

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

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BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I am Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined again today by my good friend Eric Edelman, former Senior State Department official ambassador to two nations, number three in the Defense Department in very important years. In the second term of the Bush administration, especially with, served very closely with Robert Gates, the Secretary of Defense. Now a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis and I think served on maybe was vice chair, if I'm not mistaken, of the recent defense... National Defense Strategy Commission, I think it's called.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yes, it's a congressionally appointed commission and produced very good report, actually. very important report on our national defense bipartisan report, which has gotten a lot of attention. So defense expert, foreign policy, veteran, overall deep thinker, PhD in history even... most... I don't know if it's that the best or the... That's a high. For me, that's a family matter. That's a good thing. So that's impressive from Yale in the seventies, one of the great history departments in modern American history... in modern America... in modern history, that is... What was your thesis on? I don't think I've discussed that with you.

ERIC EDELMAN:

It was actually on US relations with Italy from the US invasion of Sicily in 1943 until 1949 when Italy became a member of NATO in the first expansion of NATO.

BILL KRISTOL:

Oh, interesting actually. We'll do a conversation on that sometime for the more academic minded audience. Was it published as a book or were you one of those people who chose not to you went to the foreign service?

ERIC EDELMAN:

I went into the foreign service and never returned to academia until I retired.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. Where you now do some teaching at UVA and elsewhere. Okay, so let's talk about the world. It's December 20th as we speak, the Friday before Christmas, and maybe a government shutdown coming in 24 hours and a million things going on with Donald Trump and Elon Musk. But there is a world out there. It's had some pretty big events happening in that world in the last few weeks to say nothing over the last few years, the fall of Assad, most notably, I thought we could go to the Middle East and Europe, try to figure out, say, have you explained, as you've explained to secretaries of state and secretaries of defense and presidents, what are they facing?

What's the world Donald Trump will inherit? What does he need to know bottom line and going forward, even if he doesn't or anyone, any president's not going to be fascinated by all the ins

and outs of the histories there, but what do they need to know? What choices do they face? Pretty amazing moment, isn't it though? You've been through these transitions quite a few times and I don't know, has there ever been a moment like this with so much in play, so to speak, and up in the air as we move from one administration to another?

ERIC EDELMAN:

I can't really recall one. I mean, perhaps the one that comes maybe closest was the 1980 transition, '80, '81 transition from Carter to Reagan where you'd had a number of dramatic events in the last year of the Carter administration, the hostage crisis with Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the intensification of the Cold War that some people called the Second Cold War that Reagan inherited. So the crushing of solidarity in 1980 by the Soviet Union in Poland. So there was a lot going on then as well, and that was going on against the backdrop of the Cold War with the central nuclear strategic antagonism between the United States and the Soviet Union looming over everything.

So I suppose that maybe comes closest, but you have a Middle East that is on fire with the aftermath of the October 7th Hamas attack on Israel, and it's dramatically different Middle East than the one that Donald Trump left behind when he left office in January '21. Notably Hamas has been essentially destroyed as a military force. I mean, there's a burbling insurgency in Gaza that Israel will have to figure out how to deal with, and right now it's got its finger in the Chinese finger trap. It's destroyed Hamas, but it can't quite extricate itself from governing Gaza right now, which I don't think any sane Israeli wants to do, although there's some voices arguing for it.

Israel has essentially eviscerated Hezbollah, which was its biggest threat to the north and now rippling cascade effect, the Assad regime has collapsed in Syria. And that has put Iran on its really back foot. And I think as dramatic as the events in Syria are, and we can certainly talk about that, the most important, I think, thing that that represents—it's two things really—one is that Iran has lost the ability to sort of be able to reconstitute easily and resupply Hezbollah in Lebanon, which was its major sort of deterrent to Israel.

And by the same token, it has been moving very aggressively to enrich uranium at levels of 60%, which is very, very close to having fissile material for a nuclear weapon. And so Trump is going to inherit an Iran that is both moving rapidly towards a nuclear weapon where there's an active debate inside the country between those who want to move—having lost all these other instruments—to threaten Israel and the United States, its network of proxies, to nuclear weapons as a deterrent against its adversaries, but is also because of the Israeli strike on October in the aftermath of the October 1st Iranian attack. Essentially Iran has been denuded of its air and missile defense, and so it's both moving towards a nuclear weapon but also never been weaker than it is today. And so Trump will inherit this, I think as one of the most important burning issues on his agenda.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's so interesting because a lot of the discussion of Assad's fall has been a certain celebration of it, which I think is appropriate. Certain concerns about who's taking over and their terror ties, HTS and then the relations within the groups in Turkey, a country you were an ambassador to and know a lot about and have followed very closely. Maybe we should say a few words about that, but let's stay on Iran for a minute, because I think this is a good, I mean you're really calling attention to the big thing that people aren't talking that much about, and I just want, you think Iran has been as weakened as much as you just said.

That is to say the both exposing of their incapacity to defend themselves against Israel, but above all the apparently pretty considerable weakening of Hezbollah that really changes their situation in terms of their ability to project power and terror on the one hand. And you're saying, I think, and then that has the weird, not weird, but the ricochet effect on the nuclear program of perhaps increasing, making them more interested in accelerating it, and how quick is the acceleration? Is this just the same old, same old, they're gradually inching up or has there been something noticeable? Is there an inflection point in the last few months or a year?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, there are a couple of things there. One is that the amounts of uranium that they've enriched to 60% when you get up towards 80 and 85%, now you're talking getting towards weapons grade uranium, and you're talking about having the material to make a weapon. The amounts that they have been making have been alarming enough that, Rafael Grossi, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, which is charged with, among other things, monitoring the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to which Iran is a signatory as is in the United States, but also the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the Obama 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. They monitor that as well, and he's called attention to the fact that this is a very dangerous level of material that they're accumulating. He's drawn attention to the fact that senior officials in Iran have been making statements saying maybe we should develop a nuclear weapon.

This is in the face of years and years of denials that Iran has a nuclear program and also allegations that because the supreme leader has issued a fatwa saying that Iran should not have nuclear weapons, there's no way they can develop nuclear weapons. Grossi has been saying, look at all the senior leaders who are talking now about having nuclear weapons. It's clearly a debate going on. The newly elected president Pazeshkin clearly would prefer not to go down that route but would like to engage in negotiations. So to your point earlier, Bill, about the choices that the new administration is going to face, this is going to be a very big one.

Do you make good on the consistent US policy that has been articulated across multiple administrations of both parties, going back to the Clinton administration, which is that Iran will not be allowed to possess a nuclear weapon? Do you enforce that with military force? Trump has shown himself to be very reluctant in the past to use military force with one sort of possible exception, which will be relevant for the Iranians, which is he ordered this strike that killed Qasem Soleimani, the former head of the IRGC Quds force, the head of Iran's main instrument of exerting its overseas influence with its proxies. So he has a certain amount of credibility with them, and the fact that they're so defenseless gives the United States maybe for the first time since we started back in 2013, '14, negotiating with Iran a real credible threat of the use of force.

So if he doesn't want to use force, does he use that to reinvigorate what he has said he wants to do with a maximum pressure campaign of sanctions and a threat of force to get the Iranians to negotiate that has its own set of problems that come with it, which is not allowing the Iranians to engage in endless dilatory negotiations, which they specialize in and also run out the clock on the snapback of sanctions under the UN Security Council resolutions that implemented the joint Comprehensive plan of action back in 2015 that will expire in October.

BILL KRISTOL:

So that October is a real date. I mean that is to say you sort of would have to decide by then whether negotiations, if you've begun them, are working or whether military force is possible. And what about Israel? Is there a sense that Trump not wanting to be, since he's an anti-war president, but also a tough guy, could he outsource or give Israel a yellow light to act? I mean, I guess, and so just generally how much... What about other regional players, the Saudis, it feels like an awfully... What's the word I'm looking for? A situation that's ripe for many people to do many things, some of which might not be well thought through.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, there's a lot going on. I mean, I think the Saudis are still trying to take in what are the implications of the collapse of Assad. At one point, they were actively working to help overthrow Assad in the early years of the Syrian revolution back in, you know, 2012, 2013. In more recent years, they've been trying to normalize relations with Assad since he had survived this Civil War for so long. And I don't think anybody anticipated the rapid collapse of the regime that took place earlier this month and late last month, earlier this month. So they're still trying to process this and figure out what all this means. I mean, what's clearly happened is the balance of power in the region has shifted dramatically in Israel's favor. The Saudis already were making their peace with that and haggling with the Biden administration about what the

terms of a normalization with Israel would be, and the price was going to be a US security guarantee.

They may feel more comfortable doing this with the Trump administration. Who knows? Certainly the Saudis had established what for them was much more comfortable than a traditional state-to-state diplomatic relationship. They had established a family-to-family relationship between the al-Saud family and the Trump family through Jared Kushner. I suspect there's still lines of communication there going on between MBS, the Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia and Kushner, even though Jared Kushner is not going to have an official role in this administration, he did get \$2 billion deposited in his venture capital fund that comes out of the Saudi Sovereign Wealth Fund. So lots going on there as they try and sort this out. Israel could play a major role here. Now, I will tell you most people who look at the military challenge of going after the Iranian nuclear program, which is much more extensive, much more ramified than it was back in 2015 when the Obama administration signed this agreement.

The Israelis, to be clear, took out part of that program in a facility called Parchin. When they retaliated for the October 1st missile attack, they apparently, according to reports, took out the part of that program that was involved in high explosives testing for warheads, for a nuclear warhead. So that part may have been dealt with by the Israelis, but there's still a lot of other parts to the program. Nuclear fuel production facilities, enrichment facilities, storage facilities, some of which are deeply buried and hard to get at. One is literally built into the side of a mountain at Fordow. My view, and I'm not completely expert in all of these areas, but in terms of the kind of ordinance that would be involved and the kind of a mission that would require, the Israelis can certainly set back the Iranian program. They need some help from the United States, particularly tanking KC-46 tankers to help them fly the long distances back and forth.

They need some specialized munitions and there's some specialized munitions that only certain US aircraft can fly. Now, could they do it on their own and do a lot of damage and set the program back? Yes, absolutely they could. They certainly set back Saddam Hussein's program with the attack on the Osirak reactor. They set back whatever Incipient Syrian program existed in 2007 when they attacked the Al-Kabir nuclear reactor that Syria was building with the help of North Korea. Would it be better if this were done either by the United States or by the United States working together with Israel? Yes, because we have capabilities that they lack and we could do a more thorough job. Is it likely that... And this is something that might give Trump pause if he's briefed on it, is it likely that you can take care of this all in one shot and not to have to go back and reservice targets periodically and attack different parts of the program? Probably not. So there's a lot sort of—

BILL KRISTOL:

So much for getting out of the Middle East once you start either road, right? Either you do the negotiation road and/or maybe with threat of force looming over it, of course. Or you do the force road if negotiations fail or if you just decide negotiations aren't worthwhile, or I guess you could do what Trump wanted, said was the right thing to do with Syria, which is stay out of it. They're not our friend, but on Iran, he's never quite said that I guess. Yeah. But he will be tempted by that, don't you think? And JD Vance, there'll be a certain amount of kind of —

ERIC EDELMAN:

I think—

BILL KRISTOL:

America First is not getting involved as other administrations have in the morass of endless negotiations, threats of the use of force, potential use of force telling the Israelis they can't do this and not do that. It doesn't feel like what Trump thinks his administration is going to be like. But I guess history could surprise him.

ERIC EDELMAN:

The thing that I worry about is that I think he could be tempted into a negotiation. And if you look at the negotiation that he conducted with the North Koreans in his first term as president, he had one meeting with Kim Jong Un and then said the nuclear threat from North Korea has gone away. That was obviously nonsense, that nothing had actually really been accomplished, in fact, other than the United States making some preemptive concessions by canceling some US South Korean joint exercises that got the North Koreans out of joint a little bit. So he did not solve the problem. And I worry that if he gets into a negotiation, he will be so focused on cutting a deal, no matter what kind of deal it is, it'll be the greatest deal ever. Whether or not it actually solves the problem, that's the real danger and temptation.

BILL KRISTOL:

This is the first conversation I was thinking just I've had on foreign policy with you or lots of other people where we've gone 20 minutes for interesting discussion and haven't mentioned Ukraine or Putin. But maybe before we get to that, which we should in two minutes say a word about Turkey, which has been a big player on the Syrian front and in other areas, and weird kind of... if I'm a new president, I don't know... I guess Trump likes Erdogan, but it's part of NATO, but it's also a big problem for us with terror ties. What's the bottom line of where Turkey is and how we should think about it?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah, so Turkey is the big winner, certainly coming out of the Syria episode, the collapse of Assad. I mean, it's interesting. This is, I think, maybe Hegel's cunning of history at work here, because Erdogan, who liked the Saudis for a long time was pushing for an end to the Syrian regime, although he had a different outcome in mind, he preferred an outcome in which the Muslim Brotherhood would be the big winner. And the Saudis obviously had a different outcome in mind, but Erdogan also, like others, was making his peace with the fact that Assad had survived and was looking also to normalize relations with Assad. But he had certain asks, which included return of the almost four million Syrian refugees living in Turkey from the Civil War back to Syria. And this was important to Erdogan because all of Erdogan's foreign policy is rooted in his domestic political situation, and he just had suffered the biggest reverse this spring that he's ever suffered in municipal elections. And one of the main reasons for that was discontent in Turkey at the cost on the common wheel that this Syrian refugee presence has represented. That was one of the big issues, not the only one. His mismanagement of the economy also was the major factor here. But when Assad rebuffed Erdogan, Erdogan used the training and the facilitation, HTS, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which is an outgrowth of what used to be the Al-Nusra Front, which was initially an Al-Qaeda franchise in Syria, is an organization in Idlib province, which is Southwestern Syria, right along the border with Turkey. That group had been, despite being designated as a terrorist group by Turkey at the behest of most of the rest of the international community, they have facilitated the financing, the equipping, the training of HTS.

And apparently, the Turks gave Ahmed al-Sharaa, who goes by the nom de guerre, Mohamed Abu al-Jolani, family from the Golan Heights, and therefore al-Jolani, gave him the green light to go ahead with a limited military operation to take back the second-biggest city in Syria, which is Aleppo, and this resulted in catastrophic success. And they not only took Aleppo, it became clear that the regime was really hollowed out and fragile. They were able to negotiate surrenders and then in rapid succession, Aleppo, and then the other big cities, two of which had been the sites of enormous massacres by Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, Hama and Homs, these places 40 years ago were leveled and destroyed by Assad in an effort to wipe out the Muslim Brotherhood in those areas. Those fell and then ultimately Damascus fell and Assad fled to Moscow.

Now, Turkey is clearly the big winner here. They'll have enormous influence with HTS, obviously. They're also going to play a very big role in the reconstruction of Syria because Turkish construction companies have been very active throughout the region. They're very good. And so they will almost certainly be involved in the reconstruction of Syria. So he will

have outsized influence. He won't be dispositive. He won't be able to tell them exactly what to do, but he will be the most influential foreign player in Syria.

The other issue that's left there though, that the Turks are involved in with us is that one of the sources of Erdogan's discontent at the situation in Syria, is the fact that there is an autonomous self-governing Kurdish enclave, which has been governed by forces allied with the PKK, which is the Kurdish Workers' Party in Turkey. It's a Marxist-Leninist Kurdish group that has waged a very long, bloody insurgency in Southeastern Turkey. Erdogan, he has sworn that he will stamp all this out. He doesn't want Rojava, this enclave to succeed. And his forces are the proxy forces and Turkish forces gearing up on their side of the border for a major incursion. There's been already fighting with the SDF, which is the Kurdish force that the US has been working with to keep control of the ISIS remnants in central Syria, of whom there are quite a few, and a number of prison facilities, which house ISIS fighters who've been taken off the battlefield. And so there's concern on the part of the US government that if the SDF is forced away from their positions, they'll abandon these prisons and these ISIS fighters will be on the loose, which will be a threat to Syria, to the region, to the United States. There's the US presence of some 2,000 Special Forces guys at the air base in Tanf that oversee all this. Question for Trump, are you going to leave them or pull them out? My view would plead it's very low visibility, low cost—

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, I suppose generally... well, this is too complicated to even get into. Yeah, Trump likes Erdogan, an fellow autocrat-type. So I suppose he might be tempted to give in to Erdogan to a degree, and if Erdogan assures him that they won't be any terrorists let loose or something, but I don't know, the poor Kurds could get shredded in to this thing once again, huh?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Betrayed again by the United States—

BILL KRISTOL:

Terrible.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Which has happened. And by the way, just on Erdogan and Trump for a second, he already did it twice during the first Trump administration. Erdogan prevailed on Trump to pull US forces back. Trump tried to get them all out, the so-called adults in the room, Jim Mattis and others, kept this small force there. Whether they'll be able to prevail on him a second time, up in the air, but Erdogan also had, like the Saudis, a family-to-family relationship with the Trump family. And the Trump organization, of course has business interests in Istanbul. Again, this was a son-in-law-to-son-in-law relationship. How much of that stays in place with Jared Kushner formally outside the administration? Little hard to tell, but as you say, yes, the relationship with Erdogan was a very cozy one, and that could have a role here.

BILL KRISTOL:

So keeping an eye on Trump's decision to seal down those troops in Syria is another little thing that people haven't focused on that could be quite a big deal early on. And he could be under some pressure from his own people who want to get US troops out of all these places since we shouldn't be involved in Middle East wars. Yikes. So after Trump gets this briefing on the Middle East, it'll occur to someone for 20 minutes or 30 minutes. He'll be impatient anyway, but it'll occur to someone that will, "Hey, it's the largest land war in 80 years that's going out of Europe, and that you've pledged to end, Mr. President." Or the president will say, "I've pledged to end it, so how am I going to end it here?" And I don't know. So what about that set of options and in general, what's your sense of state... Well, yeah, what's the state of play, but more practically, where do you think Trump goes? What are his real options in terms of Zelensky and Putin?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Right. So president has said he is going to end this in 48 hours via negotiation. Of course, that requires parties who are willing to sit down and negotiate. Vladimir Putin just recently had, yesterday, I guess, or the day before, his annual marathon press conference where he talks to the whole nation and takes questions from average citizens. And he was asked about this and he said, "Oh, I'm ready to negotiate with President Trump about Ukraine. I'm ready to negotiate with Ukrainians. We're ready to have a ceasefire. It's the Ukrainians who have rejected a ceasefire." And he said, "The agreement that we almost reached in April of 2022 right after the Russian invasion of Ukraine could be a basis for all this."

Now, the problem there, of course, is if you look at the documents which have come to light and been examined by any number of people, that essentially was a capitulation agreement. And the Ukrainians rejected it for a number of reasons, not least was that the terrible atrocities that had been committed in Bucha came light right at about the same time, and it became very difficult for the Ukrainians to contemplate allowing any of their fellow citizens to be left under Russian rule after those atrocities were revealed.

Look, I think Zelensky certainly has indicated a willingness to negotiate. Some of that I think is Trump management because he's trying to stay in Trump's good graces and is worried that he's going to be forced to make concessions. Europeans are meeting and trying to figure out how do they support Ukraine in the case that the US doesn't provide ongoing support for Ukraine? He's appointed, President-elect Trump that is, has appointed Keith Kellogg, he was I think the Executive Secretary or Chief of Staff of the National Security Council for the first couple of years of the first Trump term, and then was Mike Pence's National Security Advisor at the end of the first Trump term as his Ukraine negotiator. And Kellogg is the co-author with Fred Fleitz, another former NSC staffer in the first Trump term, of a paper that the America First Institute put out in April that sketched out what a negotiation might look like, which did talk about security guarantees for Ukraine, arming Ukraine.

Vice President-elect Vance has also talked about a settlement in which a Ukraine would be somehow armed to the teeth to provide security and guarantees against further Russian military activity. So it's a little unclear exactly what position they're going to take. I do think that the situation on the battlefield has gotten very bad, which is it's the Ukrainians have been losing ground at a more rapid pace. It's still not huge swaths of territory. So it's easy to over-exaggerate how badly it's going, and the cost to the Russians has been absolutely extraordinary. The British Chief of Defense, Tony Radakin, gave a speech at RUSI a few weeks ago, which he suggested that the losses may be as high as 700,000 killed and wounded, with the killed up around 150,000. This is just incredible losses that the Russians are taking. Not clear how long they can sustain that.

The Russian economy is overheating. Putin had to answer a lot of questions about inflation from average Russian citizens. The Financial Times had a lovely story about the Russian economy a couple of weeks ago in which they talked about grocery stores putting butter under lock and key because it's so hard to get ahold of and the price is so high. And the events in Syria as well, and the weakening of Iran. Syria was a major Russian client, and to have Assad taken off the board and flee to Moscow is an indication of Putin's weakness. So if there's anything that Donald Trump understands, it's strength and weakness.

So it depends on who's going to be briefing him, of course. But one would think that Mike Walz and Marco Rubio, who have traditionally been pretty firm supporters of Ukraine or were at the outset of the war, less so this past year when they were among those who voted against the April assistance package, but who certainly understand the dynamics here. There is a possibility that Trump might see it in his interest to strengthen Ukraine in order to get Putin to the table and get a negotiated settlement. But on the other hand, you can also see certain forces saying, "Just cut off the Ukrainians," the Tucker Carlson....

BILL KRISTOL:

The next tranche of aid expires fairly early in the Trump administration... Not expires, but gets exhausted. It's hard to imagine, Trump's the president who asked for more aid for Ukraine after

everything we've been through with the Republicans on The Hill and with Trump and Vance and so forth. Maybe that's possible, but I suppose that... Anyway, that moment of truth will be a 2025 moment of truth.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah, and there are a couple of points here. So the Biden administration has been trying to get as much of the assistance that was approved last April out the door as it can, and the assistance comes in two flavors. There's equipment taken out of US stocks that are sent to the Ukrainians under Presidential Drawdown Authority, PDA. And then there is the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which is money that is put on contract by the Department of Defense, with mostly US defense industry suppliers who then produce stuff for Ukraine to use on the battlefield, and that can take 12 to 18 months depending on what the item is. So they have gotten almost all of the USAI money obligated, which means there will be a pipeline of some sort of US equipment that will continue to flow to Ukraine for some number of months, unless Trump cuts it off. Yeah, I'm not sure how easily that he can cut it off.

BILL KRISTOL:

He might be challenged, but he—

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, so these are contracts with private US entities.

BILL KRISTOL:

I see. So maybe even he couldn't simply do what he tried to do in 2019 for—

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, they can terminate the contracts, but then they're going to be cancellation fees.

BILL KRISTOL:

I see.

ERIC EDELMAN:

It'll be pretty expensive. Look, it's possible. Anything is possible, but I think at least it'll be more difficult to do that. The Presidential Drawdown Authority, the Biden administration itself has run into problems because we have taken so much stuff out of US stocks that obligating all of that money, getting all of that stuff out is beginning to run into real opposition inside the Pentagon because we have to maintain certain levels of war reserve stocks for our own military planning purposes. And we haven't even gotten to the Indo-Pacific and the challenges that we could face there. And so there will be unobligated Presidential Drawdown Authority available to the Trump administration if it can find the equipment in US inventories to send. But that will take longer and be harder, and they could easily cut that off.

BILL KRISTOL:

This is a perhaps not, apart from Trump saying he wants to end it in 48 hours, a January 21st urgent situation. One could imagine having review studies and reviews for a month or two, I suppose. And hopefully, the battlefield situation doesn't change that much, but it's still a pretty early in 2025. Moment of truth, am I right or hard to tell?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, he said he wants to solve it in 48 hours. Obviously, I think that would be—

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, we're leaving that aside. Just in the real world, when does sort of... hard to tell...

ERIC EDELMAN:

I think it'll be an early decision. One of the things I think that happens in a transition is you're going along in transition and it's at a... I wouldn't say leisurely pace, but it's at a measured pace. Noon on January 20th, this whole team is going to be drinking from the fire hose because they're just going to be inundated with these problems. And it's going to be Iran, it's going to be Ukraine, and they're all going to be right on its doorstep.

BILL KRISTOL:

And of course, he won't have most of anyone confirmed at the beginning, and he may not get some of these secretaries confirmed at all. And Hegseth, I suppose, or Gabbard. And then of course, second and third tier people, even in a normal administration, take a while to confirm. Maybe this Republican Senate will be very, very solicitous and get them through fast. But yeah, I think the degree of just the combination of chaos and to be fair to them, challenges they inherit or they confront and their own management style of course, and then things that could happen and adversaries may be looking at the situation and thinking this is a pretty good time to... But if you're Putin, don't you think, "Look, I'm going to call Trump on January 22nd. He wants an early victory. I'm going to make it pretty attractive to him here, to have a negotiation with me at a summit, and we're really going to make this happen," and he'll find some fake concession he didn't make before, or something like that? I don't know, maybe not. Or maybe he'll do the opposite attitude. Putin wants to conquer all of Ukraine. Ultimately, he'd like to march into Kiev and maybe he'll decide Trump is preoccupied and dealing with budget government shutdowns, and he can just stiff-arm Trump and end up winning everything at 18 months. I don't know. It seems to me very unpredictable, both in terms of what we do, but in terms of what others do as they face us.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Putin said the other day that he is looking forward to speaking to Trump, that he has not spoken to him recently, that it's been quite a while since they last spoke. I expect that he will try and actually try and move in the direction you've suggested, that he will tell Trump, "I am open to negotiation. I'm prepared to make some kind of deal," and count on Trump's lack of interest in details to work this in the most favorable way to Putin. Look, Putin is under some pressure as well. As I said, he's having a certain amount of battlefield success, but on the other hand, he's got Russian Generals being blown up in the streets of Moscow. He is got a Ukrainian presence in Kursk which is under pressure, and the Russians are taking back territory, but more slowly than they are in Eastern Ukraine.

So it's not a great... and the economy's in terrible shape. He is relying on North Korean soldiers because he doesn't want to have a full mobilization because he is afraid of what the political effects would be in St. Petersburg, in Moscow if he did that. So he's under pressure too. And so I can imagine him wanting to get some kind of respite, and I can imagine him thinking he can work it around so that he gets a ceasefire under maximally advantageous conditions to Russia. He can then rebuild, reconstitute, and then go after Ukraine again in a couple of years.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting. One word on Europe, since you served there in Prague and elsewhere, followed it very closely from when you were back at the State Department here at home and Defense. It seems like German government just fell, they'll have elections. The French government presidency is very weakened as they keep turning over Prime Ministers. Problems elsewhere. Also, problems in Central Europe as well and Eastern Europe, different kinds of governments, different flavors. Hungary, without going through everything, which we can't, what... I guess Trump will just... I don't know, what do you think there? Maybe nothing. So is it such an immediate crisis or does it increase?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, Europe is, as you say, is really at sixes and sevens and very divided. You have a Labour government in the UK. First of all, you got the UK, which has left the EU, is still a NATO member. It's going through a major security and defense review. But it's got a Labour government that has very rapidly squandered the political victory it enjoyed in July and it faces a real challenge. They're going through this big defense review. There are now stories appearing in the UK, that the Ministry of Defense says to do the kinds of things that Britain has traditionally done, they're going to have to really dramatically increase their defense spending unless they want to shrink Britain's role. That's going to be very hard for a Labour government to do and to manage.

You've got, as you say, a French government that's in crisis. Macron is extremely weak at home. There's pressure building on him to resign early rather than serve out his term. I think he will do everything he can to resist that. He's just put a new prime minister in place after Michel Barnier called the government collapsed over a budget bill that the far right opposed and the far left. So he's caught up in that. As you mentioned, the German government has fallen. The outgoing chancellor, Chancellor Schultz is extremely unpopular. There's every chance that the AfD, the German far right will do well in the election. That's a huge challenge.

We've had Russian interference in a big way in the Romanian election. You've got a crisis in Georgia that we haven't even mentioned, which again, kind of election interference in Georgia by a pro-Russian oligarchic regime. And I'm talking about Georgia in Europe, not in the United States. You've got, as you say, you've got the little mini-Putins in Central Europe, in Hungary and Prime Minister Fico in Slovakia, but also potentially in the Czech Republic where some of these populist nationalists are making a comeback. So you've got a Europe that's politically very divided, although united by in large in terms of public opinion about the challenge and threat that Russia represents.

And so, the bright spot in Europe I would say is the government in Poland, the Nordic states, and the fact that Finland and Sweden are now in NATO and are very clear-eyed about all of these threats and working hard to deal with them and provide support for Ukraine and think about future challenges from Russia, the Baltic States as well. I would say that's the bright spot and the fact that Kaja Kallas is the EU's foreign policy spokesperson, former prime minister of Estonia is probably a very good thing.

BILL KRISTOL:

But all in, it doesn't sound to me like we can just step away and expect Europe to pick up the... They can do some things and it's great the Nordic states and all that, but they can't do what we were doing in Ukraine and they can't really, it feels to me like. They can be helpful, but they're not going to necessarily capitulate to Putin exactly right away. But I don't know, without us pushing pretty hard in the other direction. Do you think?

ERIC EDELMAN:

We have to provide the organizing framework for almost everything as we have essentially since the 1940s.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. No, it's tragic in a way. It is tragic. You get the expansion of NATO, the inclusion of really capable new members, excellent prime ministers and presidents in some of these countries, as you've mentioned, in the Nordic and Baltic States, but also elsewhere. Even Germany tried to do change its course in 2022 with the Zeitenwende and all this. And it now looks, I don't know, at best we can hope that we can hang in there for a year or two and things like Putin's weaknesses might be stronger than the West's.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah, and there's also a lot of discussion in Europe about actually spending more on defense, which is a good thing that will appeal to Trump. Mark Rutte, the Dutch new NATO Secretary

General has been talking a lot about this. There was an EU report prepared by Mario Draghi about the need for Europe to make massive investment in production capability including defense production, which is very important because the United States defense industrial base is something we looked at in our National Defense Strategy Commission report is in a very fragile state, needs major recapitalization. But even in the best projection that you might make of it, we're not going to be able to produce everything we need to support Israel, support Ukraine, prepare ourselves for possible eventualities in Indo-Pacific without our allies contributing quite a bit as well. And their defense industrial base is in worse shape than ours with some exceptions like Finland, Sweden, Norway, and a couple of others. Germany has some capability there as well in France. But that's something that needs to be tuned up also.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's another whole discussion, which maybe a lost opportunity, I'm afraid by the Biden administration, at least in terms of getting things going here at home. But as you've argued before in these conversations and many other places. So maybe just two... We do need to discuss China. It's allegedly the greatest strategic threat. And in a funny way because it's such a big looming threat, but it hasn't done quite as much you might say, or it hasn't been quite as many dramatic developments there, it doesn't seem as in the Middle East or in Europe in the last couple of years really. It's easier to just bracket it, I suppose. But obviously it's been a focus of Trump, certainly a focus of the people around Trump.

We don't have that much time. Let's just discuss it briefly, but I feel like, am I wrong, despite all the hawkish talk about it, Trump's going to try to cut trade deals with Xi, declare victory. He's already backing off on TikTok. He was willing to take a budget deal, a continuing resolution that threw out if as I understand, some of the restrictions that would've hampered Chinese...

ERIC EDELMAN:

Investment in the United States.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, which the National Security hawks had been strongly in favor of. It just feels that he did nothing to help Senators McConnell and Wicker hold that extra \$25 billion in the National Defense Bill, which was cut out at the end. So the hawkishness is not getting any help, at least in the transition from Trump. I don't know. I feel if I were in Taiwan or maybe in Japan, for all the talk about anti-China sentiment, I'd be pretty nervous here going into 2025.

ERIC EDELMAN:

So couple of things. One, Chinese military power is continuing to accumulate at pace. So just yesterday or the day before, the Pentagon released its most recent China military power report, which suggests that they've added 100 nuclear warheads to their nuclear arsenal. So they have about 600, that's about three times the number they had when I was undersecretary 15 years ago. And they're well on their way to 1,500. And the reality is that they will be a nuclear peer. The Pentagon has projected they'll be a nuclear peer of the United States by 2035. On almost every other dimension that the China military power reports have been reporting on for a number of years now, the Chinese have outstripped a lot of those projections. So I have every expectation that they will be our nuclear peer more rapidly than that.

And they're continuing to build other systems as well, ships, planes, missiles, a whole array of military capabilities. They're also more closely aligning themselves with Russia and with Iran and North Korea. And so we have this now intensifying pattern of collaboration and cooperation among these four states that are adversaries of the United States who are more or less geographically connected as a whole. This is what our friend, the historian, Hal Brands, calls in his forthcoming book, Fortress Eurasia. And this is a huge challenge for us to deal with. First of all, we've never dealt with two nuclear peers before. That's a novel challenge for us, much less two nuclear peers who might collaborate with one another.

I testified in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee two years ago with my colleague, Frank Miller, former colleague in government, Frank Miller, who is probably one of the leading U.S. Experts on nuclear weapons and redid the single integrated operational plan for Dick Cheney back in the early 1990s and the most significant reworking of that nuclear targeting plan that has ever been done. And we raised the question of potential Russian-Chinese nuclear planning in collaboration against us, which would be a huge challenge for us to deal with. And we were poo-pooed about that. When I was back testifying in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee this summer about the National Defense Strategy Commission report that I co-chaired with Jane Harman, Senator Tim Kaine pointed out that we had been poo-pooed about this before, but now we've seen joint Russian-Chinese, long-range nuclear-capable bomber exercises flying up into our air defense information zone in Alaska. So the idea of joint planning is not as nearly so far-fetched as people might've thought it was a while ago. This is a gigantic challenge.

Moreover, Xi Jinping has directed his military to be prepared to invade Taiwan by 2027 to solve the Taiwan problem as China describes it. That would be hugely consequential for the United States were they to do that. By the way. I don't think that means that that's a decision to invade Taiwan in 2027. He's told them to be ready. There's a lot that goes between being ready and actually doing it. Amphibious operations are some of the most difficult military operations to accomplish. China's never done anything like that at that scale with combined arms, although they did just have, by the way, this is where you were saying people haven't been paying much attention. They just had one of the largest combined arms military exercises that they've ever had, which has gotten the Taiwanese quite exercised. The Biden administration has been playing it down a little bit, but it's out there. But it would be difficult for them to execute and they might not jump at the chance to do it. There are other ways that they can create problems for us in Taiwan, not just in an invasion, but a blockade, which would be very problematic for us to deal with. And Taiwan produces 80% of the microchips that everybody depends on for their cellphones, their appliances, and all the other appurtenances of modern life that we've come to take for granted. So this is a very big challenge. I worry as you do, that Trump is going to focus mostly on the trade issue and try and do a trade deal and not undertake, I think the very large, I think, defense spending increase that we need coupled with a very big change in how the Pentagon does business. And here Elon Musk is half right, which is he's been tweeting about or X-ing or whatever we call it nowadays about the F-35, which is our most modern fighter jet that is produced by Lockheed Martin. And he's been saying, "This is a stupid expensive program. We need more drones. Obviously, we need more drones."

Well, we definitely need more drones. That's correct. And we need more emphasis on attritable, cheap systems, but also not so cheap autonomous systems that use AI. They need to be used in tandem with manned platforms. We're optimized to produce these extremely expensive, very vulnerable, hard to lose platforms, whether it's aircraft or ships or what have you. That's true. That's a fair criticism. It doesn't mean we've got to get rid of all that stuff and that this new stuff is all going to just solve our problems. We need both, which is why you're going to need a very big increase in the defense budget to keep pace with the challenges that we're facing. And so I worry that there's going to be efforts to change the way that Defense Department does business, which are necessary, but that this will be carried out in a way that creates more chaos and confusion than problems that it might solve.

BILL KRISTOL:

And an increase in the defense budget is the one thing that Vance, Musk, Ramaswamy and others, I think maybe even including Hegseth at the times, Tulsi Gabbard are all against, and on record against. And I've noticed just now it's become more respectable in a way for people who've been keeping their heads down a little after Putin's invasion of Ukraine to say, "Yeah, you know what? That bloated..." Some of the left-wing Democrats, for example, who've been pretty good on Ukraine and that cost money. So they've not really done much to try to cut defense that much in the last two, three years. And the Biden administration restrained them. Now there'll be an opposition to Trump. Trump will be cutting God knows what programs for

poor people and kids and so forth. And I think some of that left-wing dovishness can come back pretty quickly.

So to the degree that your read of the world is that one thing we need is not to be weaker but stronger. It's hard for me to see where the impetus for that, unfortunately in the next couple of years politically comes from. But anyway.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah, I share your concern about that. The one good sign I think that you can point to is the fact that the outgoing Senate majority leader, Senator McConnell is going to be taking over the SADC, the Senate Appropriations Defense Subcommittee from whence he can do a lot of good. And he's just published a very powerful article in Foreign Affairs that calls for not American disengagement, but for more American primacy. He basically says he's an unapologetic supporter of American primacy. And I certainly agree with that, and I hope he has some influence here to stem some of the tide of what you've been rightly discussing.

But the idea that somehow we can save enough money, look, are there savings that can be realized in the Defense Department? Yes, of course. Is it a terrible thing that the Department of Defense has trouble passing an audit? Yes, of course it is. Although the fact that we're talking about \$900 billion that are fragmented among a variety of different military services, agencies, and parts of the Department of Defense, it's probably not altogether surprising that it's hard to audit all that. But the idea that you can just get to where we need to be purely by internal savings is I think a chimera that is going to lead us down the wrong path.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, it's one that obviously Musk and Ramaswamy really embraced in DOGE world. And look, the most powerful people in the White House will be, I assume Russ Vought, the OMB director, Steve Miller, they're all for cutting defense spending, and Vance. I think the degree to which people like McConnell can in a different world where appropriations committee subchairs, where the appropriations bills were passed and there was a normal process and it wasn't all just a big CR, and where party members didn't feel totally compliant to the White House, it'd be one thing. But it seems a little grim. I guess what I'm struck by listening to, I hadn't really thought about it this way. So I'll pose this and you can correct it and explain it maybe just to begin to close up here.

I still want to come to quick five, 10 minutes on the challenges the new Trump administration poses to stability and order and freedom in the world. But just before that, your description of both the autocrats working more closely together, that's pretty clear. It's just a fact. Russia, North Korea troops fighting in Ukraine, unbelievable. Really, China not fully on board with Russia, but doing an awful lot to help them and then vice versa, as you say, the joint exercises and the nuclear and other military areas. Iran, big supplier of aid to Russia in Ukraine and stuff. So they've had a setback in the Middle East with Assad. That's great. Russia and Iran have, maybe it's an important setback, maybe it could be capitalized on, but the degree to which you have this pretty tight-knit axis of autocracy, which isn't getting weaker in every respect on the one hand, so that could be the future, that's bad. And the other side of the future strikes me as being chaos. That's to say, and both could happen at once.

There could be enough chaos in the world that our allies think, "We can't count on the Americans. They've elected Trump for the second time in eight years, he'll be there for four years. Who knows what comes next." Maybe it's America for more, America first, or JD Vance, more Radical America first. No more Mitch McConnell there in the Senate I suppose after '26, who knows where the Democrats go. And if you're in Japan, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, to take different kinds of allies, if you know what I mean, European nations. I don't know. I just feel like, I don't know how many steps. It's been a pretty sturdy thing, the US-led alliance structure in both Europe and Asia, and it's withstood a lot of setbacks and challenges and moments where you thought jeez, this could all fall apart, but I don't know, this feels like a pretty, this could all fall apart moment. So you have a strong autocracy on the one hand, and chaos and conceivable and just finally, to put the obvious point on it, that falling apart doesn't

mean just, "Okay, it falls apart a little." In my opinion, it means nuclear proliferation, which people have not focused on enough. So, say whatever you want about that little stream of consciousness, but it all makes me pretty alarmed.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Look, you're absolutely right, Bill. And you went where I was going to go in answering your question, which is the single best guarantee of the most important, successful, and still extant arms control agreement that's been reached in the post-nuclear age, which is the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968, which has kept us from having a hugely proliferated world. President Kennedy in the spring of 1963, six months before he was killed, was asked what kept him up at night most in the press conference, and he said, "The prospect that at the end of the decade will have 20 nuclear powers in the world."

Well, at the time he spoke, there were four nuclear powers. Shortly after he died a fifth, China tested a nuclear weapon. He clearly had them in mind because he knew they were working on a nuclear program. Flash forward 60 years, we only have nine nuclear powers, which is a lot less than 20, and that's because of the workings of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But you're a hundred percent right, US nuclear extended deterrence through our system of alliances, whether our multilateral alliance in Europe with NATO, or our bilateral alliances with Japan, the Republic of Korea, Taiwan at one time, Australia, New Zealand, has been the biggest guarantor against nuclear proliferation, and one reason why when we opened this conversation, I opened with Iran. Having Iran with a nuclear weapon's already problematic, just in its own right, but the other reason it's problematic is because I think most observers believe it will be the final nail in the coffin of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, because Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt used to have a nuclear program, maybe Jordan, Algeria once upon a time had a nuclear program, there will be a cascade. It won't maybe be immediate, but it will be certain that other countries will move in the direction of self-help with nuclear weapons, rather than relying on US alliances.

And that is not only going to lead to a much more unstable world, with a lot of countries with nuclear weapons very short distances from one another, with very short flight times, it means that these things will be potentially used in anger, which they haven't been since 1945.

So, you're absolutely a hundred percent right. Chaos in the order is likely to lead to precisely what you described.

BILL KRISTOL:

We can't end quite on that, so let's end on another slightly worrisome thing, which is how big... People like us have been very critical of President-elect Trump and hopes he would not be reelected, hoped he wouldn't be elected in the first time. I think we were mostly correct honestly in some of the things we worried about, but we don't know, we don't what the second term will look like, obviously. And there are competing forces, and things are just unpredictable.

But how big a shock to the system is just Trump coming back in, and how much of a, maybe to be fair, how much of that shock could be okay and healthy, sort of, a little bit of a shake up? And how much... I don't know, just how worried are you about, I guess, just the fact that it's a Trump administration. And I guess I'll just ask also on Biden, did some things pretty well, but how much... It doesn't seem like you think the world is safer now than it was, unfortunately, when President Biden took over.

Maybe he couldn't have made it safer, I'm not making a judgment about his presidency exactly, but just empirically, analytically, if... if, I don't know, those are a couple of big things for you to mull over quickly... Not quickly, but mull over and close on, because I think I'd be very interested in your thoughts on both.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah, so, number one, I think in terms of shock to the system, I think most European and Asian countries, in fact, I think most countries around the world, have been calculating the likelihood that Trump would come back for some time. I think people are prepared for it.

They also have a better sense of Trump than they did in the past. They know that frequently he blusters. They know that he's incredibly susceptible to flattery. They know that he's not a master of the details, and so that if you give him a good headline you can make hay with. So, case in point, when Trump announced he was going to go to the reopening of the newly refurbished Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, Macron used that as an opportunity to butter Trump up, and then to get him to meet with Zelensky, which I think was actually constructive. So, people have learned how to... kind of Trump Management 101. That doesn't solve all problems. Obviously, if he slaps tariffs on, that's going to create all sorts of problems. If he pulls troops out of Syria, for instance, that could create problems, because then the Europeans might end up being some of the first people to suffer as a result of terrorist acts from ISIS, which would probably happen in Europe before they happen here. Although you never can tell.

So, that's all kind of baked into the cake. The things you really worry about are things like he's going to pull the United States out of NATO. I worry a little bit less about that than I might have in the past. I know John Bolton has been, his former national security advisor, has been very concerned that he will do that. And obviously I defer to John who spent... John was Trump's longest serving national security advisor, and so obviously heard him in private a lot, and therefore I am not discounting what John says in the least, but there's actually legislation on the books that says he can't do it. And one of the co-authors of that legislation is Marco Rubio, who's going to be the Secretary of State.

I think Waltz and Rubio both still represent, in their fundamental instincts, the more traditional, conservative internationalism of the Reagan Republican Party than they do the Vance-Tucker Carlson wing of America First. I do think there're going to be debates inside the administration, which are going to be... It's hard to know how those will come out, over a whole variety of issues. Ukraine, Iran, China, et cetera.

I do worry that some of the really unqualified candidates who've been nominated, and I have in mind Hegseth and Gabbard mostly, also Kash Patel, also Robert F. Kennedy Junior. We haven't talked about the potential of another global pandemic, which is always out there, and the last administration did not exactly cover itself with glory in managing that. And the one thing they indisputably did right about that, which was Operation Warp Speed and the vaccines, they've now got a nomination of a secretary of HHS who's a vaccine denier, no matter how much backpedaling he does, his record is clear on that. So, there's a lot out there that could go wrong with all of this cast of characters. Obviously, I wish them well, for the sake of the nation and the world. But I think it's a little hard to predict exactly how it will come out. I think the appropriate attitude for all of us to take is one of a watchful concern.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's helpful to stress that it's not all set. There are these different tendencies and strains, and one can look strong now, I would say now the America First side to me just looks in the last six weeks since this election, ascendant, and Rubio looks more like a figurehead, but that can change in six months obviously. So...

ERIC EDELMAN:

And events can—

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, yeah, so and events, right, and the world they face. Maybe it's... Last thoughts on that, on the events and the kind of just the actual situation out there, you've seen some pretty bad ones. Though it seemed to be bad ones, over the decades.

ERIC EDELMAN:

It's the nature of black swans that we don't see them coming, as opposed to the so-called gray rhinos that you see charging towards you. Who knows what might happen? I think a lot of unexpected things can happen.

The Russian army could crack under the strains it's under; the Ukrainian army could crack. They're in extremis right now. So, you could get a catastrophic collapse on the battlefield of some sort or other. I'm not predicting that; I'm just saying these are the kinds of things that could happen. You could get a collapse of the North Korean regime. The Assad regime, nobody thought it was going to collapse in two weeks. These regimes always look strong, but they're completely fragile and on the inside. Russia is more fragile than we think. Think back to the Prigozhin mutiny, I think it's arguable that had Prigozhin not lost his nerve, he might have actually taken Moscow.

So, all of these things are out there. The Chinese still spend more on internal security than they do on external security, which is an indication of how concerned the leaders are about their own populace. It's the nature of all of these regimes. The Iranian regime, the collapse of Assad and the success of the Israeli retaliation rate in Iran have exposed, I think, the fragility of that regime, which is loathed by the majority of the population. So, the potential for upheaval, unanticipated shifts is always out there and tends to impose itself on every administration that comes in.

On Biden, I guess I would say I give the Biden administration enormous credit for reasserting the importance of US alliances, and doing its best to be a good ally. Some of that was undercut by the manner in which they withdrew from Afghanistan, which was done without a whole lot of consultation with allies, and resulted in a pretty disastrous blow to our international reputation. Ironically, I think the Trump administration has a chance to reverse some of that, because the entire narrative in the Middle East has been, since 2011, the US throws its allies under the bus, look what they did with Mubarak, look what they did in Afghanistan. Unlike the Russians and the Iranians who stick by their clients. That doesn't look so persuasive right now. That is an opportunity for the United States, if the United States is willing to take it. We'll squander it if we sell out the Kurds, but it's there for the taking, I think. The Biden team also I think deserves credit for trying to alert Europeans and the Ukrainians to what the Russians were up to. I think they initially, by the way, underestimated the challenge from Russia. I think they thought they could quote, park, that issue by having a summit with Putin and then pivot to the Indo-Pacific. That was clearly a mistake. I think by and large they have been supportive of Ukraine and of Israel, which has been good. But when you think about it, on Ukraine it's pretty clear they've been a day late and a dollar short with almost every major military system that they gave the Ukrainians.

And instead of dolloping this stuff out in small doses, had they really put the pedal to the metal in the fall of 2022, when the Ukrainians routed the Russians in Kharkiv, instead of giving the Russians six to nine months to dig in, maybe things might look a little different. Same with the permission to use US weapons against clearly legitimate Russian military targets attacking Ukraine, I think that's been a huge deficiency.

And while they get a lot of credit, and I think more credit than maybe some quarters of Conservatism, Inc. are willing to give the Biden administration for supporting Israel, it's also the case that had the Israelis followed all of the advice of the Biden administration, that we would not have seen this gigantic shift in the balance of power in the Middle East. We should not forget that the Biden administration cautioned the Israelis about going into Rafa.

Now, maybe some of that caution led the Israelis to be a little bit more careful about collateral damage when they went into Rafa, but if they had followed all the advice of the Biden administration, they would not have successfully essentially destroyed Hamas as a military force. The Biden team said, "Don't go north into Lebanon." And they managed to completely destroy Hezbollah as a proxy force. Not completely but eviscerate them. They're incredibly weak now.

Up until two weeks before the Assad regime fell, the Biden administration was trying to grab onto the coattails of the Arab countries that were normalizing with Assad, and trying to normalize with Assad as well. So, they've been way behind in all of this. On Iran, they came in

with a pledge, both in the Democratic platform and orally, to negotiate a longer, stronger agreement on nuclear weapons with Iran. And from the get-go, Secretary Blinken kept saying, "We don't have unlimited time for negotiations, very limited time." But he said that for 18 months, and then when the Iranians pulled out of the negotiations there was no plan B for the administration. They just defaulted.

They had testified that there was no military solution to the problem of Iran, which doesn't look to be like a fact now, in light of what Israel has been doing. And they said diplomacy is the only solution, but they weren't engaged in diplomacy, so in effect they had no policy on Iran, which is how we got to where we are. So, very mixed bag I would say.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And I think a point you've made elsewhere, to close, is that no real Truman-like awakening of the US domestically either, in terms of understanding the challenges coming, or actually defense military base and all kinds of other internal reforms of the government, and business and social reforms, as it were, or social alert. I don't know how to say this. Or alerting, getting essentially the business, industrial world back up to speed, but also just getting the country to understand what we're facing. I think there Biden was just not the person to do that, I guess. So...

ERIC EDELMAN:

It was a failure to mobilize on all fronts, mobilization of public [inaudible]—

BILL KRISTOL:

That's a good way to put it, better way than I was... Yeah, that's good.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Mobilization of public opinion, mobilization of American defense industry, to understand the challenges that are ahead of us and to prepare the country. There's no equivalent of the Truman Doctrine Speech, or anything like that,

BILL KRISTOL:

Or educational exchanges, or a million [inaudible] programs, people... All the kind of stuff that happened in the late forties, early fifties.

Well, so much more to discuss. We've gone long, but it's been very, very useful, I think, Eric, and really informative, and I hope obviously the president... Well, he won't perhaps watch, but some of his top people will undoubtedly watch. But leaving them aside and members of Congress, I just think for all of us, it's really important to... It's gotten a little weirdly with all the stuff happening in the world, so dramatic, there's so much happening at home and people understandably focus on that first, but this stuff is going to hit us pretty fast in beginning of January 20th, and it's good for people to really have a comprehensive, but also detailed understanding that you've, I think, made possible for them to have.

So, I really appreciate you taking the time today, just before Christmas and Hanukkah, and—

ERIC EDELMAN:

It's always a pleasure.

BILL KRISTOL:

I wish we could have had a slightly more upbeat, cheerful discussion for the holiday season, but I think it's good for people to face reality, even in the holidays, right?

ERIC EDELMAN:

I think it's an incentive to eat, drink, and be merry.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, that's true. And then face reality after they can watch this, put this on... Don't watch this on Christmas Day, watch it the day after, that's the advice. Eric, thanks again for joining me today, and thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.