

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

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BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm Bill Kristol. Very pleased to be joined today, once again, by Aaron Friedberg, Professor of Politics at Princeton, a Non-Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a leading scholar of International Relations, in general, and China policy in particular. Most recent book, I think, is *Getting China Wrong*. That's about Aaron's colleagues, not about Aaron himself, got it right. I believe that's the subtitle of the book. And he did get it right, actually. And we've had a conversation, or two maybe, on China, a very much worth going back to. Our most recent conversation was at the very beginning of this year on China, mostly, as well as the world, in general. But I thought today we could talk about, what are we at, it's Monday, September 30th. After a very busy weekend in the Middle East and the usual busyness elsewhere in the world, I thought we could talk about the general world situation, it's implications for our election campaign, Election Day is five weeks away, and really try to help people think about this moment in international affairs, but also our own political history. So Aaron, thank you for joining me.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Thank you very much, Bill.

BILL KRISTOL:

So, maybe let's begin with, I want to get, obviously, to the choice we face, the different foreign policy options facing the American public, and their implications. But maybe just begin with, just the world, and do a quick lightning round, as it were, of a general sense of things. It doesn't seem like things have calmed down a lot since we spoke in January of 2024.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

No, it's to the contrary. I think they've heated up pretty much in all directions.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, it is striking, isn't it? You could think these things go cyclically, but this case, say well, let's just go quickly around, the Middle East, the most obvious, but we should begin, say a word about that.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yeah, well obviously, there Israel is fighting on multiple fronts, continuing to fight in Gaza without any clear end point to that conflict. They don't seem to have achieved fully their military objectives and they've resisted pressure to agree to any kind of ceasefire, so they're continuing their operations there.

And then the war with Hezbollah, which has been ongoing, in a way, I guess it's been ongoing for a couple of decades. Low-grade conflict has flared up with a series of remarkable Israeli strikes against Hezbollah at all levels, culminating, at least for the moment, with the airstrikes that killed the leader, Nasrallah, just a couple of days ago, and everybody's waiting for the other foot to fall, whether that's Hezbollah retaliation, or Iranian retaliation, or an Israeli incursion into Southern Lebanon on the ground, which is something which seems like a real possibility. So that's percolating.

And the Houthis continue to harass shipping in the Red Sea. And the Israelis have also evidently conducted some operations against the Houthis, so that's ongoing. In Europe—

BILL KRISTOL:

Let's just, on the Middle East—

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

...for one second. Yeah. And the Iranian nuclear program hasn't come to a halt, I don't think. And they seem to have suppressed their domestic troubles for a while, at least, unfortunately. So, yeah, it's pretty unstable situation. It looked for a while, like, I don't know, there wasn't going to be a new Middle East, but the Abraham Accords, and a little bit of, and Gaza was, one forgets, quiet, not quiet-ish, more or less quiet, until a year ago. The Hezbollah situation was a standoff. It is a good lesson in how the post-October 7th Middle East feels like it's not found to new equilibrium and probably won't for a while.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

No, I think that's right. We don't know where any of the dimensions of this are going to go. I suppose there is a possibility that Israel could escalate further against Iran or if there's some kind of direct exchange. The next step up the ladder, it seems to me, would be for Israel to take action against Iran's nuclear program. But they haven't shown any inclination to do that.

So yeah, this is, I think, the best possible outcome, at least of this most recent exchange with Hezbollah from an Israeli point of view, is that they buy themselves time. I don't think anyone believes that Hezbollah is going to collapse and go away, or that Nasrallah is not going to be replaced by somebody. So this is going to be ongoing. But as has happened in the past, going back to 2006, the last time they had a real war directly with Hezbollah, it was fought to a standstill, but it also led to an extended period of more or less quiet. And I suppose that's what the Israelis are hoping for.

BILL KRISTOL:

It's also striking to me just one more second on the Middle East that Israel hits Yemen, it's a take because the Houthis had launched, I guess, missiles at Israel...

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

...a pretty big attack, it sounds like, from the air on the Houthis in Yemen, which again, is something which just, it barely makes it up to page nine, or the virtual page nine, on the websites. It's a big, once upon a time, that would've been a big story, I think, Israel flying quite a long way away to do this, but getting apparently a green light, yellow light, from a lot of the Arab nations. And then we, I guess, conducted two raids in Syria in the last, or against Syria, against Al-Qaeda and ISIS-type forces in Syria, in the last two weeks. We announced them after we had done them...

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

...which I suppose is prudent. But again, it is barely, it was like in the headlines. We're using, it seems like pretty, not major, but a significant counterterrorism operation there, too. And direct involvement of the U.S., that was—

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Right. And I guess, although we can't be sure what's going to happen next, what's striking, and maybe one of the reasons that these events don't get as much attention as they might otherwise is, the expectation in the past might've been any action is going to lead to some enormous and catastrophic reaction. And what's been striking is how little and how ineffective the reactions have been to both what Israel has done and what the United States has done. And in particular, from the Iranians. Their big contribution was to fire all these missiles at Israel back in the spring, and that was a dud. Those were all shot down, minimal effect.

So it's not clear what capacity, I'm thinking here, particularly the Iranians, what capacity they actually have to hit back, and how willing they are to go up the next step on the ladder. Thus far, as I said, when they've tried it hasn't worked out well for them. And they seem to be hanging back.

And that may be part of the Israeli calculation. They may have come to the conclusion that really, for various reasons, the Iranians either can't or won't take direct, escalatory steps. And what the Israelis are doing to Iran's surrogates is, among other things, humiliating to the Iranians and diminishes their perceived power in the region. And from Israel's point of view, that has to be a good thing.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, I suppose Iran could wait and take retaliatory terrorist actions and so forth as opposed to direct military actions.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes. They have enormous capacity, as we know from the past to do that kind of thing. And they may yet.

BILL KRISTOL:

And then just on our actions, it's a reminder that the War on Terror isn't over, and that unfortunately because of Afghanistan, perhaps in part, that the al-Qaeda and ISIS, they never fully went away and they seem to be reconstituting themselves. So again, a reminder of that side of the challenge as well, I suppose.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes, and it's quite possible that the United States could become even more of a target, in part, because of what's been going on in U.S. support for Israel. That doesn't seem to have happened directly yet, but the problem has not gone away. And if past is prologue, we're going to see this problem grow and take different forms, but it isn't going to go away. There will continue to be terrorism, terrorist attacks on targets in the region and outside the region, conceivably.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yuck. Meanwhile, the largest ground war in Europe in 80 years is going ahead. It's not ceased or even diminished in intensity, really.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes. And I gather the Russians are slowly, slowly making progress. Ukraine has conducted this counteroffensive, which continues into Russian territory. But there's no sign there of any kind of decisive outcome in either direction. I guess there was hope some time ago that the Ukrainian forces might be able to roll back the Russians. And I think, for the most part, people have given up on this thought, at least for the foreseeable future. So is this headed for some

kind of a stalemate? What might break the stalemate? To what extent would the United States and others support Ukraine in taking action that could conceivably have that effect, even at the risk of escalation with Russia? So that's by no means stable, but with no clear outcome in sight, either.

BILL KRISTOL:

I suppose in that case, and get to this in just a second, obviously, there are two policy choices in the U.S. one could seem like it could continue, but you could have us relaxing some of the limitations, lifting some of the limitations on Ukraine's use of weapons. And also providing more of them to Ukraine, conceivably, along with others in Europe. There's a fair amount of people singing up to do that, which could move things in one direction, which would have its own effects in terms of Putin, I suppose. Or the opposite, obviously, if Trump were to win and try to insist on some kind of negotiated settlement.

So anyway, though, very unpleasant stalemate, not even a stable stalemate, if I can put it that way.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

No, I don't think it's reached that point. And therefore, in part for that reason, both sides clearly want to keep on. They haven't reached the point where they've both suffered enough pain and paid enough of a price that they're willing to consider some kind of ceasefire or try to come to some negotiated settlement. I don't see that in the offing.

As you say, and maybe we come back to this, there are those two branches, question of whether the U.S. and others would assist the Ukrainians in escalating in some way that might have hope of bringing about a more successful outcome. Or, whether we might under, for example, a Trump Administration, put pressure on Ukraine to come to terms with the Russians, even as things stand now, giving up a chunk of their territory, effectively.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And the other point people don't, I think, make quite often enough about this situation, Anne Applebaum's made this point in conversations here, and some others have. But if you have a more conventional border war, you can have a stalemate, and you can have a negotiated temporary settlements, at least. If you have a semi-genocidal war against the country you're conquering, and trying to kidnap its children, and kill and torture people, and so forth, it's a little hard to know what even a stalemate or agreement on territory would mean. Are they really going to just allow Russia to just destroy and devastate millions of Ukrainians? So the nature of the war, I think, makes it harder to get to.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes, and I think, also, the nature of the technologies involved, the fact that you have these long range standoff weapons on both sides, so even if you had a stabilized front on the ground, you could continue to have strikes on infrastructure and military targets going back and forth in both directions.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's really a good point. People don't make that point too often. So let's talk about demilitarized zone. What does that even mean when much of the war's being fought at long distance?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, yeah. And then China, just to wrap up their little *tour de* [inaudible] here. That's been, I guess, superficially a little quieter, Asia, maybe than Europe or the Middle East, but not, I take it, in your judgment, more settled or stable than it was nine months ago?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

No, certainly not. Although it is, of the three theaters that we're talking about now, it is the quietest in that there isn't the ongoing, large-scale shooting war. The tensions, obviously, between the United States and China continue. China continues to apply pressure to Taiwan. They've been doing things to put more pressure on the Philippines. And I think more concerning, perhaps more important is the pace of the Chinese buildup of its military capabilities across the board, including, now, a large nuclear buildup. So that one, maybe, is burning at a lower flame for the moment. But it's obviously, or in my view, it's the biggest long-term threat and problem. But the Chinese haven't, thus far, been eager to push it beyond where it is now. They seem pretty content to keep things at, again, a certain low boil, continue to develop their capabilities.

BILL KRISTOL:

Say a word about the relationship of China, Russia, Iran, North Korea. You've stressed this in past conversations, the—

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes. Yeah. That, I think, when we spoke last, and I think maybe even in a prior conversation at the time, I was thinking about a piece I had written about, not a stunningly original notion, but that there was an axis of authoritarians that had emerged and seemed to be operating in closer and closer alignment. And the question from my side was, to what extent are we going to succeed in building a functioning coalition of democracies, global coalition, that would include our allies in Europe and in Asia cooperating with us and working together jointly to deal with this growing threat, which is emerging from the center of Eurasia, if you like, Russia, China, Iran, North Korea. They are all cooperating with each other in different ways. And it appears that that cooperation has grown more and more sophisticated and complex. China is clearly doing a lot to help the Russians, as far as we know, they're doing everything but selling them large quantities of armaments, maybe there've been some small shipments of arms in the past, there've been some reports of that.

But they're, of course, major provider of all the components, electronic, mechanical, that the Russians need to build and rebuild some of their sophisticated capabilities. So China is helping Russia.

The Iranians are helping the Russians by selling them drones in large quantities. And that's where they've been getting a lot of the equipment that they've been using against Ukraine. The North Koreans and the Russians have a deal, the full dimensions of which, I think, we don't fully understand, but seem to involve supplies of conventional munitions from North Korea to Russia, artillery shells, and perhaps also Russian assistance to North Korea, in the further development of its ballistic missiles and its nuclear weapons capabilities. China always, I think, thinks of North Korea as a problem, but also as a state that relies or has relied historically on China, maybe a little concerned that they're striking off and drawing closer to Russia, but that's also a relationship that has significance.

On the China-Russia, There have also been accounts just in the last month where U.S. Officials have made comments. They haven't provided a lot of detail, about transfers of Russian technology to China of a sort which includes capabilities that in the past, the Russians have held back, the Crown Jewels or the remaining Crown Jewels of the Russian arsenal.

And then the Chinese also helped the Iranians in various ways, including by being the biggest purchaser of Iranian oil, which has been constrained by sanctions. They are supposedly, I believe it's over a million barrels a day through this dark fleet that the Russians or that the Chinese use, so they're not seen to be directly purchasing oil. But they're helping Iran by buying its oil.

And there probably is also technical cooperation. Something else that a number of people have wondered about is the extent to which there may be direct or indirect Chinese learning going on from both the war in Ukraine and the fights that are going on in the Middle East. And there are a lot of weapon systems that are being used and tested on both sides. This is an opportunity to see Western, or particularly American, weapons and how they're used. And it's also an opportunity to test various concepts of operations and weapons that the Chinese are interested in. So whether there are Chinese observers on the ground, as there were German and Soviet observers on the ground during the Spanish Civil War or not, China is watching this very carefully and undoubtedly learning lessons from it.

BILL KRISTOL:

Wow. And we talked about a week ago or 10 days ago, and one reason I wanted to have this conversation was the comment you made, you were walking through some of this stuff just very quickly with me, and then I think you said something like, "But of course the biggest source of instability or concern right now is probably our election," not any of these actual, not to minimize these foreign policy developments... but not simply these foreign policy developments.

And so let's get to our election and the choice we face, explain that. One can imagine the dangerous world and we've had it in the past. And a U.S. that's ready to deal with it. Or maybe not ready to deal with it, but that in any cases, on a certain path, that's kind of established and set. That's not the case now,

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Right. I don't know that I would say that the United States is the biggest source of instability, but the biggest source of uncertainty right now I think we know what all of the other actors we've been talking about are going to do over the next six months, year. They're probably going to continue along the path they've been following.

The biggest uncertainty is what we're going to do. And I think that does depend on the outcome of our election. And it may be that there's greater variance or greater potential variance in some of these domains than others, but there is a great deal of uncertainty. And as a result, there's a great deal of anxiety on the part of our allies about what direction U.S. policy is going to take and what the implications for them may be. Maybe this was eased somewhat back in 2020 by the outcome of the election. And I think for the most part, our friends and allies have been content. They haven't always been pleased by everything that Biden Administration is doing, but I think they've found it to be more predictable. And there is this underlying anxiety, both in Asia and in Europe, and more so in Europe, probably, about what exactly a Trump 2.0 would look like. So that hangs over all of this.

BILL KRISTOL:

And so explain that in more, why isn't this just the normal Bush, V. Kerry in 2004? There's always been some uncertainty and some differences in opinion about what we should be doing during the Cold War and during the post-Cold War era. But is this like that, or something more fundamental?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

No, I think the range of possibilities, if Trump comes back, the range of possible policies in each of these areas and across other domains too, is just much wider than would have been typically the case in the past, particularly obviously we're talking about foreign policy. So the range of possibilities there is quite wide. We can talk about Harris, there are uncertainties about what she would do, but I think the range of uncertainty there is fairly narrow compared to what is the case with Trump. And that has partly to do with his past record and partly to do with uncertainty about who exactly would emerge around him and who might have influence over policy in a second Trump administration. And some of those people, at least in their expressed views and their past track records, are maybe closer to a kind of conventional, traditional

Republican hardline approach to foreign and defense policy. And some of them are completely different. Some of them really are isolationists, and I don't think anyone can say with assurance if there are such groups, which one is going to emerge dominant. And I think there are some reasons to think that the second of the two would probably in the end win out because I think they are probably closer to what Trump himself actually believes.

BILL KRISTOL:

And I think Vance makes that much more likely. I think Vance's pick, whether Trump attended it this way or not, means he'll be there if Trump wins, as vice president. And he really seems to believe in America First, and I assume will insist that America First types populate most of the key positions of the administration. And Trump will insist that people who go along with him on January 6th get first crack, not the people who voted to certify the election. You put those two things together, you do end up, I think with an America, much more of an America First administration, a much less of a Reagan Republican administration.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes. And I don't think we're going to see the cycling through more traditional figures who will then get fired or quit after six months, 12 months, 18 months. It just doesn't seem like that's likely for one thing because most of those people have been eliminated. But there are, if you go down the list and think of people, Robert O'Brien or Pompeo or people have mentioned Tom Cotton, Marco Rubio... At least before Trump came on the scene, I would've said those people were all kind of traditional hardline, Reagan-type Republicans. And to varying degrees, when they've spoken on some of these issues, they've continued to take that kind of position, always being careful, of course, not to contradict Trump or not to be critical of him. So that's a cast of characters who could conceivably emerge or some of those people could emerge. We don't know what their views would be once they were in office.

What we do know is that ultimately they would have to do what Trump wanted them to do or they would be out. But at least at the outset, it's possible that you could have a Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, National Security Advisor, who again, at least based on their expressed views, might appear to be more, how to say it? Normal or familiar Republicans. But then there's a whole other cast of characters, Steve Bannon, Rick Grinnell, Stephen Miller, who knows, who could easily emerge as important. Kash Patel, dominant figures even in parts of a new Trump administration. And those people, again, to the extent we can judge their views, are very, very different, and would be America Firsters, for lack of a better term, isolationists I would say. And they'll also be, assuming that there is another faction, they would be struggling for Trump's ear. And again, my guess would be in the end, that side of the spectrum, people with those kinds of views, traditional Democratic allies, I don't know that all of those people share Trump's personal affinity for some of the dictators that he's engaged with. But overall, these are people who are much less interested in talking about human rights or judging the quality of another regime based on its ideology and style of governance. That seems to be much more in harmony with Trump's own views. But again, we don't know. But to get back to your question, what that means is the range of uncertainty, the range of possible policies under a Trump administration is just extremely wide. And just the last point, it's not just a function of, and this would be more normal if you had schools of thought that are going to fight and maybe they're going to compromise and one's going to win on this and one's going to win on the other. Sitting on top of this, you have the maximum leader who's mercurial, capable of changing his mind, going from one thing to another. The thought that that administration with that leader is going to be capable of formulating, implementing and executing anything resembling a coherent sustained strategy, I think is fanciful.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that was very interesting because I had been thinking a little more actually of the gulf between a Harris foreign policy and a Trump foreign policy, which itself is a bigger split, I think you could say. The paths are more divergent than typically has been the case and a choice between, again, Kerry and Bush or whatever you want, Carter and Dole, even the Cold War

choices really. But you make a very good point about Trump himself and his administration itself being uncertain. But maybe say a word also about just the choice in November in the sense of, I mean, Harris and Trump, they are, I mean, we should say, just say a word if you wish, about uncertainty about Harris too. But the basic thrusts of those two foreign policies would be pretty different now.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

I think so. I have in my mind a picture of two sort of branches. So there's Trump on the one side, there's Harris on the other, and each of those branches has two sub-branches underneath. So there's Trump and there's Trump with a dominant influence of a more, I don't know, traditional Republican foreign defense policy, perhaps driven by some of the characters that I've mentioned. And then there's Trump with these other people who would be pushing for a set of policies that would be really radically different and might continue some of the themes that Trump raised at least even if he didn't get to the point of actually implementing them fully in his first administration. And then on the other side, you have the Democrats, Harris, and I think the question about Harris might be, is Harris going to be Biden 2.0 or is it going to be Obama 2.0?

To me, that's sort of the range of variation, and that's much narrower. And obviously there would be differences between either type of Trump administration and either type of Harris administration, but the differences between those two notional forms of a Harris administration are much, much narrower and much more, I don't know, much more traditional and familiar. And so the widest gap would be suppose that you got a much more left-leaning Harris foreign policy and a much more right-leaning Trump foreign policy. And both are possible, although I think it's less likely in fact that Harris is going to go in some dramatically different direction than the direction that Biden has been following. But the array of possibilities is quite wide.

BILL KRISTOL:

And it seems to me, correct me if I'm wrong on this, on both China and the Middle East, you could argue they end up maybe not so wildly different from each other, the two Democratic, let's just say Democratic and Republican administration, Trump and Harris. Whichever version of Harris you get, and to some degree, whichever version of Trump we get, I do think on Russia-Ukraine, it just seems pretty much more black and white. I mean, just hard to believe. Trump is just not going to be spending the next two or three years supporting Ukraine, it doesn't feel like, and fighting Putin and quite the contrary. The only question is how pro-Putin he'll be or how much he'll be sort of neutral, you might say, between Ukraine and Putin. And I think Harris, it's pretty safe bet, will be like Biden. Now, some of us would wish her to be stronger in helping Ukraine, but again, that's an unusual, I feel like, difference between the two candidates on what is probably the most important short and medium term, at least, choice facing the US and maybe the world.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

I agree with that. If you take those three areas, regions and ongoing crises or tensions, yeah, I think the variation on Russia-Ukraine would be the widest, and it's pretty clear. And even the people who are trying to make Trump out to be a coherent thinker and are writing articles describing what Trump's foreign policy could be in this sort of parallel universe where he pursues a consistent set of policies. And by the way, most of those people describe policies which are sort of Reaganites and I guess reflect their own preferences, but I don't think they really reflect Trump's. But even those people have a hard time saying that, well, Trump in the end would really stick to supporting Ukraine and standing up to Russia. So I think the range of variation on that issue is greatest. There may be, and we can perhaps talk about them, there may be differences that would emerge on those other issues on China and on the Middle East, but Russia-Ukraine, it seems pretty stark.

And Trump has not been doing or saying anything to suggest otherwise. I mean, on many issues where he seems to sense that there may be strong opposition to positions that he's taken, he's sort of fudged it and pulled back, but he hasn't really done that on Russia-Ukraine. I haven't

read the full transcript of his encounter with Zelensky, but people are pointing to this or some people are pointing to this, "Well, they met and it was very cordial, and how can you say that Trump would be hostile to Ukraine?" But if you read at least the portions of the transcript I saw, the reason he likes Zelensky now, he says, is Zelensky really could have stuck it to him during the first impeachment investigation by saying that he felt pressured. But instead, he said that he didn't, and therefore he helped Trump. Well, of course, you think about it, and Zelensky's position at the time, is he going to inject himself into this controversy and say, "Yes, Trump was twisting my arm," with the possibility that Trump would in fact not be impeached as happened and then would wreak vengeance on him?

So as with everything with Trump, his judgment on this person and this issue is almost entirely personal. So short answer to your question is yes, there would be a lot of difference. And judging by what Trump has said, and even more what Vance has said, I think there's every reason to believe that a new Trump administration would at a minimum put enormous pressure on the Ukrainians to come to terms to, and Trump has said this, to accept it's very sad they lost some of their territory, but really they can never get it back and they need to just accept that. Some of the people around Trump who again have been trying to articulate policies that sound more or less coherent, have said, well, what Trump would do is to say to the Russians and the Ukrainians, "You need to come to terms. And Russia, if you don't, then I'm going to increase support for Ukraine," which is kind of laughable because what else is he going to give them?

I mean, there may be some things he could give them that we're not giving them, but that just would be inconsistent with everything else that he said, and saying to Ukraine, "If you don't come to terms, we're going to cut you off." Well, that's quite plausible, it seems to me, unfortunately. And that I think would be the most likely outcome. And then that has ramifying effects on everything else if it happens.

BILL KRISTOL:

That last sentence is so important. I want to get to it in a second, but I just did a podcast with my colleague, Tim Miller, who made a very good point I hadn't quite focused on, which is we take so much for granted that Trump behaves the way he behaves. I mean, how astonishing is it that he's with the head of a government that's fighting, of a nation that's fighting for its life against the brutal aggressor? We've been with it for, on its side, as almost the whole world has been really, the whole civilized world. And there's not a sentence that I could see, I skimmed the transcript also, of sympathy for Ukraine, of solidarity, of, "Look, we so admire what you and your citizens have been doing."

You could then say, if you wished, "We may have to, I'm not sure we can get the maximum war aims that you hope for." And sometimes he has to make compromises you don't want to make. But the fact that it doesn't even occur to him that a US president, or in this case, a US presidential candidate, should say the most basic thing about another democracy fighting for its life is so revealing, I think.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yeah, and praising them for standing up for their freedom and fighting, even when, I mean, it could have been critical of the Biden administration saying that initially they didn't believe that Ukraine could defend itself, but of course, Trump himself had taken a similar view. Again, I haven't read the full transcript, but the bit that I saw that referred to the war and the consequences talked about all the buildings that had been knocked down. And he says something like, "If they hadn't done this, these buildings would still be standing, then they'd be there for 2,000 years," or something like that. So yeah, I didn't see anything there. Praising Ukraine for its resolve, praising Ukrainian democracy for rallying its people to defend their own government and their own territory, sympathy for the losses. He talks about it as if, you know, these are two, I don't know, there are two parties negotiating over a real estate deal. There's no sense that there's one side that we are sympathetic to and align ourselves with, and another that we reject. And that is revealing because I think that is the way he looks at it.

BILL KRISTOL:

And if that becomes the first kind of big fork in the road he faces as president, which I guess it might, support for Ukraine, you just said a word about the ramifications elsewhere. So say something about that. It's not as if these things, they do have an effect, even if he thinks he's going to be status quo and with respect to China for six months or something like that.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Well, and this is one of the problems I have, again, with people who are trying to put forward a coherent alternative to policies that the current administration has been pursuing or alternative grand strategies, Asia First, that kind of thing, as if you could take this piece off the board and ignore it or somehow that it would take care of itself and everything else would remain the same. And of course, that's not the way the world really works. So if you imagine a world in which the US pulls back its support from Ukraine, presumably our European allies might at least for some period of time try to fill that gap. And I think they've been thinking about how they could do it and whether they could do it, but I don't think anybody believes that they could in the long run do that on their own.

So imagine a world in which the Russians have successfully conquered all of Ukraine. I mean, you don't have to conjure up nightmarish notions of what would happen. We've seen what happens in territory that Russia takes from Ukraine. There's mass murder, there's deportations, forced deportations, kidnapping of children, destruction of industrial capacity. It would be nightmarish, and you would have an outpouring of refugees, and you'd also have Russian forces sitting that much further to the west and on the border of US friends and allies. So the consequences in Europe and Putin emboldened, presumably, by his success, he would be able to say, "I, just like past great Russian leaders," maybe he wouldn't invoke Stalin, but that's clearly who he would have in mind, "took a punch, but we Russians don't give up, and we mobilized our industry and mobilized our people, and we won this great victory." Does anyone think that he then is going to be content and isn't going to cast his eye to the Baltics or even cast his eye further to the west?

That seems to me highly unlikely. He's expressed his views, his revisionist views about how he would like Russia to become the dominant power in Europe again. And the first piece of that would be weakening the American position and weakening the alliance that depends on the United States, namely NATO, and a defeat in Ukraine would have that effect. And I don't know where exactly that would lead, but it can't be anywhere good. So that's the first and most obvious set of consequences that seems to me would flow from a scenario in which the United States basically forces Ukraine to accept terms, which most likely would not hold for very long because the Russians would regroup and continue, and probably with the assurance that the United States wouldn't do anything. So that would be the first set of consequences. But then it echoes around the world.

There are all these academic debates over years about whether dominoes really fall or whether a failure to follow up on commitments in one domain has an effect on others. I don't know. I haven't kept up with the literature. So it can go back and forth, back and forth. Usually academics like to say that, "Oh, there's no connection between these things." But that too seems to me highly unlikely. What are our friends and allies in Asia going to make of this outcome? And they've been very blunt now, Japanese leaders in particular, but Taiwanese too, saying, "We have a stake in the outcome of this war between Ukraine and Russia because what happens there today could happen in Asia tomorrow." So what would be the responses to that? I suppose you could say they're going to cling even more tightly to the United States, and maybe in the first instance that would be true, but I think the leaders of Japan, Korea, Taiwan too, would be foolish if they didn't consider the possibility that they too at some point might be hung out to dry.

And they would have to think seriously about how they could defend themselves under those circumstances. And one obvious answer to that question is to acquire their own nuclear weapons. South Korean— there's been an open discussion about that in South Korea and Japan. It's more of a taboo subject, but less than it once was. So there are kind of quieter conversations about that going on. And again, a world in which the United States has pretty clearly been defeated and Russia has succeeded with the help of China is one in which confidence in

American security guarantees can only go down, and leaders are going to have to think about how to fend for themselves.

BILL KRISTOL:

And with the help of Iran, I mean, I think if you're Saudi Arabia, you don't have as nearly as direct as stake in this as other countries. The effects might be a little more indirect, but I don't know, do you really think if the US won't go to any extra trouble to help a country that's bordering NATO and is democracy in Europe, a place we've been committed to forever and willing to risk NATO for this because we don't want to just send more arms to Ukraine, what is, I don't know, do they really think we're a viable partner? Suddenly the Saudis, I think get less interested in a defense deal with us and more interested in their own nuclear program conceivably, right?

They might be friendly with Trump and they're busy giving money to his family and all this, so maybe they could buy them off short term, but I guess that's the thing. Don't you think that you can imagine short-term scenarios where nothing falls apart in the next six or 12 or 18 months, and Trump might have personal reasons for being friendly to MBS, so even there's no immediate movement on that front, or same you might say for Israel incidentally. But longer term, what's the reliability of the US under someone who has shown the willingness to be as, I guess, I don't know, what, cavalier about our commitments as Trump?

AARON FRIEDBERG:

I don't see how foreign leaders could not worry about the possibility that they too could find themselves in a situation where the United States was not there when they needed them, whatever the stated policy of a Trump administration on that issue might be. And then they have to ask themselves, well, what can we do to take care of ourselves? Because they're not just going to give in to their enemies, presumably.

Maybe we can get to this, but one of the things that I find frustrating, I guess, about the discussion on foreign policy alone and the comparison between a notional Harris administration and a notional Trump II administration, is that it tends to ignore a whole set of other problematic issues, which arguably are more domestic or internal that would arise I think under a Trump administration, which would raise deep questions about the stability of our political system and of the fragmentation of our society, and that's the foundation on which American power ultimately rests.

And I think we have every reason to fear that a second Trump administration would exacerbate those problems and would reinforce the notion that you find, for example, in contemporary Chinese analysis of where the US stands, that we're not exactly a paper tiger. We have many strengths, but we also have these, from their perspective, critical weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and they're almost entirely to do with the state of our society and the state of our political institutions. And I think in many ways they're betting on that, counting on that because power is always relative, and power in the Chinese view is the sum total of all different kinds of capabilities, including those related to the strength of the domestic system.

So it's not just about what we do or don't do in Ukraine or what we do or don't do with Taiwan. It's also about what we, or happens to us internally and what the implications of that are for our credibility and our ability to act as a power in the world. I mean, that's the deepest source of my concern. Yes, it's about the possible policies that Trump II might follow. And maybe they wouldn't be as bad, and maybe this more traditional strain of thinking would have some influence on various specific questions. But does anyone think that a new Trump administration is going to be suddenly sober and serious about adhering to the law, about resisting the temptation to use its powers to oppress or persecute its domestic enemies? I think we know what we're in for on those counts. And all of that would, in my view, would dramatically weaken the United States, both in practical terms and in moral terms.

I mean we're already in a bit of trouble on that score. We used to be able to think of ourselves as a beacon of democracy. And we still are in my view, and we're still viewed in that way to some degree by many people around the world, but it's a lot easier for people to say, "You're in

no position to lecture us. Look at how your system is dysfunctional," and none of that is going to get better under Trump. It's going to get worse.

BILL KRISTOL:

You haven't said anything about international economic policy, which you've actually have written on very interestingly in terms of dealing with China. Maybe say a word both about what you think we could or should be doing. Do you think the Harris and a Harris administration would go in the direction, which you should explain, that you would like? But also what about the Trump tariffs? I mean, that's a big deal in foreign policy even though it's dealt within the economics departments more than in the political science departments, I guess.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Right, right. Well, as far as what we should do, I've written this piece, it was in the last issue of *Foreign Affairs*, about how to respond to the so-called second China shock, which is this massive outpouring of manufactured goods and the possible damaging implications of that for new industries emerging in advanced industrial countries. Also, harmful consequences for the efforts of advanced democracies to de-risk by reducing their dependence on China for a whole array of so-called intermediate goods, everything almost down to nuts and bolts, but not quite critical minerals. That's one that's attracted a lot of attention.

So if China is pushing out all this stuff at a very low price and the United States and countries in Asia and some countries in Europe are trying to build up their own domestic capacity, those efforts are going to be derailed because they will be undercut by, if they allow these goods to keep flooding into their markets, by these low-cost imports—and it'll also have damaging consequences—is for the prospects of developing countries that are trying to build up their own industrial capacity.

So this is a serious problem that has been percolating for some time. It is getting worse in part because of the weaknesses in China's own system. It's inability or unwillingness to do things that would allow domestic consumption to increase. They are more reliant than in the past, or in the immediate past, on exports. So they have to push all this stuff out, and it's coming. And we're not going to talk them out of it, and wagging a finger at them or telling them, as we have repeatedly, that there's an alternative path, you should liberalize and so on is not going to work.

So in my view, we need to defend ourselves against it, but we can't do it unilaterally. And what I propose in the article is a trade defense coalition, which would be a grouping of countries starting with our closest friends and allies, but also including some other industrial powers that see their prospects and their domestic industries being threatened by Chinese exports and imposing some kind of protective barrier between themselves and China. There are all kinds of issues with that. It's not something that's going to be easy to do, but I think of that as an alternative to what I see either a Trump administration or a Harris-Biden 2.0 administration from being inclined to do, although maybe it's closer to the latter. Trump's position is tariffs are great. He continues to talk about how the tariffs have raised all of this money. Well, it's mostly come from domestic consumers and producers who have to pay higher prices. And he wants to impose a, he says, a 60% tariffs on all exports from China, but also he wants to impose 10% tariffs on all imports from all around the world, so including from our friends and allies. So whatever else it might do, this would exacerbate differences between ourselves and our closest friends and allies.

And we went through a minor version of this when the Biden administration began the Inflation Reduction Act. Subsidies, and the Europeans found that they were left out. And according to at least some reports that high officials in the Biden administration, perhaps joking, said, "Oh, we didn't mean that, but we sort of forgot about you," and they've done things to try to fix that. But the course of action that Trump proposes would be one that would, I think, isolate the United States from the people that we need to collaborate with in dealing with China economically and from dealing with Russia and these other problems strategically. So that's at one end.

I don't know exactly, of course, what a Harris administration would do. I think the Biden administration has taken some steps in the right direction. They've imposed some tariffs on

Chinese electric vehicles and some of the other pieces of the so-called green energy transition. And they've also begun to think about how to subsidize or how to encourage domestic production, but it's been pretty narrow and pretty selective. And I think it's going to have to be wider than that, and it's going to have to be done on a coalition basis.

So yeah, those issues are coming and they're here already and there's question of how Harris or a Trump administration would respond. The thing we know, I think most likely a Harris administration would continue on the path that Biden is following, which is okay as far as it goes, but it needs to go a lot further. I think from everything we know, Trump would go off in a very different direction that would I think scuttle the possibility of forming a tighter coalition of friendly countries economically to deal with China because I think he sees them all as unfair competitors and taking advantage of the United States and wants to impose tariffs on everybody.

BILL KRISTOL:

South Korea is as bad as China, or something, if you get on the wrong side of him.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Right, and Taiwan, as he said in this interview with I think it was *Businessweek* back over the summer, Taiwan has stolen our semiconductor industry, and he raised this in the context of a question that asked him if he would be inclined to help defend Taiwan, which you would've thought from all of the tough talk from some of the people around him and from him would've been an easy answer to give. In fact, what he says is, "We shouldn't be paying for their defense. They should be paying us, and they stole our semiconductor industry." The attempt to make Trump out to be a consistent and coherent tough guy in dealing with China doesn't stand up to the facts.

He did indeed impose or pursue or really permit people in his administration to pursue policies that were quite tough on China, and I suppose he or they deserve credit for that, but he also continues to express this personal affection for Xi Jinping. I think if the Chinese had been smarter and given him this great deal that he was bragging about and just bought a few hundred billion more dollars of stuff from us, some of these other measures, like export controls and technology controls, might not have gotten off the ground. So what's he going to do when he comes back? I don't think he has a principled form of or basis for his opposition to China any more than he does for his opposition to Russia or than for any affinity that he might feel, which I don't think he does, for our democratic allies in Europe. So there's no principle there. So the idea that he's going to follow a consistent tough strategy for dealing with China, I think is questionable at best.

BILL KRISTOL:

People who want to give him the benefit of the doubt, will interpret one nice thing he says about one democratic ally or about Israel, let's say, a country people are concerned about, obviously, and think that's really a sound basis for thinking his foreign policy is going to be fine. But there's so much evidence that he's willing, as you say, if the Chinese decide, well, you know what, he's back in office so maybe we should give him some economic Bennies now and a little bit of bribery. It's not bribery literally, but it could be that too. But I mean bribery in the sense of rewards for stuff, and then he'll let the pressure off, right?

I mean, I think you've thought about this so much, I mean, the risks of pursuing a foreign policy in the world we're in, and if you're the US, the anchor of resisting all these bad forces, a policy that's not grounded on some degree of medium and long-term thinking and strategic thinking as opposed to this thing, I like this guy here and that guy there, and I'm going to threaten him here, but then I'm going to reward him there, I just think, I don't know, people don't seem to me to appreciate the risks of that.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Right. Well, historically, to the extent that we have pursued a consistent grand strategy, if you like, over long periods of time, those have been rooted in geopolitical calculations, but also in values or ideology. We're not a country that is led by people who are simply cold-blooded calculators of our political interest. Sometimes we have leaders who are more that way than others, but they need to mobilize the American people, and the way that they've done that historically has been on questions of right and wrong or freedom and opposition to authoritarianism and dictatorship. If you don't have a coherent geopolitical view, and you also don't have any adherence to those values, I don't see what the foundation is for a consistent policy or strategy.

People who sing Trump's praises and say he's a tough guy and people are afraid of him because they don't know what he might do, and he might take dramatic action, they're not wrong in that, and that can be valuable up to a point. The perception that someone is maybe a little irrational or willing to take risks, let's say... that may be right, but that's not the foundation on which you build, again, a grand strategy that you can hope as a country to continue to pursue over years or decades if that's what's necessary, and it seems to me that that is what's necessary.

I mean, let's go back to what we started with. If we're faced with this rough alliance of authoritarian powers that now is behaving in a very aggressive way, and if you accept the proposition that in order to deal with that we can't simply rely on our own power and resources, but we have to cooperate with our friends and our friends are going to be the people with whom we share values as well as interests, it's going to require a coherent strategy, and it's going to require a strategy that can be sustained and justified and explained to the American people over a period of time.

It's not just a case of periodically ordering a strike on this terrorist leader or that. And it certainly isn't something that's going to be possible if you have a leader who is constantly haranguing and in effect threatening our traditional allies because of some belief that they're taking advantage of us and not paying the proper price for our protection of them. And that too I think is missing from some of these efforts to make sense out of what Trump says or to recast his previous record and fit the pieces together into something that is more coherent than I think it actually was.

You mentioned the thing about personality, just to take one example, some people who are making the case for Trump say, "Well, he would be a consistent friend of Israel, and the Biden administration has put pressure on Israel," and there is truth in that. And we can talk about whether that's the right thing to do or not, but what is the basis for Trump's supposed affinity for Israel? I mean, it seems that it has to do with his affinity for a particular leader of that country for various reasons.

And if that leader is gone and he's replaced by someone who's different or comes from a different party, is Trump going to have the same attachment to that leader and be willing to back that leader no matter what? I don't see any reason for believing that. Because again, Trump's view of the world and his policies seem to be rooted very much in these personal judgments. And those personal judgments seem to have to do almost entirely with how those people treat him and how they talk to him and whether they flatter him. That's not the foundation for an enduring American grand strategy, to the contrary.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's awfully well said, that last one. You really put together I think one of the fundamental problems with Trump. People, like me, are interested in the somewhat the ideology, the political theory underlying it, and America First, and I'm very appalled by that. So I probably focus on that more than just the pure transactional and erratic and undisciplined character, and the failure to even understand that you should have a strategy. I mean, the American First strategy would also be very bad. So if the choice is going to be a mixture of a very bad international strategy and no international strategy probably mixing together in the Oval Office there with Trump.

But let me ask you one last question and then I'll let you go, but you've studied American politics and some of the interaction of US politics and foreign policy, international relations

over a long time. You've studied it for a long time, but you've studied it in practice over the last century and during the Cold War, and you've written about that. I was talking to someone actually earlier today about this. I was consistent with what I just said, maybe the better critique of Trump for the American public is a little less the America First thing, or even the tariffs, though I think that probably has some potency, or the explaining the knock-on effects of deserting Ukraine, which I do think people have a sense of, so I think that's all important. But also just the pure riskiness of his being so erratic and impulsive and not understanding that you need to have a functioning foreign policy and a functioning administration that carries out a policy somewhat consistently and so forth.

And I was wondering if you think in your reading of American history since World War II, I guess, does the charge that someone who wants to be president, Trump's a little different who wants to be president again, but it's too risky? Does that work politically? I mean, is that something that Harris should be saying or is it better to stay on the particulars of the terrorists and Ukraine and so forth? I kind of have the feeling that there's something that people could see there. They kind of have a common sense view I take it that you can't run major organizations this way, can't run the government this way. The world's a volatile place. You can get into wars by trying to be erratically too dovish and you can give up a lot by being erratically too hawkish. People have a sense of how that would work or do they? I mean, I guess is the risky charge a sensible thing politically? I'm curious for your judgment on that.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

It's an interesting question, and I haven't thought about it in quite that way, but just as you were speaking, if you think about the history of our domestic politics and presidential politics in particular over the post-World War II period, there are at least a couple of examples where you had candidates on both sides, on one side or the other who were perceived rightly or wrongly as being excessively risky. And Barry Goldwater is one of the reasons he lost by the margin that he did to LBJ, I think, was that Johnson and others probably accurately portrayed Goldwater as too risky because he was cavalier about the use of nuclear weapons among other things. And then of course, a few years later, you also have George McGovern who's portrayed, and again, I think there's some reason to believe that this was accurate, as someone who was too risky because he was going to pull America back from its traditional commitments and not just get out of Vietnam but pull out of our alliances.

Now whether that was fair or not, those are two candidates who were successfully portrayed by their opponents as risky. But that worked because of the sort of backdrop and the public perception at the time of the nature of the world as being risky but risky in a... How to say it, in a somewhat more stable way that we were locked in this Cold War and it was very dangerous and therefore we didn't want to make radical moves in one direction or another.

Now, I'm not sure about the perception. It may be that people see danger here and danger there, but don't see it in a more coherent way. It may be in part as a result of that, that some people are tempted by the belief that if we just sort of pull back from it, we can insulate ourselves from it. So the claim that someone is risky because they're threatening to make radical changes in policy may not work if people don't believe in the threat and therefore don't see the danger of having someone who might do that.

I think that's a real failure on the part of our leadership up to this point. I was just looking at the Commission on National Defense Strategy that came out over the summer, and normal people don't read those things and they certainly don't read them every time they come out, but if you do read them, it's quite hair-raising. And these are serious sober people from both political parties who are saying, I think in the first sentence, we face the most dangerous international environment since the end of the second World War. Therefore, we need to increase defense spending considerably. We need to make serious changes in strategy and all the things that follow from that.

I don't think that most people in this country see the world in that way. And part of the reason is that I don't think our leaders have successfully conveyed that message and that heightens the danger I think. Because, well, just taking the defense spending as an example, we're headed

towards 3% of GDP, far lower than the average over the course of the Cold War. If you believe, as I'm inclined to do, as this report suggests that we need to increase to say 5% of GDP or 6% of GDP, that's a huge political struggle there. And there are all kinds of consequences. Are you going to cut spending here, are you're going to increase taxes? If you believe it's necessary to make that change in strategy because of judgment about the character of the international environment, you're going to have to persuade people of that.

You're going to have to start by portraying that external environment in a way that's accurate and is going to be frightening to people, but also coherent. And that makes clear why and how we can and need to respond in a coherent and stable and sober way. And on that score, again, I think Trump fails utterly because he doesn't see the world in that way. He doesn't speak that language, and I don't think he's going to pursue the kinds of policies that will make that possible over a period of time. So he's risky, but maybe there's something about the way people are viewing the world, which doesn't make it clear just how risky he is.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's really well said. Our friend Eric Edelman was Vice Chairman of the Commission and really co-author of that report and has testified on it before Congress. And I think I need to go read the whole... Really read it. I've just looked at the kind of headlines of it and maybe have a conversation with Eric, I guess about it at some point in the future. But the paradox, I guess is in a political way for Harris thinking about the next five weeks is a version of what follows what you've said, which is, I mean, any incumbent administration sort of wants to portray things as getting better. I'd say the Biden administration in particular though is not... They've done some, might be pretty good things. You think on China and I think on Ukraine, we both think on Ukraine and so forth, actually supporting Israel, but they certainly haven't made one of their centerpieces of their rhetoric that it's a very dangerous world out there and we need to do more than we've been doing.

And these are real... It's a little bit more of a reassuring, we're doing, everything's fine. NATO is stronger than ever, and we don't have troops in harm's way. And that undercuts, of course, the argument that you're making here and that we're saying that Harris might make or that a responsible leader would make about alerting the American people to the danger. It's not totally... Obviously it's not... You can have some of both, obviously and Cold War leaders did that a lot. I was thinking about Bush in '88 who had, I think there was an actual debate in the Bush campaign in '88 about should they take credit for the improvement under Reagan and for the fact that Gorbachev was clearly leading the Soviet Union in a somewhat different direction than his predecessors had. And the fact that the world seemed safer by November '88 when George H.W. Bush was running to succeed Reagan, then it had probably in '80 or '84, maybe a little less concerned about things blowing up, literally. On the other hand, they also thought, A, the world remains dangerous and B, politically, we need to make the case that it's dangerous. That's why you need Bush experienced tough foreign policy and not Michael Dukakis. And so they had that famous bear in the woods ad, do you remember? Which was a pretty kind of Cold War, be worried about the Russian Bear ad. But I think responsible leaders, probably from Truman on through Reagan and Bush and really Clinton sort of, and into post-Cold War sort of had to balance this, we need to be strong, we need to be the pillar of this whole international order or things could get very, very dangerous. And there are people out there trying to make it more dangerous at the bear in the woods. But on the other hand, I'm the incumbent president, so things have gotten a little better. I feel like Biden's maybe aired a little bit more on the—

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

...Things are getting better side of it. And it puts Harris in a slightly tricky position here, I think.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Right, yeah. Two things. One, there is the rhetorical issue and then there the concrete issue, I'm thinking particularly of defense spending. And yes, on the rhetorical side there is a desire to say things are getting better and there is obviously going to be a desire on the part of the opponent to say, oh, the world's going to hell in a hand basket and it's because of this administration. Well, the world may be going to hell in a hand basket, but it's not primarily because of what we're doing or not doing. It's because of these external factors and the character of these regimes. So this claim that things are getting better or the inclination to say that also frames the problem in the wrong way as a short-term thing that can be brought under control and we can go back to business as usual. And my own view is that's not an accurate presentation, and it's not solely or primarily because of any failings of the current administration. It's because of the way these other powers are evolving.

And I believe I said this in one of our prior conversations that Biden had an opportunity, there was a moment there after the start of the Ukraine war, after the beginning of the Russian invasion, when he could conceivably have gone to Congress and said, as Truman did after the North Korean invasion of the South in June, 1950, "This is an extremely dangerous, a newly dangerous situation, and we have enemies and so on, and therefore we need to make dramatic increases in the resources that we devote to defense among other things over an extended period of time." And I think he probably would've gotten support for that from people on both sides of the aisle. Now, they did wind up increasing the amounts of money that they're spending, but they have not made what I would consider to be the necessary long-term, upward adjustments in the slope of that curve.

And it's kind of late to do that. It requires... because we're in a different situation... It's not like during the Cold War where, again, I think people had a general sense of what the problem was. It's a new danger or a new emergent danger that has to be explained and the various pieces of it and how they fit together and why they're threatening has to be articulated in order then to get to the practical question of what it is that you're going to do about it. And I do worry about the Harris administration. I don't want to leave the impression that I think they're going to be great, and I'm highly confident of everything she's going to do. I'm not, and I'm worried about it on, for lack of a better term, on the soft side, I'm worried about the somewhat more left-leaning portions of the Democratic Party that are not going to be inclined to increase defense spending, that are suspicious of foreign entanglements and so on.

Biden probably deserves more credit than he gets for not being right in the mainstream of his party that he was to the right of the center of that party. And he kind of brought it along with him on all of these issues to some extent on Ukraine, certainly on the Middle East. And I'm not confident that Harris coming next is going to continue to exert that kind of pressure. And I'm concerned that there will be counter pressures from other parts of the Democratic Party, foreign policy establishment who will be trying to push her. That's the sort of Obama 2.0 scenario that I'm concerned about. The big unknown there is Harris herself, and partly because the things that she said, they're fine, but they are kind of rote recitations of standard view or standard ways of explaining what's going on in the world and what needs to be done.

But what exactly are her views and convictions? To what extent does she share Biden's, I don't want to say black and white, but somewhat more ideological view of the world. To what extent does she share his, really share his gut instinct regarding American leadership? I don't know. It's quite possible that she's received an extraordinary education in the last four years because of where she's been sitting. And she certainly has emerged as a more effective candidate than many people thought. And I think partly because of what she learned from where she was and what she observed, the things that she said on the Middle East, Russia, China, they've been, in my view, for the most part, the right thing to say. Are those now her genuine convictions and are they strong enough to enable her to push back against what I think is coming her way if she wins, which is we need to stabilize relations with China, we need to get a ceasefire because somehow we're going to get a peace settlement in the Middle East.

Or I'm not sure exactly where that would come out on Ukraine. That we don't know, but I think the variance there is much narrower than the variance if it's Trump. And the downside, in my view, is much worse and more dramatic on the Trump side than it is on the Harris side. So if she wins, we'll be back to sort of normal debates about policy, foreign policy, defense policy,

and I think we can survive that and live with that. If Trump wins, we're in a whole different world. In my view, it's likely to be a much darker one.

BILL KRISTOL:

Oh, that's good if somewhat bracing thing to end on. I would say with Harris, I think also the fact that she'll be sort of a next generation candidate who doesn't have a very well established foreign policy record, unlike Biden, is both an opportunity and of course a risk. I mean, as you say, we don't quite know where she'll go and who will influence her, but she might also read your article in *Foreign Affairs* and say, yes, that's a model for how to go forward. Whereas in a way, Biden wasn't quite interested in new models for how to go forward. He was interested in strengthening the old alliances, which was better than destroying the old alliances. So that was good. So I don't know, the Harris thing will be an interesting actual thing to watch and to try to influence, I suppose.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Well, I don't know about you and we're not as old as Biden, but we're not as young as we used to be. Yes, there is an inclination to kind of fall back on the modes of thought and the ideas that you've had. And it's true. People who are newer to the scene and newer in dealing with these problems may have the advantage of being able to consider a wider array of possibilities than a more experienced leader might. There again, it depends partly on the extent to which that person has developed genuine convictions. I'm thinking about Truman in this regard. Someone who was not seen as a heavyweight, had some experience on foreign and defense policies from being in the Senate, but nothing like what he was thrust into when Roosevelt died, but turned out to have reflexes. He had the right kind of reflexes, which were sort of tough-minded.

And he also was surrounded by a bunch of people who were experienced and did have a realistic and tough assessment of the world. And that combination moved him in the right direction. And in Harris's case, both are uncertain, but at least based on what she's been saying, for the most part, it's hopeful. Whereas based on everything Trump has said about foreign policy, to the extent that it's coherent, and if you actually read the transcripts of some of these interviews, they're not coherent at all. I think would lead to the conclusion that what he really believes is the America First, isolationist, protectionist, anti-immigration view that I suspect would emerge triumphant if he gets another crack at the White House.

BILL KRISTOL:

We'll see what happens in five weeks. But thank you for really explaining, I think, what's at stake in foreign policy in this election, but also how to think about the world and how to think about the world after November 5th, as well as over the next five weeks. So Aaron Friedberg, thank you very much for joining me again.

AARON FRIEDBERG:

Thank you, Bill.

BILL KRISTOL:

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