

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined again I think for the sixth time, amazingly, by my old friend, Aaron Friedberg, a very distinguished professor of politics at Princeton University for quite a long time now. Served in the White House and in the federal government. Done a lot of work with the Defense Department and other parts of the US government, so real practical experience as well as superb academic credentials. One of the leading China experts who's been right about China when so many of your fellow China experts were wrong and thinking it was all going to work out fine, and you wrote a whole book about how they were predicting they were going to be wrong, and they are wrong. Has that made you popular in that community, Aaron?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Well, you said, "My fellow China experts." The real China experts don't consider me a China expert. So I'm out of that fraternity, which is a certain advantage.

BILL KRISTOL:

I bet that's right. You do serve on the congressionally mandated US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, which is a distinguished bipartisan commission which studies US-China relationships. So you're in the middle of that with members of Congress and dealing with the administration as well. So great to have you here. What a time. We had a conversation in March and focused on China, but we'll talk quite a bit about Russia-Ukraine and how China's interested in that and how they might have an interest in a frozen conflict there.

And I thought the world's getting awfully complicated. We have this medium and long-term threat from China. We've got Taiwan. We have Russia, Putin having launched the largest ground war in Europe in 80 years. And now we have a major conflict, to say the least, in the Middle East with Israel and Hamas. We have the Houthis doing their thing in the Gulf. We have Taiwanese elections just last weekend. We're speaking, what is it, January 18th. So what is going on? Just begin with the world situation and then we'll get more into China. But, am I wrong to think this is not quite something we've seen in a long time?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

I can't think of a period in recent history that's the equivalent of this, at least in terms of its complexity and the multiplicity of major conflicts, either ongoing or potential. You mentioned we spoke a year ago, and at that point we were talking all about Russia-Ukraine and that was greatly complicating the picture, and now we've got this additional dimension. So it's really a three-sided or three sets of confrontations, two of which are violent, and the other China and Taiwan is not, at least not yet. And the United States kind of standing back at one remove supporting others who are being opposed by forces that are backed ultimately by China, but also by Russia and Iran.

BILL KRISTOL:

I guess, how correct is it to say they're not just overlapping, but interlocking conflicts? Or how much is it these are three different things, and we deal with them as we deal with them?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

There are three different things, but I think they're interlocking and the interests of the parties converge in various ways. I don't think there's a giant master conspiracy that set all these things in motion. But taken together, and I guess I'm thinking here particularly, I visualize this as sort of a triangle around the periphery of Eurasia. Where in Europe you had Russia-Ukraine. In Asia, you have this confrontation at least between China and Taiwan and potential armed conflict there. And now in the Middle East, this additional dimension, Israel-Hamas you mentioned, and then Israel-Hezbollah, Israel-Iran, and also the Houthis backed by the Iranians who are making a lot of trouble and disrupting global shipping.

Who knew? I think for many people it's a surprise, the extent to which they have sophisticated arms and are capable of doing a lot of damage. So it's all around the clock. It's those three confrontations or actual conflicts underway. The only one in which the US is now directly involved, at least for the moment, is with the Houthis on the Red Sea. But we're supporting Ukraine, obviously we're supporting Israel, and we're supporting Taiwan. So we're behind this and trying to support our friends who are trying to stand up to increasingly aggressive authoritarian powers.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, so let's go through each of these, but let me begin in a way backwards, you might say, from the US point of view. I guess I have a feeling, and I say this as someone who's been pretty supportive, quite supportive of the Biden administration and willing to cut them a break at times when it's hard to deal with all these things at once and there are big surprises. But I have the feeling in the last month or two, and maybe I'm just overreacting to some of the Houthi headlines, that it doesn't seem like we're quite as much on top of dealing with these crises as we might be, that people might be losing some confidence in us around the world, that we might be losing some confidence in ourselves here at home.

You've been around US politics, as well as international politics for a long time. What's your sense of that? And again, I'm not even being judgmental. Maybe this is just the world we're living in and Biden's doing as well as one can be expected, but it just is objectively a more challenging world, but whatever fault could or couldn't be ascribed. How worried are you about that, just the overall US credibility and standing?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

I am worried about it. I tend to agree with you. I've been inclined to give the current administration a break or actually to be supportive of many of the things they're trying to do. I think at this point, it's hard to believe that they're not overloaded with all of this. I think we've probably talked about this in the past, but until I served in the government, I used to think this idea that the government can't deal with more than one crisis at a time is just nonsense. We're this great global power, we have to be able to do all these things at once. We fought a global war in the Second World War and so on. And yet, in reality, dealing with one of these situations is stressful. Dealing with several is extraordinarily stressful.

Plus, whatever you think of what the administration is doing, whatever you think of what they've done in the past, they're now under a lot of pressure, domestic political pressure. Certainly as regards Ukraine, this has become maybe the major partisan foreign policy issue between Republicans and Democrats, or at least some Republicans and Democrats, and is likely to feature, I think, in the upcoming election campaign. The administration is also under pressure in its support for Israel, particularly from the left side of the Democratic Party. And so that's not a trivial thing for them to deal with, especially in the run up to presidential election.

I think they're also concerned, and one of the reasons I think that they've been as hesitant as they've been to respond to what the Houthis were doing or to confront the Iranians directly, which they've not wanted to do, is I think they're just concerned about a conflict that

escalates and produces economic dislocations that will further complicate their ability to win the upcoming presidential elections.

So in reality, presidents are always concerned about domestic politics. And of course, this is a special election and they have a special reason to be concerned about it. The Taiwan issue is less urgent in a sense, but I think there are questions there about whether the administration is doing enough to support the Taiwanese. And one of the lines of criticism of what the administrations have been doing in Ukraine is that it's arguably taken resources and focus away from Taiwan, which some in the Republican Party in particular say should be our principal concern. So, they're dealing with these three crises or confrontations, and they're also under increasing domestic political pressure. So, I don't envy them.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And the possibility of Trump, we'll certainly get to this a little later, being elected in 2024 also complicates their life because it means foreign actors have different incentives, Putin to wait things out for this year, allies to be nervous and so forth. But let's get back to that. There's so much to cover. I don't quite know where to begin. But let's begin with Taiwan, which is the least kinetic, I would hope. We say this, and of course we release this conversation tomorrow and God knows what could have happened, but let's hope not. But they just had an election last weekend. The situation there is less dramatic, obviously, than Russia-Ukraine or Israel-Hamas or the Houthis. But what happened in the Taiwanese election? What does it matter? And more broadly, how does China see things in their neighborhood and around the world, in your opinion, compared to maybe a year ago?

A year ago, I think we had this conversation in March, you really stressed the degree to which China would like to have a frozen conflict between Russia and Ukraine, that would weaken us, make Russia maybe even more dependent on them going forward. But now other things have happened too. So give us the Taiwan issue and the Chinese point of view in general.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Okay, so starting with the Taiwan election last Saturday, as you mentioned, Taiwan had a presidential election. There were three parties, the DPP, which is the incumbent, the KMT or Kuomintang, which is their main opposition, and then a third, a new political party. So it was a three-way race. A couple of things to note about it, just struck in reading the accounts of the election. First of all, something like 70 plus percent of eligible voters voted in their election. You may have seen videos of the process by which the ballots were being counted. No one raised any questions about the validity of the outcome, even though obviously the parties that lost hoped that they would win. And by the time the sun rose here in the United States on Saturday morning, it was all over and the DPP had won. So just a reminder that Taiwan is an admirable democracy, and I think we have some things to learn from them. Their example is actually quite a positive one when you think about what we've been going through. So a successful election.

BILL KRISTOL:

Some major issues between the parties, but nonetheless no claims that it was rigged or that they couldn't abide by the results. Right? Or no serious claims.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

No. No serious claims. They had major issues, and a lot of the issues are domestic. So, I think we in the United States and other foreign observers tend to think of this as— we see it through the lens of Taiwan versus the PRC. And of course, that's always an issue for Taiwan. But then there were all kinds of the usual sorts of domestic issues about employment and domestic policy and so on. And on that score, I guess the DPP took a lot of criticism and the

newly elected or incoming president of the DPP got something like 40% of the total vote, whereas the outgoing president, President Tsai had gotten 50% when she ran. So there's a degree of dissatisfaction with what the DPP is doing.

People have said that if the two opposing parties had managed to get their act together, and they tried to form a unity ticket, but it fell apart. My understanding is in part because they couldn't decide who was going to be at the top of the ticket. But maybe if they had done that, they would've won. Anyway, they didn't. And yes, with all of those issues, and I should say also with a very concerted and ongoing effort on the part of the PRC to interfere in their election with disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, even with all of that, there was, as far as I'm aware, no challenge, no serious question raised about the validity of the election and about its outcome.

So again, there's some sort of civic lessons to learn there because the degree of involvement and engagement on the part of their citizens, but also undoubtedly there are some lessons to be learned about how exactly to handle CCP disinformation efforts. Of course, it's a different situation there than it would be elsewhere, would be in the United States, but nonetheless, this is a problem that everybody's going to have to deal with. I haven't followed this closely, but I'm sure I've seen references to fakes and videos and recordings and all kinds of things.

So DPP won. Incoming president who won't be inaugurated until May, so they have a long gap between the actual election and I guess as we used to do before the depression. And there's a question we maybe can talk about that, about what kinds of things may happen in the interval. The incoming president, soon to be President Lai, has said that he will continue with the policies of his predecessor, which have been stiff in their resolve not to succumb to pressure from the CCP, but also they've gone out their way to avoid anything that could be interpreted as provocation, no talk of independence or anything of the sort.

They're also committed to making ongoing improvements in Taiwan's military capabilities, to cooperating with us to do that and so on. So there's likely to be continuity, at least in terms of foreign policy. From the perspective of the PRC, this is a significant setback. There's no subtlety about what the CCP wanted. They did not want DPP to win. They would've preferred, I think, for the KMT to come back. And the KMT, although it's moved away from its old posture of claiming that it was the legitimate ruler of all of China, has been, I think, softer and more accommodating in its approach to the mainland, even though they're not saying, "We now support reunification" anytime soon.

So they would've preferred the KMT, they've got the DPP, they're going to have to deal with that, and they don't like it. We don't know exactly what they're going to do. As I said, they tried a variety of things to make sure that this didn't happen. I mentioned the disinformation. They've taken some steps that suggest that they might do things to constrict their economic relationship with Taiwan, which would hurt Taiwan, which does a great deal of business with the mainland, but would also potentially have a negative impact on China itself. So the X factor here, and the question I think that's been on people's minds is what else the CCP regime may do and how soon they might do it. We've been engaged in this country in a very intense, and I think in some respects, an exaggerated discussion over the supposedly imminent prospect of a major use of force by the mainland against Taiwan.

This isn't to say that it couldn't happen, but I think we've kind of spun ourselves up in the last couple of years in talking about this to a point that may be exaggerated and unrealistic. But that said, there is little question, I think, that the PRC is going to continue to tighten the noose to the extent that it can around Taiwan. They're doing this diplomatically. There are only, I think, 12 governments in the world remaining that recognize Taiwan, and that's symbolic. Maybe it's not of great practical significance, but one, Nehru dropped off, I guess there were 13, and now they're at 12.

Undoubtedly, they did that at the instigation of the PRC. Maybe that doesn't make a huge difference, but it's part of an ongoing effort that the PRC is making to limit Taiwan's diplomatic

space. I mentioned the economic pressure, and they're continuing to put military pressure on Taiwan, both in the longer term, the ongoing military buildup, which is very serious. And every day that goes by, China's capabilities against Taiwan are growing, but also displays of force. People, I think, are waiting to see whether the mainland will respond to the outcome of the election with anything that resembles what they did when former Speaker Pelosi visited Taiwan, I guess, in August, 2022. And they may yet do things like that. During the course of the election campaign, I think even while the election was underway, apparently they floated some of these surveillance balloons across Taiwan. There've been suggestions that they will take some further steps like penetrating Taiwan's airspace and overlying the island, this kind of thing. So people are waiting, I think, to see what the PRC will do. I guess my own view is the likelihood in the near term that the mainland is going to start a war with Taiwan is very, very small. And I think that's probably going to be true for at least in the short to medium term. I just don't see this happening immediately.

There are things that could happen that could be worse and more difficult to deal with than what we've had to face thus far and could be more serious than a replay of these big military exercises. And the thing that I think the more serious commentators have focused on in the last year and more is the possibility of a naval blockade that would effectively cut Taiwan off from the world and have major economic implications.

Of course, a blockade is an act of war, so they probably wouldn't do it overtly, but maybe they're going to conduct exercises and they're going to issue warnings to ships coming through sea lanes and so on. I don't think a blockade is coming anytime soon, but I think we're in for continued tension and increased pressure from the mainland on Taiwan. So, this pot is, it's bubbling and it's, I think, not going to boil over immediately, but the heat is going to go up, so it's going to be even more of a concern.

BILL KRISTOL:

So it's a defeat for the mainland that the DPP won as the least pro-succumbing-to-the-mainland party and quite resistant to it actually. That's kind of their brand. But on the other hand, a defeat that they're going to try to deal with. Not one that's going to make them think, "Oh gee, I guess we have to give up on those prospects of unification with Taiwan."

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yeah. And people have pointed out that there's now divided government, so I believe the KMT has a majority in the legislative branch. So, there are going to be some constraints on what this new president can do, and undoubtedly the PRC is going to try to work on those and slow down Taiwan's efforts to strengthen itself, in particular. The problem, I think, for China in the long run has been evident for a while, and this is just a reminder. And that is they really have lost any possibility of achieving, as they would put it, reunification in an uncoerced or peaceful way. For a long time, they did entertain the hope that they could do that. They thought maybe the KMT was the vehicle. But Taiwan has changed in the last 20 and 30 years, and more and more Taiwanese people think of themselves as Taiwanese first and not Chinese first. Support for unification or reunification has dropped off dramatically. I think the possibility of achieving a peaceful resolution of this on terms that would be acceptable to the mainland has disappeared. That doesn't leave them with a lot of options other than the application of further pressure and hoping that somehow they can crack Taiwan's resolve.

The other thing I think the mainland would like to do, and this may be increasingly the focus of their efforts, is to chip away at the support that the United States has been giving and is giving to Taiwan. They have not been successful in this regard either, but I think the way in which they might do that is not to persuade us to back away and let China do what it wants, but rather to increase concerns in the United States, in the West, that war is imminent and that if we don't do something to pressure the Taiwanese, who knows what's going to happen? And that's been the tone of things that the mainland has been saying for some time and they're

going to try to keep working on that, I think. Weaken support from the United States, make the Taiwanese feel at some point that they're totally isolated, alone, and have no alternative but to agree to terms with the mainland. But they're a long way from that, and certainly now, and in fact they're probably further from that than they've been in a long time.

BILL KRISTOL:

Maybe closer to getting this... They would be in favor of this. I'm not saying they're the main cause of this but getting Americans to generally be weary of foreign entanglements and commitments and feeling overstretched and these things don't work out perfectly. And people started saying recently on the right, the right-wing critics of Ukraine, "It's another Afghanistan." For now they're anti-China for various reasons, and therefore pro-Taiwan, that's orthodoxy on the Republican right. But how long does that last if we're really tired? Or how serious and deep is that if we're tired of deploying forces everywhere and spending too much on defense and so forth?

I think all these... it's funny how... I mean, I suppose we should go through these different parts of the world first, but we could talk about it for a minute now. I mean, the degree to which all these countries' agendas depend on weakening US resolve in general, I think is underappreciated here. It's not so much that China has to change our view of China necessarily or of Taiwan. But China has a big interest in changing our view of the US role in the world.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes, absolutely. And that I think is among the most important reasons why China is supportive of what Russia is doing, very much so. Also, they're supportive of the Iranians, and in my view, they weren't unhappy to see this war in Ukraine drag on. They may not have instigated it, maybe they were surprised by it, initially they may have been concerned about it, but I think they've come to the conclusion that it serves their interest in part for just the reason that you say, it wears us down, it certainly deflects our attention, some of it, from the Indo-Pacific region, and it contributes to these divisions that are emerging in this country over foreign policy in a way that we haven't seen in some years. The same thing is true arguably of what's been going on in the Middle East. I don't think there's any reason to think that China was in any way directly involved in what happened on October 7th, no suggestion of that. Or even that they're directly implicated in what the Houthis are doing. They don't have complete control over the Iranians certainly.

But what Iran is doing in the region by confronting Israel both directly and indirectly through these three proxy groups, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, and confronting us, again, divides our attention, divides our resources, stokes debate in this country over the particulars of this conflict, but also I think over the question of our position in the world.

So, yes, I agree. I don't think — certainly Russia, not China and not Iran — they don't have any hopes of directly confronting us at this point or defeating us in some way. But they have reason to hope that our resolve is waning and that our resources are overtaxed. That's the only way that they can succeed in achieving their objectives, is if the US pulls back from the support of its local allies and friends who stand in the way of their achieving at least their regional objectives. That's true for Iran, it's true for Russia, it's true for China too.

BILL KRISTOL:

Let's take a moment on each of the Middle East and then on Ukraine, because it is in a way... You said your fellow China experts don't consider you a China expert, but maybe the China experts don't think enough about this broader context, which is really important to understanding, I suspect, what China's thinking and the future of US-China relations.

So the Middle East — I mean you're an international relations expert, also China expert — so just generally, I mean October 7th is now what? Over three months ago. I mean, surprises, things to look for in the next few months that might happen or might not happen? Indicators that it's going to really become a wider war and really have to be even more of a focus for us or that maybe we've seen most of it and it's winding down a bit. Where are you on that?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Well, I'm not a Middle East specialist, so I'm even more reluctant to poach on the turf of people who really are. But I mean, first to start with the obvious point, what happened on October 7th was a shock and a surprise to Israel, the people who were most immediately concerned, and to us too. My sense is that the purpose of this attack was to provoke Israel into doing things that would leave it further isolated from the rest of the world and maybe draw in the Iranians or draw in Hezbollah to support Hamas. They appear, if that's what they were hoping, on the one hand, I think they have succeeded in provoking Israel and causing Israel to become further isolated in the world. Also, they've succeeded, although I don't know that they were intending this, in producing new and maybe serious tensions in the relationship between Israel and the United States.

I don't think they are likely to succeed in sparking a wider war, at least the way things have been going from what one can gather, if Hamas thought that Hezbollah was going to help them out by starting a war with Israel in the north, in Lebanon, they must have been disappointed because Hezbollah is pretty clearly not interested in doing that. If they thought the Iranians were somehow going to come in and help them out directly, they've been disappointed there as well. I saw an account recently, I think it was in the Wall Street Journal saying... recounting, who knows how reliably, a meeting between Hamas representatives and Iranian representatives in which supposedly the Iranians said, "Look, you didn't tell us about this. Don't expect us to do anything big to help you out." Now maybe the Iranians are spreading that story because they don't want to be implicated in what happened and they certainly have indirect responsibility because they've given support to Hamas over the years.

But at least for the moment, the prospects of a wider war don't seem to be there, at least not with Gaza as the spark, if you like. The piece of this that now has emerged, and which I think has also been a surprise even to many of the regional specialists, is what the Houthis are doing ostensibly in support of Hamas, but they have their own reasons for wanting to deflect their population from the fact that they the Houthis are now in charge, need to go from being a resistance movement to actually governing the place. And that's not an easy task and they may not be very interested in it. So standing up to the United States may make good sense. It also presents them to the world as the great supporter of the Palestinians, and arguably as an embarrassment to Arab governments who are not stepping up to do that.

I think the surprise for many people, maybe I should say it was a surprise to me, is the extent to which the Houthis have been armed by the Iranians with a suite of anti-ship missiles of various kinds and varying ranges including cruise missiles and evidently some ballistic missiles as well, which because of the geography and the relatively narrow waters that flow by the coasts and then have to go into the Suez Canal, enable them to interdict shipping to attack or if not to sink any major freighters or oil tankers to seriously disrupt maritime traffic. Because once these missiles start flying, the people who are sending the cargo via this route are confronted almost immediately with sky-high insurance rates, so they prefer to divert the shipping around the Horn of Africa if they're going to Europe and that raises the cost.

They're able to cause a lot of mischief and I think no one that I've seen who knows anything has suggested that Houthis are suddenly a very sophisticated fighting force. But I think what it shows is that these fairly sophisticated and effective precision-guided munitions don't require a very sophisticated military, highly trained, or with lots of other apparatus to use them and to cause a lot of disruption. That's a new wrinkle in this.

I think the Biden administration, it can be faulted for their, perhaps, misguided attempts to put relations with the Iranians back on even keel, and they may have believed that the situation in Yemen was quieting down. And they have tried, I think, as hard as they could, not to get directly involved in this, but now because of the repeated attacks on shipping, the US in combination with the British and other allies have had to launch some air attacks against some of the facilities from which these missiles are launched. But I don't think anybody believes that is going to solve the problem, in part because apparently the Houthis have a pretty sizable arsenal of these things, it's rough terrain, these missiles are mobile on mobile launchers. I saw one estimate that said, "Well, the strikes destroyed 90% of the targets at which they were directed," but even if they did that, they destroyed less than a quarter of what's thought to be the arsenal of these missiles that the Houthis have. Here, I think they're the prospects for further escalation because I think we're now in a kind of a tit-for-tat where the US coalition are going to be striking at these weapons and the Houthis are not going to stop. But again, I don't see the Iranians becoming directly involved in this. The Iranians benefit from what their clients, if you like, these three groupings are doing, to attack their enemies, particularly Israel, attack the United States without Iran getting directly involved in that. And China benefits from what Iran is doing, two steps removed for the same reason, because it ties us up in knots.

It seems to me this is going to continue. Even if the fighting in Gaza winds down, I don't see much prospect that there's going to be a sudden peaceful resolution to all of that that's satisfactory to Israel or anybody else. There too, I think we have at best an open sore, an open wound that's going to continue to deflect our energy and attention away from other things.

BILL KRISTOL:

The Houthis thing is such a good reminder that these unanticipated things that happened, the unknown unknowns, not just the known unknowns, the war started — Hamas attacked October 7th — the war started almost immediately afterwards. And there were a lot of people intelligently weighed the balances of would Hezbollah get involved and how well could Israel fight this war and the tunnels of Gaza and what would the Israeli domestic situation be and all kinds of things, very important things. And those have been discussed and we've learned something. I bet you could look pretty hard in the cover in the... online and media on October 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, and see a lot of talk about the Houthis. That's not a criticism, that wasn't the most important thing, but here we are.

It's a good example of how these things, people take advantage of situations. People act on their own, even if they don't take advantage of situations, they become challenges, as you say. In a way, the Houthis, ironically is more of a direct challenge to us than Israel, Hamas, where we're standing with Israel basically, and have concerns about obviously the civilian casualties in Gaza and the reconstruction of Gaza and so forth.

But I don't know, the Houthis thing does... yeah, it's not resolved yet. And I don't know, Eli Cohen had a pretty excellent piece, a pretty tough piece I would say, saying this tit-for-tat is not the way to handle this kind of thing. It just guarantees that it goes on. So, I suppose we could live with it, I suppose we could be having another conversation in four months and Houthis would be lobbying missiles and ships would be mostly still going on the path they're on, but some would be diverted around the Cape and, I don't know, or not. Or do you think it has to be... I don't know. What do you think, you think that's the most likely situation as opposed to a cleaner resolution of this? And how much does it destabilize other things? The Saudis... I just want to, again, come back to the general chaos has some spillover effects even if there's not a direct one-to-one correlation or something.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Right. A couple of thoughts, one is it's just a reminder, and I guess what Hamas did in October in provoking Israelis was an illustration of this and maybe what the Houthis are doing now is another example. It's so much easier to sow chaos and disruption than it is to assure stability.

You don't have to be a big and powerful force to do that, unfortunately. And both Hamas and its attacks on Israel and what the Houthis are doing now have proven that, they're having global impact, even if it's a somewhat indirect one.

The other thing, you'll excuse me for just one little excursion here, which is people have been talking about the revolution in military affairs for 20, 30 years. At the heart of that was the recognition that advances in, basically in microelectronics communications, guidance systems and so on, were enabling jumps in the accuracy of conventional weapons, precision-guided munitions that would have a profound impact on the character of war, one, so people have been saying that at least since the end of the Cold War.

And two, some people at least, early on speculated that these same capabilities would ultimately proliferate, and it wouldn't just be big powers that would have them, but because they're relatively inexpensive, relatively simple to operate, even lesser states and even non-state actors could eventually get hold of these things and use them. And I think what we've been seeing since the start of war in Ukraine is that emergence of this revolution in warfare, in full flower, big powers, the United States, China, Russia, have been developing these things for a couple of decades, but now we're seeing that even lesser powers can use them in very effective ways, and that is changing the character of warfare. That's an illustration of this.

As to what's going to happen, I certainly don't know. It is very difficult for me to imagine. Just looking at the Houthi part of this, from what I understand— is there going to be some negotiated settlement of this, or even if the war in Gaza simmers down, is that really going to cause the Houthis to stop doing what they're doing? There are reasons to think not.

Negotiated outcome, no. Are we going to invade Yemen and overthrow the Houthis regime? I think the probability of that is absolutely zero, less than zero for good reason. Are we going to be able to significantly degrade the Houthis' capabilities to cause the kind of damage that they're causing? I think the answer there could conceivably be: yes— at least in part, but it would require two things.

One is this offensive element that we're seeing, although thus far, only in limited increments, I guess we've carried out a third attack and we could keep on doing that. But the second piece of it has to be finding some way to interdict and prevent re-arming because the Houthis, as far as I'm aware, don't have any capacity to manufacture these things. Maybe they can make some simpler rockets the way Hamas can, but not anything like the weapons that they've been using. So they have to get them from outside. Where do they get them? They get them from Iran. And how do they get there? They get there by sea. I guess there've been a couple instances in which we've stopped and inspected ships that are coming from Iran that have replacement parts and we've seized those.

We could do more of that. We probably will do more of that. So we're both attriting the existing forces, the Houthis are firing these things off so their magazines get lower. And then what can we do to prevent them from effectively rearming? I think we're going to be trying to do that. We're already starting.

The last bit of that would be thinking about whether we can apply pressure to the Iranian regime in ways that would discourage them from continuing to do what they've been doing. They actually agreed under the terms of the... Whatever it's called... It's not exactly a treaty. Agreement that they signed with the Saudis a while ago that was brokered by China, agreed not to continue to supply the Houthis with weapons. Well, I would guess they probably never really intended to abide by that and now it seems to me unlikely that they would. So, what could we or outside forces do that would dissuade the Iranians from continuing to resupply? I think it's going to have to be a combination of those measures to make these waters safely navigable.

BILL KRISTOL:

And as you said, having been in government, yeah, that's a pretty major enterprise, all that, with Iranian implications and Middle Eastern implications, Saudis. And then you've got that and Ukraine and obviously the ongoing big threat of China and Asia. It's a lot for any administration to deal with. I want to come back to that in a minute and ask you how you think they're doing, basically. But I want to put a pin on your point that it's so much easier. One thing we've learned over the last two years is it's easier to sow chaos than to guarantee or secure stability. And I think that's such an important point for people to just think hard about.

The other point, as you started to say it, I actually went to a slightly different direction, I think, but consistent direction, which was the other thing about the last two years is surprises. If we had had the most intelligent conversation with all of our most well-informed friends, as well as some less well-informed ones and people with different points of view politically, I don't know, would we have thought on December of 2021, when Afghanistan was huge and bad and there were going to be implications of that we all thought? I think we were right about that incidentally, in terms of low point for the US and Putin saw it, but we didn't expect, most people, a full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in February of 2024. We didn't expect Hamas to be able to do what they did terribly on October 7th, 2023. I didn't expect the Houthis to be doing what they're doing.

So this is only two years. That's a lot of surprises in different parts of the world in two years and such a good reminder of... And I feel like together though... A, it's a reminder of the nature of the world and the nature of life. But B, I do feel like they're a little bit cumulative. We're somehow in a moment now that began in November, maybe... Who knows when it began, but we'll just say it began in February of... I said November. I meant February, began in February 2022. It's now two years of conflict, surprises, reversals at times. Russia, look how pitiful their military is. Well, actually then they stabilized and aren't quite as pitiful as we thought. Then it turns out they may be pitiful, but Hamas is may be stronger than Israel and we thought, and the Houthis could do more damage than we thought.

So, which way does the military balance, which way does it cut? Are we stronger vis-a-vis our adversaries than we thought three years ago or weaker? Or is it some probably combination of the two? I mean, I feel like the degree to which historians will look back and say there was this period that began in February 2022, and as we're in the middle of it or early in it, maybe is very uncertain in terms of its outcomes. And then the question is, how are we doing and how are our allies doing? And again, just one last point I want you to talk, not me, but Biden, everyone thought the administration... The early judgments, and I very much concurred in these after February 22, is we're stronger than we expected, our allies are stronger than we expected, NATO is stronger than we expected, Ukraine did better than we expected. Could be a real moment for the democracies to really... And I think it was, and Zelensky was awfully impressive and Europeans were more willing to rally to Ukraine and so forth.

US was pretty united despite the polarization of our politics. I feel a little different today, honestly. I think we did well and Europeans did well. But all in, if you now look around the world, are we as confident in our ability to manage these crises, our will to stick them out, our allies' will? So I guess the question is: All in, what's your judgment of US ability, the US policies, if we've done what we needed to do in different areas and what worries you the most, I guess going... Where are we almost two years after February 2022?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Well, let me just add one other surprise in there. And that is the economic difficulties that China has been experiencing and the fact that they have not bounced back from... Well, one surprise was they dropped their COVID policy literally overnight and went through a period when they evidently experienced very high number of deaths because they let the pandemic just burn itself through their population. And so, that was a surprise. The other thing that's been surprising there was that their economic performance didn't get a big upward boost as

people thought that it would and they haven't gone gotten back on a healthy trajectory of growth. They've had this ongoing crisis in their property sector, real estate, which has not caused the place to collapse, but is a serious drag on growth.

So, they've been experiencing a negative crisis themselves and maybe we can come back to talk about that and what the implications of that may be. But there too, I don't think many people were predicting that. In fact, the economists, I think, the ones that I have read, were predicting China... They've made an intelligent decision to drop their zero-COVID policies and get rid of these draconian lockdowns and try to get back to normal business. And as a result, their economy is going to get back on a healthy growth trajectory, and it hasn't. And I think that's also something of a surprise.

But on your question about where do we stand, I shared the view that you expressed that what happened in February 2022 was, as terrible as it was, was also a tremendous opportunity for the United States, viewing it from our perspective, to further consolidate our alliance relationships in Europe, also in Asia. Among other things, it seemed to me that one of the unexpected effects of the Russian attack on Ukraine was to increase the level of seriousness in many places in Europe regarding the possible threat posed by China.

And there really was a shift in the ways that people in many countries in Europe began to talk about China after the Russian invasion. And they began to use language that really sounded remarkably like that of some people in the United States saying, "The problem is the character of this regime, these dictatorial authoritarian regimes are inherently aggressive. They're untrustworthy, they're prone to begin conflicts and we need to take that seriously," number one. Number two, the other thing that I think happened or began to happen more quickly was people in Europe started to take more seriously the concerns that had emerged, especially during the pandemic, but in our case had started somewhat earlier about deepening dependence on China for a variety of products. PPEs during the pandemic, but also semiconductors.

All of a sudden, maybe that's an exaggeration, but you find more people in Europe saying, we've learned from our experience with Russia that dependence on a hostile regime for essential inputs to our economy is risky and it can be cut off or it can be used to exert leverage over us. We don't want to be in that situation again with respect to China or we don't want to be with respect to China in the position we found ourselves in initially with respect to Russia. It seemed to me like there was a lot to work with. And also I should say in Asia, you also had heartening expressions of concern about what was happening in Europe and expressions of support for Ukraine and for NATO in the US in opposition to what was happening in Ukraine, and also in European capitals more concerned about Taiwan and more expressions of support for Taiwan and essentially support for policy similar to the one that the US has been supporting towards Taiwan. So, it was galvanizing.

I wrote a piece, I guess it was published spring 2023, and it was entitled "A World of Blocs," and spelling this out and saying there's an axis of authoritarians that's emerged and is consolidated, and now there's a new possibility for creating a strong coalition of democracies in Europe, Asia, backed by the United States. I did a variant of that, a shorter one that was published sometime afterwards, which, displaying a lack of imagination, I called "A World of Blocs?" And the question mark there had to do not with the axis of authoritarians, which I think has really emerged as a bloc in a meaningful sense. But the question is more about us, and it has to do with our domestic politics... I mean, I don't know about you, but I would not have expected that continuing support for Ukraine would've become such a controversial issue in our politics or that some parts of the Republican Party, not all of it, had become openly hostile to the Ukrainian government and more or less openly sympathetic to Russia. I kind of thought that was a Trump thing, which I think it was. But of course, because of Trump's grip on the Republican Party, what's his obsession becomes the obsession of many ambitious politicians on the Republican side.

So our resolve not as strong as it was, because of course we didn't anticipate what was going to happen in the Middle East and the controversy that would emerge over Israel's response to this barbaric attack on them and the prospects that has opened for deeper divisions between us and our allies, particularly in Europe who have historically been less sympathetic to Israel than we are, but initially at least, took a line similar to ours in supporting Israel against this terrorist attack.

So, there are fissures and seams there that... some of which were difficult to foresee. And of course, the other thing that hangs over this, it's the elephant in the room, if that's the right term, and that is the uncertainty over our upcoming presidential election.

I think to a degree, which perhaps we don't observe, maybe because people shield us from some of it, our allies have to be considering what the implications for them will be of a second Trump administration, and they have to be hedging against that possibility and waiting anxiously on the outcome of our election, because I don't think most of them want to see that. So there too, I wouldn't have expected as recently as two years ago that this was a serious possibility. And that too, I think has interfered with our ability to seize that moment and consolidate a stronger multi-part coalition. I think there are still possibilities there. I do think the current administration has been trying to push forward with the different pieces of that, but it has not progressed as far as I would've hoped two years ago. We have not taken full advantage of the opportunity that was presented two years ago.

BILL KRISTOL:

And that's in defense spending and defense industrial base and some of the just basic building up of what we need for this new world we're living in, right?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes. And also, mobilization in the American public. I may have missed it, but I don't think President Biden got on TV and gave a major fireside address in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion, saying, what he has, to his credit, said in other less visible settings, that this is a struggle between Democracy and Authoritarianism, and we in this country have to be the bulwark against authoritarian aggression. I mean, again, I think he has said these things, but not in a way that really gripped ordinary people as I think it might have. And we need to respond to it by doing some things that we would perhaps not otherwise choose to do, like undertaking major increases in defense spending.

Seemed to me that there was a window, there was a moment after the Russian invasion when that would've been possible. People made this comparison, I think we did when we talked last year, to the North Korean attack on South Korea in June 1950, and the decision that the Truman administration made to ratchet up defense spending and to solidify NATO and so on. Different, undeniably, and maybe less intense. It was pretty intense, but maybe it was different than the Russian attack on Ukraine, but there was a model there for rallying the American people, and it seems to have passed, unfortunately.

BILL KRISTOL:

Maybe it could be brought back. You and I have discussed this in the past, compared it to the early Cold War and the Truman administration and the possibility of a laying the [inaudible], imperfectly, obviously, for things that could... but beginning to do things that would pay off later and would lead to some stability and some ability to confront, certainly, the opponents.

But the Trump thing is... I mean [inaudible], "Oh, you don't like Trump, so you're just saying this." But of course it really isn't just analytically so different that he's going to, presumably, going to be the nominee again. I was thinking about it. Take the Trump, take the Truman example, just a very simple way. Roosevelt in '44, and Truman in '48 all ran against Republicans who defeated the isolationist wing of their party and therefore were more or

less... I mean, certainly in the case of Willkie, very explicitly, Dewey '44, a little more complicated, but basically there was no doubt we had to finish the war. People didn't quite see the Cold War coming.

And then '48, very much so with Dewey against Taft, and then '52 with Eisenhower defeating Taft. So, in the early Cold War years, the out party basically resolved — I mean there were all kinds of things going on, God knows — Joe McCarthy and Bricker and all this stuff, but ended up supporting the administration's basic policy. So you had mostly bipartisan support for the basic policies that the administrations pushed and for all the criticisms and bickering. And if you think of the Cold War years in general, I guess you could say Goldwater in '64, McGovern in '72 were the two biggest challenges to the mostly bipartisan consensus. And they both got crushed in general elections, which restored the strength, that you might say, of the more or less bipartisan consensus, which was able to live through Watergate, therefore, and other things.

I mean, it's as if we do have Robert Taft as the nominee. From my point of view, it's as if we have Robert Taft as the nominee in '52 or really maybe Joe McCarthy as the nominee in '52, if you want to think about it that way. Which incidentally, he wasn't never thought of at the time, I think, as a real presidential possibility. He had a lot of fervent supporters. But of course, it's a different world we live in, and Trump has been president, so he is a real possibility, obviously. I guess how much does that change the dynamics of everything, where Henry Wallace could not just a third- or fourth-party candidate, but a possible competitor to Truman in the Democratic Party in '48 would've been another analogy, perhaps? I do feel that people underestimate a little bit, we went through all those fights here in the forties and fifties and afterwards. But this is so unusual in a way, but also challenging, therefore, to deal with this, which does mean, just to get back to your basic point, and maybe you could talk a little more about this, we'll probably have to put off all the big talk, the interesting talk about the longer term challenge of China. We can have another conversation about that which we have had before, and which is presumably going to still be there three or four months from now. But just this next... What do we have, 10 months 'til the election is that right now? It's January 18th, so a little less than 10 months 'til, and almost exactly a year until the inauguration. It's January 18th, it'll be January 20th, I think, 2025.

So what a year, right? And to have this Trump presumably winning the nomination, what signal that sends abroad, what he then campaigns on, do Republicans in Congress make a deal on Ukraine as we talk? That's literally, it's very much up in the air right now with water discussions, and I just talked to someone on the hill, and they're hoping it could work out in the next week, but if Trump wins New Hampshire and he says, "No, I don't want a deal on the border or in Ukraine," what happens there? Obviously, the Middle East, we've been saying, we don't know quite what direction that goes, whether it's Israel, Hamas, or the Houthis. Taiwan, China has some interest probably in keeping that pot bubbling. I mean, I don't know. Have we really looked at... Since we've been out of the real wars of the early 2000s and since Afghanistan simmered down to a very difficult, but still not a massive conflict after about 2012, 13, have we been in a situation like the one we seem likely to face here in 2024? It's a real moment, isn't it? And I don't quite know what to say about it, but I want to hear what you have to say about it.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes, I think it's potentially a fork in the road which we have not faced since the late 1940s, early 1950s. That just as you say, certainly with Eisenhower's election in 1952, where you resolve the question of whether there would be bipartisan support for this global US position, support for alliances and so on. Yeah, there were details to be worked out and there were disputes over various things, but there was a consensus, this Cold War consensus about confronting the Soviet Union, confronting China also working with allies in various parts of the world to accomplish the objectives of containment, and that held through to the end of the

Cold War. And then the interesting thing, and maybe somewhat surprising to the theorists of international relations who assume that states are rationally calculating unitary actors that should logically at such a major turning point re-examine the assumptions underlying their grand strategies and adjust. That isn't what happened. And we kind of ran on the fumes of that consensus through the '90s, through the first decade of the 2000s, growing... there's descent and disagreement about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan certainly, but that has now run its course. And we are now, I think, faced with a serious debate about whether we're going to continue with anything resembling the set of policies that we adopted to conduct the Cold War.

So, alliances, large and globally deployed military forces, free trade agreements, more or less binding us, the countries that shared our values. Are we going to do that? Are we going to continue to do that? And albeit in a very peculiar form, Trump has brought this issue to the fore, and I guess I'm of two minds on that. One, you could say it's sort of a fluke. I mean its particular form is not something that one could have anticipated. And maybe if not for Trump, if you had had a more normal Republican as a candidate in 2016, or even as elected president in 2016, or if you had a more normal mainstream Republican now, whatever exactly that means, you would have disagreements, but not radical disagreements.

I mean, think of how Rubio as a Republican nominee in 2016 would've run on foreign policy against Hillary Clinton. It would not have been this debate about fundamentals.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Or even Nikki Haley today, to take an actual candidate, the last one standing against Trump. She and Biden would be a more traditional kind of choice.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yeah. And you'll know much more about this than I do. But there is in, at least on the Senate side among the Republicans, there's kind of a core of people, not all of them old people who've been around for decades, but some of them, who basically still believe in this. Mitch McConnell being an example and who are critical of the administration on all sorts of things. But they continue to adhere to this basic view of the proper role for the United States in the world and maybe among some of the Republicans in the House.

But that's kind of a residual, I'm afraid, and it's shrinking. I worry it shrinks with every passing year, partly because some of the people who make that up are exiting. And I don't see a lot of new people coming in who want to pick up that banner and say, wait a minute, yes, we can criticize Biden for this and that, but we shouldn't throw everything out and revert to isolationism basically. Or the way in which it's presented now going back the early '50s is this idea of Asia first, and we can talk about that.

But nevertheless, this is because of Trump, I think, this is where we are. And so we have not faced anything like this and our allies have not faced anything like it either. And that has caused deep anxiety going back to 2016, which has been somewhat beneath the surface for the last three years because of Biden coming back. But I don't think there are many serious people in our major allies who just assumed that it was all just going to be business as usual and the United States was back as Biden said, and things were going to continue as they had been before.

There has been this anxiety in the background about whether the US is going to be around in the same way. And that, I think, is something that's very different than anything that we've experienced or that our allies have since the early days of the Cold War.

BILL KRISTOL:

And what I'd add and want you to comment on finally is, but also in the actual 10 months or whatever it is till the election and 12 months till the inauguration, it's a very turbulent world.

So it'd be one thing if there was like, okay, it's quiet. We get to have this fork in the road. We get to make a choice. We have a fork in the road. It's coming in 10 months. Let's have a debate about it. Our allies are so nervous, but okay, what can we do about that? But of course, a huge number of things are happening and could be happening, including some surprises of course, you just mentioned, few months.

And with respect to Taiwan, they have sort of lame duck government now for a while. And then of course Russia, Ukraine, and obviously the Middle East. The degree to which we're in extremely choppy waters with a very uncertain moment of decision ten months from now, I can't really even think of a sort of example of that and of which of course the uncertainty about November is contributing to the choppiness of the waters today and giving incentives to certain actors to do certain things.

So I mean in that respect, 2024 is not just like a year of division, a year of decision, though it is that, but also itself could be a very important year, don't you think in foreign policy and international relations in terms of where we are just as a country by the end of this year, vis-a-vis the world situation in the global order? I mean, don't you think or do you think and—

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

... particular things to look for, are there things you're sort of focused on and... there are elections, there's Russia-Ukraine... what would you focus on? Where will we be in November '24 I guess is what I'm asking?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Oh, Bill, if I could answer that question, I'd be—

BILL KRISTOL:

Give a brief answer—

AARON FRIEDBERG:

... In wealthy retirement.

BILL KRISTOL:

... we'll end the conversation.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Well, of course, I don't know. But yeah, it is I think potentially a fundamental turning point. I do think if Biden is reelected, we'll continue along something resembling the current trajectory. And so maybe the idea that the United States has sort of returned to something more closely resembling the path that it was on before 2016 will sink in and people will start to believe it. Of course, that'll depend on what happens in the Republican Party. And that'll be a very interesting question.

If Trump loses in the upcoming presidential election, what's going to happen to the Republican Party and what's going to happen to the Republican Party stance on foreign policy? I mean, I would've said once that if you took Trump out of the picture, things would snap back and maybe they would have if he had lost in 2016. But because he's been successful, at least as far as he's been, he's now got people following him and coming along behind him. And to put it bluntly, coming up with pseudo-intellectual justifications for a lot of the things that he was doing on instinct or impulse disrespecting our European allies.

So, you've got people saying, well, NATO has to do more, which of course they do, but that's different from Trump saying, I'll tear up the treaty and you're on your own. That would've been, we would face a different prospect. We will face a different environment if he is defeated. On the other hand, if he wins and if he does a fraction of the things that he's sort of intimated that he wants to do. First of all, I think it'll produce even deeper divisions in our politics than we're experiencing now and instability and disruption of a sort that we haven't experienced on a sustained basis before.

We went through some of this January 6th. But who knows what happens if he gets in. And that really is going to force everybody to recalibrate their thinking about the United States and about the role that we play. Of course, it's exaggerated, and it's led to some mistaken decisions to have this view as the United States as the indispensable power and so on. On the other hand, we are the poll in the tent that's holding up anything resembling a stable international order, at least among... in the democratic parts of the world, democratic with a small D.

And if that's gone, I think we're going to see a lot of chaos. I think we're going to see a lot more conflict even than we've seen. Our allies are going to have to recalibrate and do various things, including potentially acquiring nuclear weapons of their own on the one hand. And on the other, what is that going to do to our opponents? And there's not a simple answer to that. I think there's reason to believe that Putin has been playing for this longer term with the hope that if Trump comes back, the pressure is going to be off him and support for Ukraine is going to be reduced if not eliminated, because I think our European friends would at least try to fill in if we were doing less.

So there's that. That's going to change things. There's the possibility that he might do things that Biden has been reluctant to do in the Middle East, using force perhaps in a more extensive way. And we don't know where that would go, getting into a conflict directly with Iran. That's not impossible. The interesting thing, and for me, the puzzling question is how does this look from a Chinese perspective? Because on the one hand, they have reason to think that Trump has inclinations towards them which are hostile.

And he did set in motion a set of developments that have led us to a much more open rivalry with China than perhaps would've evolved if he hadn't emerged. He did it in a kind of spasmodic and not very systematic way. And the Biden Administration has in many respects continued with the basic direction in which we were going, but actually made it more coherent and rational. So, would Trump pick up where he left off? Would he want to push even harder than the Biden Administration has done on trade issues, on technology control policy?

He might. But would he be as interested in supporting Taiwan as the current Democratic administration has been? I mean, there's some reason to have doubt about that. If you think about how Trump appears to make these calculations, what's Taiwan done for us? They've stolen our technology, and we should be making these semiconductors. So, the other thing I think from a Chinese perspective is the prospect that deepening divisions within the United States and between the United States and its allies are very much in their interest. I think they are for reasons that maybe we'll talk about next time around, they have significant problems of their own, but they also have still faith in their long-term prospects. And they're convinced that our internal problems and divisions are greater than theirs and are going to prevent us from responding as effectively as we might to what they're intending to do and what they have been doing. So would they rather see Trump elected in 2024 or not? I don't know. In one sense, maybe it doesn't matter to them. We're all just sort of cogs in this big historical material machine that they believe in, but I think they would see a mix of pros and cons to a change from what they're dealing with now.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting. But just, I mean, final footnote really what you're saying is I just worry also though about the next eight months themselves again, or 10 months. I mean, that is to say, what does the world look like in October of 2024? Are we confident Ukraine hangs on and is able to at least stabilize the situation, which itself isn't great in a way, a frozen war without USA? Are we confident there will be USA? Are we confident about what happens in the Middle East? What about the Taiwan situation? So, the degree of just a very short-term instability in the middle of an election year with Trump as the probable nominee and everyone and him saying certain things, weighing in on everything presumably, which then affects the instability.

I mean, I think people, we haven't really gone through that either, honestly. And so, in a way, not really, I would say even in 2016 where people didn't think Trump was going to win or 2020. And again, that was all before February 2022 and before October 7, 2023. So yeah, we'll have a lot more to talk about even this year. And we probably should do so maybe around the conventions, let alone, I mean after this fork in the road gets chosen in November of 2024. But that was very interesting about China.

Yeah, it's really important to try to put oneself in their shoes as you have and think it through from their point of view. But there's a lot to think about here, right?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yeah. If you think about the three bad guys, if I can use that technical term that we've been talking about, Russians clearly all in with Trump, Iranians have to be concerned that he might be more forceful in confronting them. And the Chinese, I'm not sure. I think it's a mixed bag from where they sit.

BILL KRISTOL:

But I mean, how weaker we might seem in October of ... Let's assume Trump has a horrible campaign and is gonna lose by 10 points. I still personally think that we could be much weaker in October of 2024 than we are today. I don't think the trajectory is very good in terms of the Biden policies. And so, we could have, I would be for Biden against Trump and would still bet on that being better for the country over the medium and long term. But the degree to which we are just in very, as I say, choppy waters even now in terms of what's happening in the next weeks and months and this year is also an added sort of complication to the situation.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes. And I think the biggest question mark, at least in my mind, is what is going to happen with support for Ukraine? Because if the Congress can't get itself together and continue with the support that we've been offering, that's going to make the situation, it's going to change the situation there pretty dramatically and not in good ways. Could they lose? I don't know. But they could be in much worse shape. And if that were to happen, what message does that send to the rest of the world about our, it's not even about our resolve, it's about the ability of our system as divided as it's become to sustain policies over a period of time. That can't be good. That's only going to encourage those who want to further undermine and weaken the system that we built and to undermine and weaken us. And unfortunately, that prospect of a cessation of our support or a substantial reduction in our support for Ukraine seems to be a real one at this point. And as they used to say, the whole world is watching, and it's not a very edifying picture right now.

BIL KRISTOL:

A sober, but I think a good important note to end on. So, we will end with that. We'll come back in a few months and discuss both the world we're in and also, again, the longer-term conversation about China. And there's so much to talk about there in terms of trade policy, defense policy, defense industrial base, all that sort of stuff. But Aaron, thank you for taking

the time today and for this really informative, I think if not entirely upbeat and cheerful conversation—

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Sorry.

BILL KRISTOL:

... About the world we face.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Thank you very much, Bill.

BILL KRISTOL:

And thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.