying lately, *"A good start for policy is, don't let a genocidal organization control territory."*

MCMASTER: Yeah, right.

BOWMAN: That's kind of a good place to start.

MCMASTER: Right. And this is what — remember, this is really what Iran has done. And we haven't talked about Iran enough yet. I mean, also we have to act like we know what the return address is for all of this.

BOWMAN: Yeah, right.

MCMASTER: And we ought to trace those grievances of the Palestinian population back to the Iranians, who are willing to expend every Palestinian life, every Arab life, in their effort to push us out of the region, as the first step in destroying Israel and killing all the Jews. I mean, that's what they say they want to do.

And you see all the effort they've put into not only establishing, you know, Hamas as a significant terrorist organization, with the capabilities they demonstrated on October 7th, but also the reinforcement of Hamas and PIJ [Palestinian Islamic Jihad] in the West Bank. The assembly of 40,000, I guess, a 40,000-strong proxy army in Syria, which has been already placed on Israel's border and, of course, Hezbollah, you know, which is the next phase of this war.

But the ring of fire is in place. I think it's been activated. And I believe that Israel is in a more precarious position than it's been in, maybe, since 1948. And this is going to be a long war, because it is, kind of — as Israelis have described it, and I agree with this — a seven-front war. You know, it is — it's Gaza. It's the West Bank. It's Syria and the Golan. It's southern Lebanon. But it's also the other militias in the region.

The Houthis have made direct attacks, and Iran has made direct attacks — in April especially — against Israel. And then, there's a huge informational dimension to this, to isolate Israel internationally, you know, the lawfare and the International Criminal Court and so forth. So, I really think that it's time for us to be much stronger in support of Israel.

Every time we make these kind of inconsistent comments about there needs to be a ceasefire, when — instead of saying, no, there can't be a ceasefire until Hamas is destroyed; and until we stop saying there needs to be a ceasefire on the Lebanese border, instead of saying Hamas [Hezbollah] needs to get out of southern Lebanon and move north of the Litani River, or there will be a continuation of the war.

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Until we stop saying take the win, when there are hundreds of projectiles fired at Israel, I think that was a tremendous opportunity, actually, to act like we know what the return address is, and to organize a response, a multinational response, along with Israel, but maybe other countries in the Gulf.

BOWMAN: Some of the most interesting, among many, anecdotes in your book, for me at least, were where, you know, former President Trump was making statements, and you worked so hard to try to make sure those were aligned with good policy. And in this moment, since October 7th, when this administration makes public statements, and there's a perception that we're putting more pressure on Israel than the terrorist organization trying to exterminate the State of Israel —

MCMASTER: Yes.

BOWMAN: — are we not empowering the enemies of the United States and Israel when we, Washington, do that?

MCMASTER: OK, I'm trying not to get emotional about this. I'm so angry about it. But, you know, so you have — what you have is the alleviation of pressure, kind of at the end of the Trump administration, too, after the Soleimani killing, and deciding not to respond to the al-Assad reprisal, not responding to the shoot-down of a U.S. UAS [Unmanned Aircraft System] from Iranian soil, you know, the attack on the Saudi oil field.

So, I think, you know, the Trump administration, I think, you know, kind of backed off a little bit there, when I think that sent a mixed signal to Iran. But what really sent the mixed signal is the Biden administration's approach to try to resurrect the JCPOA. And to do so, by providing inducements to Iran, by mainly just not enforcing the sanctions already in place, which resulted, based on the work that you've done here, the transfer of about \$100 billion into Iran's coffers.

Then you had the release of all these funds, right? Billions and billions of dollars of funds. \$6 billion were sitting in the Qatari's bank on the eve of October 7th, about to transfer to — back to Iran. Suffering the humiliation of negotiating with the Iranians, but not being able to talk to them directly, and using who as the mediator? The Russians? Really?

I mean, it's just astounding to me that all that was happening. And then, of course, as FDD has documented, even the attacks since October 7th against U.S. forces, I think it's like 175 [176] attacks, right?

BOWMAN: Yeah, yeah.

MCMASTER: U.S. forces and installations by Iranian proxies in the region, and I think only about 11 of those were answered, and they were answered in, you know, kind of this very controlled way to certain signals, and not to escalate. So, whenever we say, hey, we want to de-escalate, which is, you can't read, you know, more than two sentences of any press statement in response to any act of Iranian aggression without the word de-escalation being in there, right, or de-escalate.

What that does is it gives license to Iran to escalate on their own terms with impunity, again, because, hey, they're willing to expend every Arab life if necessary, in their efforts, and they're not feeling the cost themselves. And so, I think this is probably the most important adjustment that needs to be made to policy now, is to impose those costs directly on Iran.

We continued our diplomatic overtures to the Iranians in the middle of all this. And then we have this jackass, I'm sorry, in — at UNGA, you know, saying that, you know, who now the press is labeling a reformist, you know, again? I mean, like Khatami, remember that guy, the librarian. He was going to be so much nicer, you know?

BOWMAN: Yes.

MCMASTER: I mean, it's just the same narrative.

BOWMAN: Well —

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MCMASTER: But this is a deliberate Iranian narrative, which is really, really, we could moderate at any moment. And there's this big struggle within the regime between the Republicans and the revolutionaries. And if you're not nice to us in Iran, if you don't alleviate our sanctions, those mean revolutionaries are going to get stronger, and we're going to get weaker.

It's all BS. It's complete BS. The revolutionaries won. They're in charge. It's the supreme leader and the IRGC [Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps]. And Pezeshkian is not a — like, he's not a reformist, right? What he wants is he wants it both ways again. He wants to continue his proxy wars, and he wants to get the sanctions relief at the same time, which he has reason to believe he'll get, because the Obama and Biden administrations gave him that before, you know?

So, I think, I mean, how many times do you have to be duped? You know, it's like Wile E. Coyote. You know, like, figure it out, man. You know, the Acme rocket-propelled roller skates, man, might not work. You know, I mean, it's not...

BOWMAN: One of my favorite quotes from your book, you mentioned the UN General Assembly. I just have to throw it in here. You described it as a *"diplomatic circus, political speed dating, a cocktail party where everyone talks and no one listens, and the world's most expensive open mic night."*

MCMASTER: That's what it is.

BOWMAN: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, that's great. So, we're spending a lot of time, appropriately, talking about Hamas, Hezbollah. You mentioned the Houthis and you've brought in Iran to the discussion. I'm so glad. This seems to be the obvious strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is to hit the US, hit our ally, Israel, with its Arab proxies, so that our counter punches are delivered to Arabs, and not to the regime.

Even as they smile, and say nice things at the UN, and progress toward nuclear weapons capability. And there's some concern that we could see them make significant advances, or even a sprint between Election Day and Inauguration Day, thinking that maybe they have a window opportunity to achieve a *fait accompli*. What are your thoughts on that?

MCMASTER: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think that, you know, we've sent two of our best diplomats to talk with the — so, it didn't work, talking with the Iranians, right? It was never going to work. So, now, we've sent two of our best diplomats to talk with the Houthis individually, and to Hezbollah. Now, like, maybe we can peel the Iranian proxies away from Iran.

It's delusional. It's really delusional. It's a fool's errand. And so I think that, you know, until we recognize what the return address is, and we take the actions that are necessary to really dry up the resources that are available for these proxies and terrorist organizations to interdict, you know, the land bridge and the shipping lanes that sustain these organizations, and then to impose direct costs on them militarily when they attack us.

I mean, I think, you know, that our — we should stop talking about, you know, proportionate and measured responses. I mean, I think what — these organizations will not be deterred at all, until we impose costs on them that go far beyond the costs that they factor in when they take these aggressive actions. That's what's happening to Hamas, right? They're getting more than they bargained for.

That's what has happened to Hezbollah because of what Israel has been able to do with, you know, with not only the massive counterstrikes—every time they fire 50 rockets, they get hammered very heavily—but now, with, you know, the explosion of the beepers and the walkie-talkies, and then the physical strike against leadership, when they had to convene physically, because they couldn't rely on any communications, that triple blow has imposed a cost on them way beyond what they factored in.

But that's the kind of response you need, you know? And, you know, you don't get into a boxing ring, you know, and think, I'm not going to hit the other boxer very hard, you know, because maybe they'll hit me harder back, or —

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BOWMAN: They might be offended.

MCMASTER: — no, you want to put them down. You want to put them down.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

MCMASTER: And I think that that's how we have to think about it. Of course, you know, applying firepower with discrimination, you know, and applying firepower with a degree of proportionality based, you know, based on, you know, our desire, and the requirements to minimize the loss of civilian life, but also, recognize, you know, that these organizations deliberately use people as human shields.

Where are the rockets coming from? They're coming from under people's houses, you know, who are compelled to keep those houses there, or they're put on a retainer to keep them there. And then the beepers, you know, many of these beepers were used to activate, you know, at least from — in that neighborhood, with that Hezbollah leader — to go tell the houses to, you know, wheel out their rocket launchers and fire them at Israel, you know. So, I think it's really important to expose that, to talk about it continuously.

BOWMAN: In your book, you talk about Iraq, and the 2011 withdrawal. You obviously served in Iraq with incredible distinction. There have been reports, in recent days, suggesting that we could have a potential withdrawal of U.S. military forces, at least a partial withdrawal in Iraq, over the next two years.

A senior administration official said, last week, that there's a plan to end the coalition military mission in Iraq. Some reports suggested that there might be a residual force left in Kurdistan, kind of TBD. When asked last Thursday, I believe, this administration — why now, the suggestion was, well, it's a 10-year mark. It's a 10-year anniversary. What a good time to do it.

MCMASTER: Yeah.

BOWMAN: You know, it sounds like another timeline-based, conditions-ignoring withdrawal, like we saw in 2011, like we saw in Afghanistan from 2021, and we may be seeing an announcement on that coming soon.

And this is all kind of interesting, because CENTCOM said, on July 16, 2024, that from January to June 2024, ISIS claimed 153 attacks in Iraq and Syria. And at this rate, ISIS is on pace to more than double the total number of attacks they claimed in [2023]. So, attacks doubling, hey, let's withdraw.

MCMASTER: Right.

BOWMAN: Thoughts?

MCMASTER: Yeah. Well, conflicts don't end when a party to the conflict disengages. And this was the big lesson of Iraq in 2010 that we didn't learn, when, remember, Vice President Biden went to preside over the withdrawal ceremony with General Lloyd Austin, then-General Lloyd Austin, who was the commander of multinational forces in Iraq, and he called President Obama from Baghdad, and said, *"Thank you for allowing me to end this goddamn war."*

And as we were withdrawing militarily, remember, we were also disengaging diplomatically. Because what we did is, we allowed the Iranians to throw the election in Iraq at that time with a devastating effect. Ayad Allawi had won the priority of votes, and had the first shot under the Constitution of forming a coalition government.

The Iranians got the Supreme Court in Iran [Iraq] to rule that, no, the existing, you know, prime minister gets an opportunity to form a coalition government first. This is Maliki. And we backed off, and said, well, that's kind of just, you know, an Iranian — you know, an Iraqi issue.

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What happened then is that Maliki then reinitiates a lot of the sectarian policies that pump the life back into al-Qaeda in Iraq, which then portrays itself as patrons and protectors of increasingly beleaguered Sunni communities. Al-Qaeda in Iraq morphs into ISIS, takes over the control of the territory the size of Great Britain, and becomes the most destructive terrorist organization on Earth. Draws 40,000 fighters to the cause. Conducts 96, 97 or so, external attacks in Brussels, in Nice, in Marseilles, in, you know, San Bernardino, in terms of an inspired attack, shoots down an airliner. You know, the list goes on. And so, you have to go back. We didn't learn that lesson again in Afghanistan, right?

And so, what we — the lesson of 9/11 is still valid, and that is if you give terrorist organizations a safe haven and support base, and the ability to raise funds, to train, to plan and prepare attacks, they become much more dangerous, and much more lethal.

When terrorists are worrying about, like, if they're going to live or die, you know, they're a lot less effective. And it's not us that has to do that heavy lifting. In Afghanistan, it was the Afghans who were bearing the brunt of the fight, until we threw them under the bus, and negotiated with the Taliban and, essentially, partnered with the Taliban against the Afghan government.

We can talk more about that if you want, but I think it was appalling. Even the Obama administration, when it left Iraq, didn't negotiate with al-Qaeda on Iraq — in Iraq on the way out. They just left, you know. So, I think, you know, I think this is disturbing to me.

I saw the CENTCOM report and, you know, ISIS is not defeated. It will come back. We're not bearing the brunt of the fight, but we are enabling others to do so. And that military presence there, it gives you — again, it goes back to our point — it gives you — it strengthens your diplomacy.

Without that military presence, you know, what leverage do you have? The same thing is, once we remove the threat from Iran, once the Gulf states — remember, I think in the early days of the Biden administration, I think they just concluded that we weren't going to enforce the sanctions, so we were giving up economic leverage over Iran.

We weren't going to act like we know what the return address is on Iran, or strike Iran directly, and so therefore, we gave up military leverage on Iran. So, the Gulf states looked around like, who has leverage on Iran? China has leverage on Iran. So, they — when they brokered the agreement with Iraq, they brought the Chinese on top of it.

So, I think that, you know, whenever we disengage militarily and diplomatically, we create a vacuum, and that invites others to move in. Those who say, hey, you should just leave the Middle East completely, you know, and focus on China, I mean, what you're doing is ceding an important, competitive area, geostrategic area, to China and Russia, and giving them influence they don't really deserve.

China would love to have us out of the Middle East. I mean, because we have the keys to their gas station in the Middle East, with our strong relationships. So, you know, these geostrategic competitions in other regions are quite relevant to the, you know, the great power competition that some people want to focus on, which is good; but we shouldn't focus on that competition in a myopic manner, in a way that creates opportunities for these adversaries around the world.

BOWMAN: Such a great point. If we — I would say, if we under-resource the protection of our core interests in the Middle East, small problems will become bigger, forcing us to come back later at a greater cost. So, if you only care about China, we have to make sure that we protect our interests in the Middle East so they don't become worse, requiring more resources, more troops, more time in the future.

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MCMASTER: Absolutely. And to use a phrase from Fouad Ajami, who I think we all miss, you know, for his clarity of thinking about the region, you know, he said that, you know, America is not going to conciliate the furies of the Middle East, right? But what America must recognize is that if you think the Middle East can't get any worse, it actually can get worse.

BOWMAN: Yes.

MCMASTER: You know? It can get worse. It often gets worse because of our disengagement and —

BOWMAN: Exactly.

MCMASTER: — the opportunities it creates for our adversaries.

BOWMAN: Exactly. I want to go to audience questions here in about three minutes. If I can ask you one last question before we do that, General McMaster. I wanted to spend more time on Ukraine. I feel like I would be remiss if I didn't ask you at least one question. I've got about five here.

Let me ask what I think is the most important question right now: Why — with respect to Ukraine. Why should Americans care about the outcome in Ukraine?

MCMASTER: Yeah. Well, I think, first of all, one of the reasons — and this can be overused and simplified — but I think this could be, if Ukraine doesn't win, or if Russia's not stopped there, it could be the opening of a much broader conflict. You know, people are saying World War III. I think it's quite possible.

Because if you look at how the Axis of Aggressors has aligned behind Russia, with real material support, we mentioned, you know, the drones and missiles from Iran. But, you know, China's buying more and more Russian oil to feed Putin's ATM, so he can sustain his war-making machine.

China is providing the hardware and equipment and electronics necessary for Russia to continue to manufacture the, you know, the long-range missiles, and glide bombs — and so forth — that they're using to bombard Ukrainian cities and infrastructure. And then you also have, you know, the cooperation with North Korea, and all of this is interconnected.

You know, North Korea's providing billions of artillery shells, for example, to Russia. So, if we prove incapable of helping the Ukrainians defend themselves, this is the first blow in what could be, kind of, a death blow to NATO, you know, and the NATO alliance. Putin would love to use Ukraine as a way to disintegrate the NATO alliance.

He's already working to pick off other members of the alliance, you know, with Slovakia and Hungary, for example. He's very actively subverting the Bulgarian election, continuing to cause problems in Moldova, for example. And he's already — this is not a NATO country — but he's already de facto annexed Belarus, you know.

So, Putin has huge ambitions, ambitions that go far beyond anything that's in reaction to what we do, you know, and so it's worth us to help the Ukrainians win so we can deter conflicts in other regions as well. I think China — you know, there's this phrase which really irritates me that, you know, that we're fighting a proxy war through the Ukrainians.

No. The Ukrainians are defending their people, and their territory, from a completely unjustified onslaught from the Russians, in the first major land war in Europe since the end of World War II. But I think you could flip that, and you could say that China is using Russia to fight a proxy war against the West.

And I think there are really big implications for what happens in the Indo-Pacific if our will collapses. I believe that the interruption in our aid for Ukraine — I have no evidence for this, I just — I think — you know, I just have a sense of this — our interruption of aid for Ukraine, I think, was a contributing factor to the October 7th attacks.

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I think there was a belief that, hey, if America, after saying, hey, we're all in with Ukraine as long as it takes, if America can't —

BOWMAN: You mean, Afghanistan?

MCMASTER: Well, no, I think — well, I think there's a direct line. So, the theme is that the perception of weakness is what is provocative. The disaster of August of 2021 in Afghanistan, I think leads directly to the massive reinvasion of Ukraine in February of 2022.

I mean, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin all but announced it before the Beijing Olympics, you know. The message was, hey, you guys are over in the West. It's a new era of international relations, we're in charge; get used to it, basically. Then I think our inability to sustain support for Ukraine in — in 2023, you know, into 2024, I think that that encouraged the October 7th attacks, because we weren't, you know, because not bringing the Ukraine aid package to a vote, until when that happened. That happened after October 7th.

BOWMAN: Yeah. No, that's such an important point. And you and I wrote about that in our *Newsweek* piece, where we — how the outcome in Ukraine —

MCMASTER: Right.

BOWMAN: — is going to affect perceptions in Beijing, right? Because as you know better than me, deterrence is based on perception of military capability and political will. And if the United States of America is not willing to spend less than 3.5 percent on what we spent on the Pentagon over the same time period to help Ukrainian men, women, and children defend their homes against the worst invasion in Europe since World War II without putting a single U.S. servicemember at risk, dealing body blows to the second-leading conventional military threat we confront, making aggression against NATO less likely, where you would have U.S. troops fighting, and sending a positive deterrent message to Beijing, if we're not willing to do that, why would they believe we're going to send Americans to fight in the Taiwan Strait?

So, what happens there affects decision-making, war and peace decision-making, arguably in the Middle East and the Pacific.

MCMASTER: Absolutely. And FDD has done great work, just, knocking down a lot of the myths associated with aid to Ukraine. The money spent here, mostly, you know, it's actually — you know, the war in Ukraine, not that we would ever want this, but it has been a wake-up call, in terms of our defense industrial base, and our manufacturing capacity for weapons and munitions.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

MCMASTER: And I think we're in a stronger position, in terms of our own national defense because of that realization.

BOWMAN: Sure. All right. Well, let's go to questions. Please raise your hand. Let us bring the microphone to you. Give us your name and your affiliation, and ask a question, if you wouldn't mind, in the form of a question.

So right here, please.

BENNETT: Excuse me. Thanks a lot. Hi, H.R. I'm Brian Bennett from *Time Magazine*. I spent time in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 as a reporter for Time. And I have a lot of respect for people who have had real on-the-ground experience, and can speak about these issues from a 30,000-foot view as well.

My question, however, is about the use of the military on U.S. soil. You know, since you were National Security Advisor and worked closely with Trump —

MCMASTER: Yeah.

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BENNETT: — what are your thoughts on the limits of Article 2 powers, particularly in the context of President Trump, when he was president, talking about wanting troops to go into U.S. cities to fight crime or put down protests, and also his public comments about — recently, about wanting a military tribunal for Liz Cheney. So, can you talk about how you think about the limits of the U.S. military on U.S. soil, in that context?

MCMASTER: Yeah, well, I think this all goes to, kind of, confidence in our institutions, and actions or statements, you know, that could undermine confidence in our institutions, and those institutions' role in our society. You know, our founders set up a really bold line, you know, between the military and politics for a good reason.

I mean, they had in mind Oliver Cromwell, you know, and the need to keep the military separate. But, you know, in terms of this specific issue on using active-duty forces, or federalizing National Guard forces, there's a long precedent for doing that. I think it goes to what the intention is, and how it's implemented.

It must be implemented in a way where the military is in support of law enforcement. So, it's not martial law. It's reinforcing law enforcement who still has the arrest authorities, and so forth. But it also should be to protect, right? To protect citizens, to protect, I think in this case where President Trump, if you go back to — what are we talking about, like 2020 now? Is this 2020, right?

You know, if he had said a statement about, we're considering committing the military to protect the peaceful protesters from those who are violent within these protests, and who are trying to usurp the protests, or to protect shop owners, you know, in cities where they're burning down stores and shops, like in Portland or, you know, Seattle. You know, I think that's a message Americans can understand.

This is what happened during the LA riots, for example. It's what happened after, you know, after the — during the integration of schools, when Eisenhower federalized the Guard. So, there's a precedent for it. I think that it's really how the president presents it, and the degree to which the way the president presents it and the decision-making process either strengthens, you know, the role of the — and confidence in the institution, or undermines it.

Was there a second part of the question, I think?

BENNETT: I mean, typically when Trump talks about using —

MCMASTER: Oh, for tribunals and stuff? Yeah.

BENNETT: When Trump talks about using, like —

MCMASTER: Yeah, right.

BENNETT: — military tribunal to —

MCMASTER: Right. Yeah.

BENNETT: — try Liz Cheney, the politician —

MCMASTER: Yeah.

BENNETT: — he disagrees with.

MCMASTER: Again, that undermines, you know, our confidence in rule of law, and reinforces the narrative that, you know, that justice can be justified. You know, justice can be corrupted for political purposes. I would say, you know, this happens on both sides of the political spectrum. We've just got to stop it, right?

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I mean, there have been efforts to try to politicize the military with certain narratives, you know. *"The military is extremist."* The military is not extremist, you know? Now, do you get people in your ranks who are racist, bigoted, sexist, whatever? Yeah, of course, it's a cross-section of American society, but our military culture is fundamentally hostile to those people, you know?

And – but there are people who came in, in the Biden administration, with an agenda to change the military culture, and created a false narrative that, you know, that there are more veterans, you know, veterans were overrepresented on January 6th, for example, which is not true.

But the military is also not woke, you know, which is a narrative on the far right. So, I think, you know, the message should be, like, hands off the institutions. And from, you know, the corruption of justice, I mean, you know, what Alvin Bragg did in New York, you know, saying, *"Hey, I'm going to get him,"* and then went to find the crime to get him, I think that doesn't bolster confidence, either.

So I think, you know, these are — you know, there are many examples that you can point to of, you know, that go back to the Durham report, you know, for example, and the degree to which, you know, which justice was, I think, corrupted for the use of — for political purposes. So, I — hey, it's just terrible.

I mean, I just think that our message to the political class — President Trump and everybody — should be to be more responsible, and to stop trying to score partisan political points at the expense of confidence in our institutions.

BOWMAN: Our adversaries want to divide us. They want to create distrust in our own institutions. Maybe we shouldn't help them.

MCMASTER: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

BOWMAN: There's one way to talk about it. OK, next question right here, please.

TREMBLE: Hi, General. Thanks so much for being with us. This is Mary Trimble from *The Dispatch*.

MCMASTER: Hey, Mary.

TRIMBLE: So, I have a two-parter, if Brad will allow it, as well.

BOWMAN: If it's short.

MCMASTER: If I can remember. I couldn't remember the second part. I mean, I was — OK, I'll try.

TRIMBLE: So, I want to pull together a couple of things that you have said, both here and on *The Dispatch* podcast, in fact. So, you said that, you know, conditions for negotiation have to reflect military reality, and you've described President Trump as someone who primarily thinks about himself as someone who can make deals —

MCMASTER: Right.

TRIMBLE: — who can do big deals. Trump has said that he wants to end the war in Ukraine in a day, that he could do that deal, that that's something that he would make a priority if he won in November. So, do you have thoughts about what he means by that, what he imagines he might do to make that deal? And then, the sort of corollary to that is, how can you trust any kind of deal? I mean, Zelensky says he has a peace plan with Russia after the Minsk agreements.

MCMASTER: Yeah. Well, you can't really, you know? And then, if you're from a Ukrainian perspective, you know, can you trust anything after the Budapest agreement, you know, in '94? So, you know, I think that there's a misunderstanding. There's a paper out there by — I think it's the America First think tank — you know, about how the United States could incentivize an immediate ceasefire.

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And it really would entail, essentially, threatening the Russians with providing the Ukrainians with everything that they need to prevail, and to regain control of territory, and then threatening the Ukraine — the Ukrainians with the withholding of assistance, and therefore, to incentivize both of them to come to the table and agree to a ceasefire.

The problem with that is, it mis-frames, really the intentions of both parties, really. On the Russian side, as I mentioned, you know, Putin's not going to stop. And this would give him the opportunity to try to regenerate the combat power that he's lost. I mean, the, you know, the casualties on both sides are staggering. But I think Russia, you know, could be meeting a breaking point.

I mean, I think one of the reasons why you haven't seen a sustained Russian offensive against the Kursk salient is that the Russians can't put one together, you know? And, you know, the — as Clausewitz said, "The offensive is the decisive form of war, and the defense is the strongest form of war," you know? And the Ukrainians are defensive now. And the Russians are impaling themselves on these defenses, in a way that I think the Ukrainians are inflicting unsustainable losses.

So, I would take a much different approach, you know? I think the approach I would take is to give the Ukrainians everything that they need, including the authority to use long-range precision strike capabilities against military targets in Russia that are the source of the continued onslaught against Ukraine.

And then, I think, again, you know, maybe there's a ceasefire at some point, from a position of strength. And I think President Trump got this on a number of occasions, and maybe, you know, then lost the idea. If you look at the speech that he gave on Afghanistan, on the South Asia strategy, in August of 2017, he said, hey, you know, we're going to go after the Taliban. We're going to take the restrictions off of our forces, and maybe we'll talk to them sometime in the future, you know?

And, of course, the State Department apparently didn't get the memo, and kept falling all over themselves trying to talk to the Taliban, which was frustrating for me. But, anyway, so he understood that there's a time for talking, and there's a time for action, you know? And that really — it is about the situation you go into any kind of negotiation with.

And someone put it well the other day — I forget where I read this — you know, that Putin won't be ready to negotiate in good faith until his generals tell him he's losing. And this goes back to, you know, what Clausewitz said about winning in war. "Winning in war requires convincing your enemy that your enemy's been defeated." And I don't think any of that's changed, you know, since the, you know, the early 19th century, when Clausewitz wrote that.

BOWMAN: All right. Yeah, one last question right here.

BADE: Hi, General. Thank you for being here today. Gavin Bade with Politico. I had a question about the U.S.-China trade relationship.

MCMASTER: OK.

BADE: You said earlier today that it's a mistake to try to negotiate and talk with China too much. And obviously, President Trump did start this kind of strategic decoupling with China, but he did also negotiate with them to a Phase One trade deal, and he and his proxies have said they would probably go back to the table and try to do that again.

Do you think that would be a mistake? And if not, what are the conditions under which the US should talk to China, in your opinion?

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MCMASTER: I think what you would see — and I could be wrong about this, but, you know, first of all, read Bob Lighthizer's book. That's the best blueprint to what might happen. He's, you know, extremely competent. He was a great colleague to work with, actually. And even if you disagree with him, you know, he's a reasonable person, and a good person, but — and has the right intentions in mind.

The — you know, I think what you would see in a Trump administration is the imposition of tariffs, and the use of other trade enforcement mechanisms, right from the beginning. Under the recognition that the Chinese Communist Party leadership strung out the Phase Two agreement, and the prospect of it, to avoid those kinds of actions, and they succeeded in doing so. I don't think he would be fooled a second time by that.

And, of course, you know, the whole story of that with, you know, Liu He, you know, sort of, coming up with an agreement, and then Xi Jinping telling him no, and I don't know — who knows what really happened inside the party, but Liu He's no longer around, you know, as is anybody else, you know, who may have a different opinion from Xi Jinping.

All the people who would talk with you as interlocutors from the Chinese side, without notes, they're all gone. All you've got now are the people who read from their, you know, prepared scripts, you know? And I think that just shows how much Xi Jinping's been able to get a firm grip on power, and how afraid people are of doing anything that cuts against his predilections.

What's concerning about Xi Jinping for me is that, you know, people keep trying to look at him like he's a rational actor the way that we would. They mirror image him. And they don't realize how driven he is by fear: the fear of losing the party's exclusive grip on power.

You know, he looks so confident, right, and pre-possessing, and all these images, but actually, he's quite insecure because of the fragility of the party's grip on power, and the big problems that are mounting for him from an economic perspective. Will that deter him from taking actions that could drag his economy down further? I don't think so, right, because otherwise, how do you get zero COVID?

How do you get the crackdown on the tech sector? How do you get the crackdown on Bain, and all these other companies, where you say you're open for business? They're desperately trying to prop up their stock market now. They have a real estate crisis. They have a huge local debt crisis.

I'm not an economist. I should probably stop talking about this, but — because I work with some real economists at Hoover, man. They're probably like, what is this general doing, man, talking about economy? But I think there are these real insecurities. Could that lead him to lash out? It seems that way.

Seven acts of war against the Philippines in a month, a treaty ally of the United States; a violation of Japanese airspace. I think there are a lot of harbingers of conflict now. And this new law that they passed about having to have waivers for critical materials and minerals export. I think it's quite likely that Xi Jinping will take actions that he thinks will crater the U.S. economy between now and whoever gets inaugurated on January 2nd. I think there's a high chance of that.

Now, that will drag him down, too, but just the prospect of that should clarify our thinking and, again, this sense of urgency, as we're talking about in defense, but also, in making our supply chains more resilient, invigorating our industrial base, but ensuring that China doesn't have control over upstream components, and critical minerals and materials, that are essential for our defense base, let alone the rest of our economy.

BOWMAN: I'm eyeing the clock. We need to wrap up here, General. But I just want to end, if I may, with two quick questions that I'm just dying to ask and, frankly, end with. Less than four months from now, we're going to have a new president in the Oval Office. He or she will have a national security advisor, presumably, at their side. What one or two pieces of advice would you give to that national security advisor, in about 30 seconds or less?

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And then, secondly, you've spent your life confronting our enemies, studying our enemies, a lot of time looking at threats, and yet you're fundamentally an optimist. You seem to me to be an optimistic person, generally, but also about our country. So, why so optimistic about our country?

MCMASTER: OK. Whoever the national security advisor is, I would say, hey, talk to former national security advisors. I did that. I benefited tremendously from it. In "At War with Ourselves," I write extensively about my conversations with, you know, Condoleezza Rice, and Steve Hadley, and Henry Kissinger, and Tom Donilon, and Susan Rice. I've talked to everybody, you know, who was still alive.

Admiral Poindexter, everybody. So – [K.T.] McFarland. So — and, you know, I think that, you know, you can learn from the experiences of others, and particularly, have an emphasis on understanding your role, right? Understanding that you're the only person who has the president as his or her only client, and that your role is not to make policy, but your role is to coordinate and integrate efforts across the departments and agencies to give the president best advice, and then to give the president multiple options.

And then the second part of, you know, of advice would be, get out of the tactical decision-making business, devolve authorities and decisions back to departments and agencies, and think longer term and think strategically, and frame the most significant challenges and opportunities we're facing, and put together integrated strategies to combine all of our elements of national power, which is, kind of, the charter of the CMPP here, and efforts of like-minded partners.

And to do all this with a sense of urgency, because I think we are in a kind of dangerous situation in the world these days. And then, gosh, on, you know, why am I optimistic? I think that our democracies look really ugly. You know, everything is on display. We have a free press. We have freedom of speech.

And — but, actually, we're quite resilient. You know, I believe that we have, you know, that we have a tremendous capacity for self-correction. And I think these authoritarian regimes, they look strong from the outside, you know, but they're quite brittle, actually. And I think we should be more confident.

I'd like to see more Americans come together for meaningful, respectful discussions about the challenges we're facing, how we can work together. I do think we have to strengthen our common identity as Americans. I think, with the election coming up, you will see a renewed effort on the part of our adversaries to polarize us further, pit us against each other, and accelerate these centripetal forces that kind of spin us apart.

And we should resist that. You know, we should put a brake on that. And I think, especially if the election is a narrow, thin margin, really, we have to recognize — despite the DOJ report that just came out — what I believe is that our adversaries, they don't care who wins our elections. What they really want, except maybe the Iranians, because they put, you know, an assassination order out on President Trump, I would say Russia, and just focus on Russia.

Russia doesn't care who wins our election, as long as large numbers of Americans doubt the legitimacy of the results. And we have reduced confidence in our democratic principles, and institutions, and processes. Both political parties play into this, right? I mean, President Trump, with some of his statements, and then on the far left, like, how is showing your ID, you know?

How is that Jim Crow, man? I don't understand that. You know, like, I mean, you know, I mean, more transparency in our elections is a good thing. More confidence in our election processes would be good. So, I think let's stop the, you know, the partisan, you know, the partisan discourse, and focus on strengthening our confidence in our institutions.

BOWMAN: Well, thank you for that. Thank you to those of you in the room who joined us, those online. General McMaster, congratulations on your new book. I highly recommend everyone read it. And sincerely, just thank you for being such an informed and experienced and principled voice right now and your extraordinary service to our country.



Axis of Aggressors: H.R. McMaster on Defending America's Interests

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I think we need voices like yours, now more than ever. So, thank you for what you've done for decades for our country.

MCMASTER: Well, thanks so much, Brad. Thanks, and good to be with you. Thank you. Thanks, everybody. Thank you. Thanks.

BOWMAN: For more information on FDD and our Center on Military and Political Power and the latest analysis on these issues, we encourage you to visit fdd.org and follow us across social media, including on YouTube, X, and Instagram. Thank you for joining us in person, as I said, and virtually online, and we hope to see you again soon. Thanks so much.

MCMASTER: Hey, thanks, everybody. Thanks, Brad.

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