

# AMBASSADOR THOMAS PICKERING DEFINING MOMENTS

Interview by Vadim Grishin



Institute for  
European, Russian,  
and Eurasian Studies

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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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*By any measure, Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering is a legendary figure in American diplomacy. During an extraordinary 45-year career with the U.S. Department of State, this consummate diplomat has played key roles in foreign policymaking—from seeking peaceful solutions in the turbulent Middle East of the 1970s and the heated conflicts of Central America in the 1980s to contributing to the end of the Cold War era, the successful building of global coalitions within the framework of the UN Security Council, and the development of relations with Boris Yeltsin’s convulsive Russia in the 1990s.*

*Equally importantly, Pickering—who has held the personal rank of Career Ambassador, the highest in the U.S. Foreign Service, since 1984—has consistently demonstrated a keen ability to work within the constraints of bipartisanship, applying his diplomatic skills in support of Republican and Democratic administrations alike. Few senior diplomats have had the opportunity—or talent—to serve under 11 Presidents and 13 Secretaries of State.*

*Over the course of decades, Ambassador Pickering has proven to be the right person, at the right place, and at the right time. He has repeatedly caught the tailwind in his diplomatic sails, often under very challenging conditions.*

*His professional accomplishments speak for themselves: Ambassador to six countries on five continents, U.S. Representative to the UN, and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs.*

*His superior intelligence and ingenuity, along with his trust in partnerships, have always been Pickering’s main capital. Over time, he has grounded his own diplomatic style and unique approach to statesmanship in a deep understanding of the realities he has faced; in refined communication with friends and adversaries; and in hard-driving political initiatives and creativity.*

*Ambassador William Burns, who worked closely with him, described Pickering’s leadership style this way: “He never wanted to be a diplomatic postman just reporting on events. Instead, he always offered his best policy ideas and solutions. And sometimes, he acted first—and asked for forgiveness later.”<sup>2</sup>*

*I first met Ambassador Pickering more than 20 years ago and have since had the privilege of talking with him frequently on a wide range of international policy topics. Gradually, the idea matured of recording some of our discussions for publication to share some of the Ambassador’s high-caliber professional insights regarding Russia, China, the Middle East, Central America, and, of course, the United States.*

*Against a broad historical backdrop, these interviews examine modern diplomacy and American foreign policy in various parts of the world.*

*In light of the dramatic results of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, which had an immediate impact on the realm of international affairs, it seemed most appropriate to start these discussions from the*

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<sup>1</sup> Vadim Grishin is currently a Professorial Lecturer at George Washington University. After the collapse of the USSR, Dr. Grishin became involved in political and economic reforms while advising the Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation during the 1990s and early 2000s. Since that time, he has had extensive experience working with the Bretton Woods Institutions: as a Board Member of the World Bank Group, a Senior Adviser at the International Monetary Fund, and a Consultant at the International Finance Corporation. He has also been a Visiting Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Dr. Grishin, who earned his PhD in social science, holds degrees from Georgetown University’s McDonough School of Business and Russia’s Diplomatic Academy in Moscow.

<sup>2</sup> William Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (New York: Random House, 2019), 88.

present day. We began with a conversation on Russia, which continues to be a highly controversial topic in Washington.

### The Future of U.S.-Russia Relations

**VG:** *On the eve of the U.S. elections, Politico published several open letters signed by a broad set of experts advocating very different courses regarding Russia.<sup>3</sup> The so-called “idealists” insisted on maintaining steady pressure on Moscow until it changed Russia’s behavior, opening space for further engagement. The alternative group—the “realists”—expressed a preference for diplomatic contacts with the Kremlin on urgent issues like the extension of New START, the last remaining nuclear arms treaty between the two countries, despite shrinking political space, constrained channels of communication, and limited opportunities. Notably, however, there was consensus among the signers of these letters on one key point: so-called reset policies had been exhausted and should no longer apply to U.S.-Russian relations. You were one of the authors of the “realists” letters. How would you evaluate that debate? Was it addressed at a new administration?*

**TP:** You are right: one school of thought is more inclined to see negotiations as a possibility and another school is more favorably disposed toward military and economic pressure as efficient policy. I think that division among researchers more or less coincides with a split among decision makers. Republicans want to see themselves as, or portray themselves as, or act as if they are hardliners, and they usually come from the right of the political spectrum.

In the American tradition, compromise is perceived by many as a weakness and the consequence of a bad posture.

Democrats have become very sensitive about this, so regarding relations with Russia, Iran, and North Korea they want to join the hardliners and not expose themselves to criticism for being weak or vacillating and giving in to pressure from those particular countries, with their negative rhetoric and policies toward the United States—in other words, pandering to people who would like to use pressure to push us around.

This tends to move the situation in the direction of demonizing the other party's actions, finding nothing of redemptive virtue in the other position and, in effect, causing a fracture or an opening to appear between us. The two sides have no interest in trying to find a way to cross over and they only proffer policies that involve the significant capitulation of the other side, even as a price for talking.

What feeds this approach is a militant idea that rejects or abhors the absence of an enemy, someone they can point to as being dangerous and requiring that the military get all the weapons it needs and continue building itself up with budgetary support in Congress. Each military service branch sees some value in its particular capacity to counter the “enemy” and therefore argues for budgetary pre-eminence in the assignment of funds in the next budget. It’s an important part of what goes on in terms of our approach to these issues.

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<sup>3</sup> Rose Gottemoeller et al., “It’s Time to Rethink Our Russia Policy,” *Politico*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/05/open-letter-russia-policy-391434>; David J. Kramer, “No, Now Is Not the Time for Another Russia Reset,” *Politico*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/11/russia-reset-response-open-letter-393176>; Rose Gottemoeller et al., “Why We Still Need to Rethink Russia Policy: A Rebuttal,” *Politico*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/09/25/russia-open-letters-rebuttal-421546>.

Our open letters were a message to the American public and to a new administration, and they were designed to make clear that what had been done under Trump was dangerous and had the capacity to provoke a military conflict. The expectation that pressure alone can produce excellent results puts both sides in a position where accidents and miscalculations have the potential to lead to nuclear exchanges—and there is no good theory and obviously no practical experience that tells us how, and in what way, a nuclear exchange, once it gets going, can be stopped. Certainly, classical diplomacy is unlikely to work in this situation.

The new administration might adopt our approach, or at least look at it as a way of dealing with some issues. It could be an option for President Biden. We also see the pushback against our letters as important and significant. The people who had opposed our position were very strenuous in their criticism, but they were ultimately weak in presenting an alternative policy—a policy with solutions. They focused on the tactic of pressure: rejecting negotiated compromise, setting aside diplomatic communication and a diplomatic approach.

At the same time, we tried to be very precise and careful not to promise that there are miracles waiting to happen if only we could begin to communicate. This does require thoughtful diplomacy.

Let me also remind you that we wrote our first letter before some unexpected events happened in different parts of the world, including massive street protests in Belarus and the poisoning and imprisoning of Alexei Navalny in Russia. The current environment is even more challenging for future diplomatic initiatives. A pre-eminent preoccupation with domestic issues—in Russia staying in power, in the U.S. being re-elected—gives special salience and life to this manner of thinking and reduces and distorts the opportunity to put robust diplomacy to work to solve or at least palliate the problems.

Finally, there is no certainty that diplomacy will work or be effective, but it is an important instrument to use, short of force, in a confrontation to try to avoid catastrophe.

What makes this approach different? “Maximum Pressure” as a tactic and strategy depends on forcing your will on the other side—something they will resist—and its lack of past success shows its weakness. The process is focused on a steady escalation of force and resistance, trending toward greater use of kinetic force. The end result is either one side backing down or the opening of active hostilities between them. For two nuclear superpowers like the U.S. and Russia and the U.S. and China, this takes us toward nuclear catastrophe—the beginning of nuclear exchanges we know little about stopping. If there are open communications between the two sides, the leverage developed can at least be calibrated short of active conflict to both take diplomatic steps toward solutions and provide opportunities to engage to that end. The Trump approach seemingly ignored this factor; the Biden administration has apparently adopted it as an essential part of its efforts.

This seen most clearly for Biden and Putin at the Geneva Summit of June 16, 2021. The outcomes, while not transcendental, included an effort to address jointly strategic stability apparently in its broader aspects, as well as resuming Ambassadorial presence and thus more effective diplomatic relations in capitals. Biden was careful to note in his press conference at the end of the Summit that the proof would be in the eating – in six months we might know whether progress in these and other issues was being made.

***VG:** Your primary concern is the risk of nuclear Armageddon. Policies to reduce the nuclear threat were pretty successful in the Cold War period. As it stands, however, almost all basic agreements in this area have fallen apart.*

**TP:** This is not the time to lose sight of the fact that Russia and the United States are the only two countries in the world that have the capacity to extinguish each other, and perhaps most life on this planet. We are talking about an existential threat. It would be crazy to open a new arms race and remove the sensible, reciprocal rules for dealing with the nuclear arsenals of both sides.

We should aim for zero nukes and take steps to get there. And that is not lunatic naiveté, but careful thinking about how conventional deterrence can play a role and how we can deal with evasions of rules by monitoring.

It is worth considering because the nukes we currently possess have given us very few, if any, advantages, and if they are not well or carefully managed forever, they will have the potential, as long as they are around, to incinerate the globe and all of us.

We also saw during the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union that there was a moment during the Cuban missile crisis when people thought about the problem of a potential nuclear war and this led them to believe that it was important to continue and enhance conversations, particularly on arms control and disarmament, to try to reduce the chances of such a catastrophe occurring.

Indeed, all of this took place in a context where negotiations for many years succeeded in building a sense of stability in our nuclear relationship that was important for the “mutually assured existence”—the survival—of both the United States and the Soviet Union (now Russia). This means that secondary problems should be put in proper perspective and addressed via diplomacy in an ongoing way where both sides are careful not to raise them to the level of existential threats.

These are questions that are obviously very important for the future and must be looked at carefully by both sides. President Biden was interested in extending New START and Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed willingness to do so. And shortly after the U.S. Inauguration, the two sides reached an agreement.

*VG: Might we expect something beyond extending New START, and what form might it take? Which other countries might join future agreements on nuclear arms reduction?*

**TP:** The U.S. and Russia might go back to Obama administration proposals to reduce deliverable nuclear weapons, and strategic delivery vehicles from around 5,000 nuclear weapons on each side to 900 or 1,000.

The Trump administration raised barriers to that possibility, insisting that China’s buildup of intermediate delivery vehicles, particularly around Taiwan, is a threat the U.S. cannot tolerate. Beijing has slowly, but not irrelevantly, built up its nuclear posture—land mobile missiles and new technology (hyper-sonic) weapons—and the Trump administration felt very strongly that the threat around Taiwan could not be countered without some arms limitations on China or a buildup of U.S. land-based intermediate range missiles.

China’s air-delivered and sea-delivered capacity is also real. As a whole, the country is estimated to have around 300 to 350 deliverable nuclear weapons, only a small number of which are intercontinental, but could be compared with roughly 5,000-6,000 apiece in the nuclear arsenals of the U.S. and Russia, with a limit of 1,550 strategic delivery vehicles on both sides. China presents less of a threat in numbers now, but may in the future and thus be worth paying attention to sooner rather than later.

The extension of New START for a full five years has given all parties time to discuss new levels of nuclear weapons, bringing to the negotiation table not just China, but also France and Britain. The next step, which I don't believe will be easy but is extremely important, will be an effort to approach over time four other known possessors of nuclear arms: India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea.

It is also well-known that commitments have value if there is trust on both sides, while a lack of trust could undermine any international agreement.

*VG: There is an evident lack of trust between the U.S. and Russia, and there are a lot of other issues that are affecting U.S.-Russian bilateral relations.*

**TP:** There are serious concerns in the United States about Russian policy toward Ukraine and Belarus and about the destiny of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. The Biden administration has recently introduced new sanctions against Moscow in response to Russia's hacker attacks, particularly the "SolarWinds" espionage case, and "soft" interference in the U.S. electoral process.

As we know, so-called "soft" election interference is designed to provide distractions and a wide flow of information, particularly over the Internet, to American voters to somehow influence their views about candidates and impact voting outcomes.

I think it is also important to know that we exist in a world where each country organizes and uses intelligence to provide its own sources of information and otherwise influence outcomes and activities. Intelligence operates in ways that do not comply with local laws—in this regard its supporters maintain that it is legal internationally if not locally.

It is also true that in the intelligence sphere, organizations that ignore opportunities are generally not considered successful by the political authorities of a given country. Thus, it remains a primary responsibility of each country to protect its elections, including by putting pressure on other states not to meddle.

There's a proverb in English: "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me." From the international perspective, however, there are serious unresolved issues in the field of cyberspace that still need to be addressed. In particular, academics have been looking at whether "rules of the game" or "rules of the road" might be applied to the murky and opaque regions of cyberspace, although these inquiries have yet to produce a tangible result.

*VG: The U.S.-Russian relationship is not all about elections, cyberattacks or strategic stability matters, although those areas play a very important role in the attitudes of both countries and their adoption of negative positions. What other things should be kept in mind?*

**TP:** There are some spheres where we do still cooperate or have opportunities to cooperate: space, climate change, the fight against COVID-19, the pandemic and its negative impact on economic activities globally, and common challenges with terrorism. And there are relatively new areas of interaction as well, such as maintaining oil price stability, which is important for major world oil producers like the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Russia. I was just pointing out a few of the areas where new or enhanced collaboration might be mutually beneficial and profitable as we move ahead.

## A New Cold War: Is History Repeating Itself?

**VG:** *Speaking recently at the George Washington University, you said that U.S.-Russian bilateral relations are the nastiest they have been since the post-World War II period, with only two exceptions: the Korean War and the Cuban missile crisis. Does this mean that we have returned to a Cold War or a "Hot Peace," as Michael McFaul puts it? Of course, we can't cover all stages of the Cold War, but looking at their contours and characteristics, what would you highlight? And what are the similarities and differences between the "original" Cold War period and the present international situation?*

**TP:** The Second World War was an existential struggle for both the Soviet Union and the United States, but that war-era alliance disappeared shortly after the end of the war. Crucially, people in both countries seemingly felt the same way: that the decline in bilateral relations had been the fault of the other side.

History points to a number of issues, but we in the U.S. have a very strong sense that Stalin, during his leadership tenure until his death in 1953, was someone who wanted to take advantage of the position of the Soviet Union as a victor in the war and did all he could to promote Soviet influence and maximize its gains, particularly in Eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, the Far East.

The Cold War, as we saw it, had a lot of ideological content, which was emphasized on both sides as a major dividing factor. This led to a crystallization of obvious broad differences.

It should come as no surprise that the questions of Germany and Eastern Europe, of long-term Western attitudes, and of a very large Soviet military presence in post-war Europe all disturbed us in one way or another, as of course did the rapid rise of the Soviet Union as a nuclear power.

So, the first phase of the Cold War was seemingly the realization, between 1946 and 1949, that diplomacy was not going to bring useful results. George Kennan and his confrontational postures heavily influenced the solidification of U.S. attitudes toward the end of that period. He articulated a view of containment but believed in being careful about military activities on the grounds that internal contradictions would prevent the Soviet Union from lasting forever. However, the intensity to the confrontation was increased by the Korean War that began on June 25, 1950, when North Korea intervened into the South, having Stalin's full support.

The next stage began with tentative efforts to see whether particular arrangements could be made in the nuclear arms sphere that would introduce elements of stability and make people on both sides think more about that.

Much of it progressed very slowly and had all the features of a Cold War, with ideological and political differences. However, the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and the emergence of Kennedy on the scene in the United States extended the realization that both sides were left with the choice of adopting either an offensive nuclear posture or one trying to enhance stability.

During that time, bad mistakes could have led to even worse kinds of confrontations. While experts thought about limited nuclear war, people increasingly felt that nobody really had any idea how to stop a nuclear war once it started. That led to a more intensive stage of negotiations, with serious ups and downs; we could see periods of détente and periods that failed to achieve rapprochement.

One could easily divide the history of the Cold War into various segments of activity that I would call defining moments. Some of those moments had to do with changes in political leadership, while

others had to do with how, and in what ways, people reflected on their postures, particularly in light of events such as the Cuban missile crisis.

We can say that John Kennedy presented an important moment, as did Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, and they gradually brought to the scene some interesting and useful ideas. The situation changed significantly from 1989 to 1991 with the Soviet Union's failure to take advantage of its main economic assets and find a way of avoiding the difficulties of excessive state planning and the effects of extensive bureaucratization on its economy.

At that time, Gorbachev realized that things were going downhill. My conversations with him well after the fact have led me to believe that he still, for very personal reasons, felt some of the key elements of communist thinking should be applied in defense of issues like social justice. He also thought that some organizational forms introduced by the socialist system, such as large-scale state intervention in the economy, were important. He wanted a kind of reformed communism for Russia.

### **The Chinese Model**

***VG:** We can track the ebb and flow of waves of privatization and increased government participation in the economy on a global scale, and the varying impacts they have had over the last 40 years. But the main argument of those who support the preservation of the public sector has been the unprecedented growth of China, and more recently Vietnam, which has been trailing behind its northern neighbor by 10-15 years while closely following its pattern of development.*

**TP:** One can read today how the Chinese have produced a model that has been rather successful, at least at this stage. But we do not know the outcome of that, since life moves forward in a very dynamic way. That's why we may never know ahead of time the results of all experiments in history, but they are interesting.

Some in the U.S. believed that economic growth in China along open-market lines would lead to political change away from communist thought and toward a more liberal attitude. That did not happen. But going back to U.S.-Russian relations, on the American side we went through periods of negotiated efforts that tried to find solutions to problems, accompanied by alarms and military buildups—the Reagan approach being an example of that.

### **End of the Cold War: Lost Opportunities**

***VG:** I assume you mean the Strategic Defense Initiative, famously known as the Star Wars Program. It's evident that the Soviet empire overextended itself in spending on the military, which, together with a plunge in oil prices, proved unsustainable and accelerated the USSR's collapse. Putin called this "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century." Of course, if there were losers in the Cold War, there were also winners. American politicians could not resist the temptation to take a triumphalist line during domestic political struggles, particularly the 1992 election campaign.*

**TP:** The United States' claim of total victory in the Cold War as a result of its own unilateral actions has always disturbed me. Let me put it this way: it was a prostitution of analysis in favor of politics.

Much of it played out in U.S. domestic politics, where each side tried to take advantage of the Cold War for its own political ends. Republicans tended to be more on the hard side, but that drove Democrats to be hard as well in their own way—to appeal to what they thought was a Cold War-era American electorate with a conservative bias.

The good news was that we had survived; the bad news was that we did not know how to take advantage of this in a constructive way during the period that followed. Each of us was living with a big enough hangover from the past that constructive thinking and full efforts to try to bring about change were highly limited by remaining deep suspicions and concerns—and these did not disappear completely even during the Yeltsin period.

For their part, many people in Russia had felt the collapse of the Soviet Union, and they did not come to understand its social, economic, and political downfall in a natural way, but rather in a way that was nursed by the adversary. Some of this was the result of competition—of wanting to demonstrate who the leading power was during the Cold War. Many of those questions and illusions continue to shape people’s thinking today. Reform and change was a spark of not necessarily successful activity dominated in many ways by the United States during the early and middle—but not late—Yeltsin period.

***VG:** An important conclusion is that neither side could efficiently use the unique opportunities presented by the end of the Cold War to deeply transform the international system as a whole and U.S.-Russian bilateral relations in particular. How would you define what we lost and what we achieved? You were involved in this political process, having been appointed U.S. Ambassador to Moscow in 1993, when the formation of a new democratic country (as it appeared to be then) seemed to be happening.<sup>4</sup> Did I understand you correctly that the old-fashioned Cold War-type geopolitical culture still prevailed in both societies and was a serious impediment? In the case of Yeltsin’s Russia, the heavy burdens came largely from Soviet bureaucratic tradition.*

**TP:** Two or three things struck me during that period when I was in Moscow. One of them was the significant amount of unhappiness in Russia about the loss of its international status and the disappointment that followed the Soviet collapse. Almost every official with whom I and the U.S. Embassy dealt at that time was a holdover from the Communist era and thought and acted in that mold. That made change particularly hard and figuring out what change might be useful equally so.

At the same time, Yeltsin struggled to try to make some sense out of his increased leadership role and move forward with it. Clearly, it was in many ways uncomfortable for him to be playing cards at a table where the U.S. and the West held most of the high hands. Clinton to some extent understood this, but that understanding did not extend as far as a willingness to accommodate some of the questions Yeltsin felt strongly about and could not pursue alone.

Tactically, Clinton depended heavily on his private meetings with Yeltsin to help Yeltsin avoid the extreme embarrassment of accepting the outcome of their talks as U.S. diktat. In the handling of the press conferences after their meetings, Clinton let Yeltsin go first and talk about foreign policy steps that the two sides had agreed on in terms that could be portrayed as congenial to Russian interests

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<sup>4</sup> There was intense competition for the ambassadorship to Russia at that time. This position was seen by many as a dream job. President Clinton considered a range of candidates, including Strobe Talbot, Condoleezza Rice, prominent academics, and members of Congress. In the end, Clinton approved Tom Pickering as “the most distinguished professional diplomat with a very diversified record in foreign service.” See Strobe Talbot, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 38-41.

even if Yeltsin had previously opposed those step – both sides got something out of it and tried to accommodate it that way.

Many Russians felt that was not the case, but Yeltsin managed to deal with the problem because Clinton was prepared to allow him to go first and explain what they had agreed on as being in Russia's national interest, even as Clinton retained the upper hand in the deals that had been made.

We tried in a number of cases to provide opportunities for common progress, and that was very much the driver of the Clinton point of view, heavily influenced by Strobe Talbot,<sup>5</sup> who thought that making “the defeat of the communist system by the United States” an important factor in American political life was both unwise and unnecessary. And I agreed with him. I thought that much of what had contributed to the defeat or the changes in the Communist system were major failures of the Soviet managed economy.

The Soviet Union could have survived with its existing resources had it been able to operate at the necessary level of efficiency—but this would have been more easily achieved by a market system than by Gosplan management. This is a long, tortured, and difficult argument, but I thought this was more important to the Soviet collapse than any type of military or security change that might have impacted the balance of power between the two countries.

### **NATO Expansion as a Challenge**

***VG:** It was also during your Ambassadorship in Moscow that some new irritants appeared—primarily discussions about NATO's future and its relations with Russia. Moscow's approach toward NATO was full of inconsistencies. On the one hand, in 1991-1993 the problems related to NATO were not seen as central, but were considered derivative of the task of moving away from a Cold War-era confrontation between the two blocs—and the Russian side expressed its readiness to cooperate with NATO. On the other hand, Moscow emphasized its reluctance to join the organization and called on NATO to instead build relations with Russia as an equal center of power. The Russian leadership did not initially perceive NATO enlargement as an immediate threat, but by the beginning of 1994 that idea had become a kind of obsession.*

**TP:** It's true. One of the first and most difficult questions that came up was the expansion of NATO—how to handle that. We sent out a number of cables from Moscow (one of which Bill Burns published in his book)<sup>6</sup> taking exception to the approach and how it was being managed. Interestingly enough, Shalikashvili's<sup>7</sup> efforts to promote the Partnership for Peace came at the wrong time. This should have been the precursor to slow change rather than the result of rapid change—but that did not happen. In my view, partnership before membership was a more astute and likely way for both sides to muse the former to achieve the latter in a way may likely to be accepted by Russia, even though there were international (in Eastern Europe) and domestic (among U.S. voters of Polish and other Eastern European extraction) forces who wanted membership not partnership first and put their weight behind the decision in the Clinton administration.

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<sup>5</sup> Strobe Talbot served in the State Department from 1993 to 2001, first as ambassador-at-large and special adviser to the Secretary of State for the New Independent States of the former Soviet Union, then as Deputy Secretary of State for seven years.

<sup>6</sup> Burns, *The Back Channel*, 91.

<sup>7</sup> John Shalikashvili was a United States Army general who served as Supreme Allied Commander Europe from 1992 to 1993 and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1993 to 1997.

We always tried to keep the door open to Russian membership of NATO, even if it was seen by Russians as unfeasible, maybe unlikely, and probably unhelpful. In other cases, it was seen as an unnecessary political requirement for retaining what was left of Russia's great-power status through a kind of bilateral management of major world issues.

In any event, the U.S. was pushed to expand NATO by the feelings of deep unease expressed by Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe. They did not follow the changing situation in Russia very carefully and they did not believe that positive, enduring changes were necessarily occurring. Their strong sentiments were driven by memories of a past when they had been coopted into the Soviet system and had paid a very high price. They did not want to see it happen again. Some deep historical differences stemming from Tsarist control to post World War II dominance, galvanized in Warsaw and also beyond, happened during this time. Warsaw was not alone in that feeling.

A second point that is not totally irrelevant: there were a lot of American voters who had East European backgrounds and felt that NATO enlargement would be valuable now that those states had left the Warsaw Pact and become free. Western Europeans were prepared to go along because they thought such an enlargement was a natural evolution for NATO.

Statements and arrangements such as Secretary Baker's alleged statements on limits to NATO enlargement helped to reduce the fear that NATO was an aggressive organization that was surrounding or occupying a large part of the Russian frontier and constituted a major danger, particularly because in the aftermath of 1991 there were many reasons to believe a military conflict between East and West was unlikely. These arguments tended to diminish the potential for conflict and were thought to help reduce Russian fears about NATO's interest in and potential for expansion, even though this was always a difficult argument to sell in Moscow.

### **The Drama of Reforms**

*VG: Apart from NATO, did you make other bilateral efforts to design a new modality for U.S.-Russian relations?*

**TP:** President Clinton supported the creation of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission,<sup>8</sup> which was a U.S.-Russian cabinet-level network designed as a major effort to promote cooperation and assistance.

In many ways, we were very ill-equipped to provide either comprehensive thinking or highly directed assistance, particularly given that Russia itself was struggling to figure out where it wanted to go. It was at a loss to admit its severe economic constraints, on the one hand, and strongly committed to maintaining its independent role as a major world power, on the other.

Those two factors, while apparent to the United States and Western Europe, were, at least in the Clinton Administration, things that we did not want to try to take public advantage of, even though many people in Russia imagined that we were doing so. It was in part a failure to have the frankest types of conversations—which were necessary to communicate a sense of our differences, perceptions, and outlooks—that set the stage for even more difficult times later on.

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<sup>8</sup> The Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, headed by the U.S. Vice-President and the Russian Prime Minister, was formed to promote cooperation between the two countries on the issues of space exploration, energy, trade and business development, defense conversion, science and technology, health, agriculture, and environment.

**VG:** *Russia's officialdom now describes the 1990s as vanished years, times of decay. No doubt, it was a tough period of transformational recession, but of course these were also years of hope and effort to set up a modern market environment along fairly liberal lines. Economic determinism dominated the minds of reformers, with the result that much less attention was paid to the building of new institutions, the restructuring of law enforcement agencies, the formation of democratic political mechanisms, and the creation of a long-overdue system of checks and balances. The Yeltsin factor gradually ceased to play a positive role: although the Constitution of 1993 concentrated a huge amount of power in the hands of the Russian president, Yeltsin himself was no longer able to drive reforms. In foreign policy, Primakov's conservative school prevailed, with a clear aftertaste of anti-Americanism.*

**TP:** There were many difficulties at the time. We had no idea what to do with the heavy focus on security and military manufacturing enterprises. Also, Chechnya revealed—particularly in the first stage of the conflict—the struggles of a Soviet military that had shifted away from the past but could not find a new approach to dealing with problems. This in itself was evidence to Russia that its great-power status was more fiction than reality.

It was a failure on the part of both sides to start from a position where they maintained an extreme desire to hang on to things that were eroding and retained an unwillingness, inability or uncertainty about analyzing and categorizing things in ways that promoted common understanding. Therefore, a straight path forward was unhelpful, not to mention that no one had ever gone—particularly in the economic sphere—from communism to capitalism in such a way that we could say “here is the path and here are the changes that have to be made.” It was a highly experimental, unique, and uncertain challenge. There were many advisors from outside in Russia at the time, each advocating different programs and approaches. Russian interest in enduring the pain inherent in any one of these approaches was low and not well-coordinated; Gorbachev and others also maintained a long-term, lingering interest in supporting, repairing, and restoring communism in a different guise.

In many ways, the destruction of the system that had, at least in theory, eliminated all economic activity for personal gain left open a door to no system at all and engendered a willingness to take advantage of a systemless situation, a time of free play, at least for a while in 1993 and 1994.

We observed that many of the people who prospered economically during that time, which bordered on anarchy in Russia, were the same people who had been the “fixers” of the Soviet system. They had been engaged under the table finding resources, supply chains, and linkages to make up for the shortages that had been felt in the manufacturing system under communism. They reduced some of the sharp burden that had been felt in manufacturing facilities with huge social obligations (employee family education, health pensions, the production of food for employees, etc.) to make them domestically and internationally competitive in a shifting economy. A Russian friend, then a recent graduate of the Harvard Business School, told me he returned to run a large plant making agricultural machinery and found that at least a third of his employees were engaged in supporting the structure making the machinery—schools, dairy farms, and other activities linked to the production plant—but not in producing the end products themselves. He cut them from the enterprise as soon as he could.

The people who gained became oligarchs using 10-ruble certificates, bought for kopecks on the ruble, to gain control of state industries and their assets, which they later built into empires by selling valuable raw materials while continuing to make acquisitions. Many American small and medium-size investors lost all their investments to alliances of small Russian investors in smaller cities and towns and to city officials who eventually used their authority to push out the foreigners.

***VG:** It looked like a trap on the country's path toward development, a trap with incomplete reforms and no systematic approach to changes. Vested interests were a serious impediment to economic recovery, with the nascent oligarchic system corrupting federal and regional authorities, as well as public and judicial institutions. Large segments of society became vulnerable and suffered from half-baked reforms.*

**TP:** We know there were only few examples of very effective policies. In those early days, I was personally amazed as to the ways people found to survive. There was a striking absence of food and other essential goods for maintaining human life in the official shops of the time. Kiosks began to appear on the streets as alternative, higher-priced markets where such things could be bought. But higher prices meant that many necessities were out of reach of those who needed them.

My sense was that a combination of factors existed that made a difference. Some of the information I collected added to my understanding of how people lived on the edge, feeling very uncomfortable and experiencing terrifically difficult times. People told me that under the “propiska” system,<sup>9</sup> no one could move very quickly, and many families were “locked into” their apartment complexes and houses. Under these circumstances, they had to share income, recognizing that if railways were paid one month and manufacturing facilities a different month, they could help each other out financially and avoid suffering the consequences of bad debts.

People also tolerated a possibility that was widespread at the time in the system—they pretended to work and the system pretended to pay them. Having two jobs per adult provided for two adults and sometimes youngsters; most families had to share to survive. Dacha arrangements, or cultivating small plots in the countryside, were an added possibility for multiplying their food resources.

I was particularly depressed by the hyperinflation and how it impacted local people, although in some cases it provided some advantages. If people wanted to privatize apartments and things of that sort, they got real bargains. It wasn't totally negative, but it was mostly negative. That made a huge difference. Moscow apartments went initially for 10,000 rubles, which became a small amount as 1,000 percent inflation took hold.

***VG:** Empty shelves were primarily a phenomenon of the final stages of Gorbachev's perestroika and a direct consequence of two main factors: state price regulation and commodity shortages. As soon as the post-communist liberalization started, Yeltsin's government released prices and the main problem became hyperinflation, which saw the collapse of gigantic non-competitive enterprises and the “melting” of people's savings. During that period, Western development assistance was especially required and was partially provided, although on a fairly limited scale, and it was not always entirely efficient.*

**TP:** Western aid providers had all grown up in the developing world and their ideas and thoughts about how to provide economic development and stimulate change did not square very well with a post-communist system. There was extreme resistance to change built into the system that made it difficult. I was depressed by the fact that those who wanted to become private agriculturalists always got the worst land from the state and collective farms (kolkhozes) that controlled it and received the hardest financial terms, even if they wanted to privatize on a small scale—although I met some remarkable people, especially women, who managed to do it, persisting through strength and resilience.

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<sup>9</sup> A *propiska* is a Soviet and Russian residence permit required for law-enforcement purposes. It restricts every citizen to one legal place of residence, and one is required to accept work, enter a school or college, get married, or engage in other civic formalities.

What was clear at the time, and for 10 years after 1991, was that the system, and particularly those people who were connected to collectivized agriculture, were also largely linked to the remnants of the Communist Party. So collectivized agriculture was in part a voting machine and in part a mechanism of raising resources for partisan political purposes.

The farm managers were the kingpins in making the system work for those parties which were characterized as belonging to the right of the political spectrum, although they advocated the ideas of the extreme left. They kept a hold on the system and were willing to run it with people who continued to depend on the collective rather than to contribute labor to the collective.

Over time, many collective farms began to collapse, bringing down the food-gathering and food-processing systems. This increased unemployment and caused tremendous hardship. The collectives had many who could not or would not work. Votes were assured by the collective management in favor of the remnants of the Communist Party. Independent farmers had little prospect of finance, government support services, good land, and machinery—although many were resilient, hardworking, and innovative. About 200,000 such small independent farms existed about the time I left Russia at the end of 1996.

***VG:** Of course, the big problem was the so-called “red directors” of agriculture and industry, who, being politically very conservative, received huge economic benefits. They continued to squeeze funds from the state budget to support the “systemically important” enterprises. On the other hand, they often simply appropriated, removing from state property the most juicy and profitable parts of the assets, which were often not very efficiently used because they did not have the necessary managerial skills for the new market conditions. In any case, it was an accelerated process of primitively accumulating capital.*

**TP:** Finally, one could see this period as a beginning for those people who became rapidly successful economically. They were part of a protected and often highly criminal system, supporting major industries in their search for raw materials and solutions in supply chain issues.

They took wide advantage of voucher privatization to acquire investments, which were very beneficial. They accumulated vouchers, which people were ready to give away for several rubles or just a bottle of alcohol, not seeing any value in them. Early on, the vouchers were used to acquire properties with high-value raw materials or stocks of semi-finished material that could be sold off outside Russia very quickly.

In addition to that, most foreign investments that came from the U.S. and Europe were on a small and medium scale. They reached people directly, almost at the street level, and they were persuaded to invest mainly outside urban areas. But over a two-year period, these investors were replaced by Russian partners who often worked in collaboration with local governments and eventually managed—through regulatory and other devices—to expel the original investors and absorb their investments, only to see them fail through lack of business experience.

Sometimes they used the investments and sometimes they monetized them. It was during the time of a free-falling economy, and large investors had kept themselves at arm’s length from the economy because they saw the system operating in a dangerous way. So large-scale investments emerged slowly and cautiously, while small and medium-scale investments dried up.

## Russia's Political Transformation Under Yeltsin

**VG:** *What you have vividly and harshly described was essential to the onset of Russian oligarchic capitalism and modern political authoritarianism. Indeed, behind voucher privatization were very selfish economic and political interests. The primary economic goal, however, was to transform formerly state-owned enterprises into profit-seeking businesses that would not become dependent on government subsidies for their survival and would re-allocate resources from old to new activities. A political leitmotif of massive accelerated privatization was also at play: creating an independent class of entrepreneurs who could resist and mitigate the very real risk of communist revanche that emerged in the dramatic events of 1993, as well as in the elections of 1996.*

**TP:** We perfectly well understood that Russia had important domestic political problems. This was clear by October 3, 1993, when Yeltsin broke away from the previously elected “Communist-dominated” Duma with the use of force. On the morning of October 4 (which was late October 3 in the U.S.), I talked with Talbot on a secure phone about what we were doing. I told him that we had no option but to support Yeltsin, because he was the only person who had the ability to reform and because he had electoral legitimacy, even though the dismissal of parliament was beyond his powers. My own view was that there had already been several hundred parliamentary changes made to the Constitution. Yeltsin had very little choice, but to dismiss parliament. He softened some of the decisions made at the end of September, by saying that he was ready to prepare for an election in January and develop a new constitution.

However, and this may be an obvious question in the United States, was it another August 1991 for Yeltsin, and did that suggest real change? I had arguments with my staff those days in Moscow—I argued that if you inherited a parliament from a Soviet government that blocked reforms, you had some obligation to change it. Other questions came up over the course of time and Yeltsin’s insufficiencies as a strong leader started to become apparent. My sense is that Chechnya was a very bad mistake, perhaps induced by a notion that the war would work in Yeltsin’s favor in the next elections. It was very clear that the 1996 elections would be a critical time. I talked with Anatoly Chubais<sup>10</sup> on a number of occasions—a loans-for-shares deal was the only device he could come up with to finance Yeltsin’s political campaign and get him reelected when his poll ratings were below 10 percent by the beginning of January 1996. And it was out of the question that we might prefer Zyuganov, the Communist Party leader, who was the major alternative candidate in the race. It was a difficult and trying time.

## The Emergence and Evolution of Putin’s Regime

**VG:** *The loans-for-shares scheme of privatization was structured in a manner that permitted a narrow group of businessmen to receive profitable public assets at a low cost as payments for services that “saved” the second term of Yeltsin’s presidency. This accelerated creation of an oligarchic system was damaging to the timid sprouts of democracy.*

*The voices representing the new oligarchic elite, who clamored for a “Russian Pinochet,” were very loud at the end of the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> They believed that “progressive” authoritarianism could facilitate the*

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<sup>10</sup> Anatoly Chubais is a Russian politician and businessman responsible for the massive privatization program in Russia under Yeltsin.

<sup>11</sup> Another question is why right-wing authoritarian reformism did not take root in Russia. The Russian reformer Yegor Gaidar, in answering this question, ironically noted: “Russian candidates for the Pinochets had not graduated from West Point.”

*continuation of liberal transformations and discard the principle of separation of powers and the construction of what they believed to be redundant institutions, which oligarchs themselves had started to corrupt.*

*In general, when a communist state switches to a market economy, it faces serious problems with corruption. This is understandable—in the USSR, money was far less significant than status in the ruling party or the state bureaucracy. When the market transition began, it suddenly turned out that one could buy almost everything with money, so status became less important. The trouble with the emerging oligarchic system was that it started to corrupt the new democratic institutions. The absence or weakness of liberal institutions, widespread economic insecurity, a feeling of injustice about privatization, and growing inequality of opportunity all began to nurture the growth of authoritarian populism and fostered demand for a strong hand that would provide a quick solution to the accumulated problems that had been aggravated by the financial crisis of 1998.*

**TP:** I think that Putin emerged out of the declining popularity of Yeltsin at a time when change and circumstances were uppermost in the minds of Russians, and when the changes they hoped for were beginning to show but had not yet begun to be delivered in economic terms. Regarding corruption back then, it was not absent, and was in many ways inherited from Soviet times, when some forms of it were running an economy out the back door of the Soviet system. People who were naturally inclined in that direction—not all of them, but many of them—became wealthy oligarchs in the new system and took advantage of the fact that Russia had moved from total rule to no rules overnight in 1991. Much of that is what Putin saw and benefited from as he developed his own positions. What was fascinating to me then, and continues to be so now, was Putin's failure to understand the importance of economics and how it should be directed. Just before he started, he was surrounded by the bond failures of 1998 and growing weaknesses in the economy.

**VG:** *The fear that the crisis of 1998 might be prolonged, as well as the inertia of Yeltsin's market policy, motivated some reforms, which basically boiled down to a low and flat tax rate and the liberalization of capital flows, at the beginning of Putin's first presidential term 20 years ago. Putin quickly completed the experiment as steadily rising oil prices and the downpour of petrodollars nullified the need for liberal economic changes. The decision was taken to create vertically integrated holdings—state monopolies in key industries.*

*Before the global financial crisis of 2008, Putin's government talked about decoupling the country from global economic cycles. There were illusions that the Russian economy could become a sort of island of stability. However, institutional and structural weakness as well as dependence on oil exports led Russia to experience the largest decline in GDP of all the BRICS countries (about 8 percent) during the global financial crisis. It was during this period that the concept of "Putinomics" was finally formed. "Putinomics" is based on several industry monopolies and state-owned banks, fairly strict fiscal discipline that ensures macroeconomic stability, and state stimulus to incentivize domestic production through major infrastructure projects and tariff barriers. It is therefore not entirely accurate to say that Putin is a free marketer. He is a supporter of a state-monopolistic market with vivid signs of kleptocracy. When you say that Putin does not fully understand economics, I assume you are referring to the fact that he is not a free marketer and does not trust the modern post-industrial economic system based on global value chains.*

**TP:** When he came in, he designed and created a political and economic construct that he could take advantage of. Putin wanted to have a strong presidency and he built most of it. A big gap existed, however, between what was seen at the time as his theoretical philosophy and his actual policies. For

example, he adopted the eight governor-general positions<sup>12</sup> and appointed state governors, which tightened the federal system because he appointed them directly when previously they had been elected. In this way, he eventually deprived the regional governors of their economic earnings and shifted gubernatorial authority to oligarchical bureaucratic authority. So, if you look at Russia over time, much of that happened.

*VG: A visible gap appeared not only between political philosophy and political action, but also between existing legislation and power structures. Many significant changes were introduced during the construction of the so-called “power vertical” without legislative registration. Norms remain the same, but the real political process has completely changed in a way that contradicts, if not the letter of legislation, then at least the spirit of it, including constitutional laws.*

*In July 2020 Putin introduced reforms that adapted the Constitution to the authoritarian political reality and to state monopolism. The latest amendments are essentially a further move toward a super-centralized state that gives the Russian president an even stronger upper hand in the power vertical. They have also made possible the extension of Putin’s presidency until 2036. At the same time, they have enhanced Russia’s international isolation, with amendments directly guaranteeing the priority of the Russian Constitution over any requirements of international law and treaties. This move has raised many questions regarding Russia’s commitment to current and future international agreements. If we go back to the 2000s and 2010s, how did the dynamics of domestic politics in Russia affect bilateral relations?*

**TP:** I think Clinton never had the same relations with Putin as he had with Yeltsin, and Putin did not feel comfortable with Clinton either. There were large gaps between what was expected and what was happening. There were connections in the Clinton-Yeltsin relationship, but during that time we never got down to examining more serious fundamentals. We did not have frank talks about the real situation and which imperatives required state action in one direction or another. Both sides saw problems that were not discussed frankly, and that later increased tensions with Putin. The U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty<sup>13</sup> played a negative role: it did not improve the security equation, which deteriorated after the expansion of NATO,<sup>14</sup> and in fact created a second set of security concerns.

I also think that the Duma election in 2011—which was very close, with results that took a long time to tally—proved to be a real wake-up call for Putin, making him feel that he had to do more to pull things together. We saw then the beginning of an expansion of nationalistic power, elements of which included Russia’s role in its near abroad, or Russian spheres of influence.

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<sup>12</sup> President Putin established eight federal districts in Russia in May 2000: Central, Northwestern, Southern, North Caucasian, Volga, Ural, Siberian, and Far Eastern. It was one of his first managerial decisions after the presidential elections and was designed to reduce regional autonomy and integrate Federation subjects into the “power vertical.” The Russian Constitution does not envisage the districts as an institution. The next step in this direction was taken in 2004, when Putin initiated the shift to a new system of selecting governors, replacing direct election by residents with appointment by the president. On June 1, 2012, an act came into force that partially restores the direct election of senior officials in the region.

<sup>13</sup> Under the terms of the ABM treaty, each party was limited to two ABM complexes, each of which was to be limited to 100 anti-ballistic missiles. Signed in 1972, it was in force for the next 30 years. In June 2002, the United States withdrew from the treaty, leading to its termination.

<sup>14</sup> In 1999, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined NATO, amid much debate within the organization. In March 2004, despite strong Russian opposition, another four former socialist countries (Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) and three former republics of the USSR (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) also became members of NATO.

A determination to rebuild the military emerged out of the war with Chechnya, where the country's military shortcomings were exposed. This was a very serious problem in the first Chechen war, particularly during the attack on Grozny, where losses were large, and the political results were very bad.

There were also acts of terrorism in Russia, and there was always some suspicion that some of those events were self-created. I do not know the answer to this and do not think the Moscow theater hostage crisis<sup>15</sup> was self-orchestrated. Maybe it was handled in a way that killed more people than was necessary. The school siege in Beslan, North Ossetia, was also a horrible tragedy.<sup>16</sup>

*VG: Thus, during the presidency of George W. Bush, lines of interaction and divergence between the two countries became clearly defined. A full reset cycle took place, from an energetic beginning—with the famous remarks by President Bush after the summit in Slovenia about having looked into Putin's eyes and seen his soul—to later efforts to revive mechanisms of cooperation, and then to mutual dissatisfaction with steps that both sides interpreted as rivalry by the end of Bush's second term. Bilateral interaction at the time involved countering international terrorism, embracing the U.S. anti-Taliban operation in Afghanistan after September 11, and of course the growth of trade and investment. Differences later arose concerning the second Iraq war (which Russia, along with Germany and France, did not support). America's extremely positive attitude toward the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine was seen by Moscow as an attempt to intervene in its own backyard, while Washington's focus on human rights violations during the second Chechen war irritated the Kremlin. At the same time, a global financial crisis somewhat pushed the bilateral agenda aside and cooled it. This created space for a new reset between President Medvedev and President Obama.*

**TP:** I think Obama's people made a serious mistake in dealing with Medvedev's presidency. Did it really represent a major shift in power or were they just trying to portray it as such in hopes that it would happen? The leading view at the time was that it represented a major shift in power, but I felt that this was not the kind of approach we should pursue. It was a very simplistic view, counter to Putin's ongoing capacity to control all important events. I do not know who was primarily responsible for the failure to recognize where things were moving. What we needed was a good dose of reality to deal with such situations.

*VG: At all stages of U.S.-Russian relations during the last 30 years, political dynamics in the so-called "near abroad" have always been very sensitive for the Kremlin. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Russia has defined this geopolitical space as a priority region of privileged Russian interests. In this context, Moscow frequently refers to the Monroe Doctrine, historically a cornerstone of U.S. policy toward Latin America. What is your view regarding the special category of international affairs that has determined relations between closest neighbors?*

**TP:** There is nothing wrong with the thesis that people should have closer relations with their next-door neighbors than they have with more distant ones. In some ways, it represents part of the reality of the Western Hemisphere, in the sense that the U.S. has traditionally had more influence in Latin America and has paid a price for it. But because of the speed of electronics, distances today are much less significant both in terms of individual and international relationships. That is why "spheres of

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<sup>15</sup> The Moscow theater hostage crisis (also known as the 2002 Nord-Ost siege) was the seizure of the crowded Dubrovka Theatre by 50 armed Chechens on October 23, 2002, which involved 850 hostages and resulted in the deaths of at least 170 people.

<sup>16</sup> Armed Chechens took approximately 1,200 children and adults hostage at a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, on September 1, 2004. The siege ended on September 3 with more than 330 killed, including 186 children.

influence” is a term we should treat with great care. There is no reason why Russia should not have good relations with Venezuela, or Brazil, or Cuba. There is no reason why the U.S. should not have good relations with Tajikistan, Georgia, or Moldova. I do not think that distance necessarily breeds security. It is clear that any action taken by a country that is close to your borders will generate greater concern than an action taken by a country located far away. At the same time, action by a country that is further away is not necessarily totally irrelevant. Close neighbors may also have some special advantages that outsiders do not. We will never resolve that dilemma with a mathematical formula; we have to deal with it with some ideas of reciprocity.

One question that should be kept in mind is whether good relations with close neighbors should lead to or inculcate a bad relationship with other states, including those that may also wish to have good relations with your neighbors? Obviously, that approach has significant elements of reciprocity, as well as a sense that contention should be dealt with carefully to avoid sliding into conflict. Consideration in policy terms should raise issues such as: Should we be speaking to each other more frankly? Do we have interests and assessments in common about such a situation? Can we develop relationships that are based on a “first do no harm” principle? Can we deal with each other in ways that are not built on conclusions (like the color revolutions) that promote adversity and antipathy?

### **Afghanistan<sup>17</sup>**

**VG:** *One of the countries where we can trace rapid changes and their influence on U.S.-Russian bilateral relations remains Afghanistan. When Washington launched its war against the Taliban after September 11, 2001, Putin accepted the establishment of a U.S. military base in Kyrgyzstan, permitted the use of an air corridor through Russia to supply the U.S. military contingent in Afghanistan, and even provided intelligence based on Russian involvement in that country. After a few years, that interaction was gradually phased out. Are there any prospects for new cooperation there today? In February 2020, the United States reached an agreement with the Taliban and signed a declaration with the government of Afghanistan to encourage the start of an intra-Afghan peace process. Is it possible to achieve a comprehensive ceasefire and permanent peace in Afghanistan?*

**TP:** It is important to take into account a couple of fundamental ideas that, in my view, help evaluate the strategic situation on the ground, along with the prospects of a peaceful settlement in the country. If we are going to be successful in the counterterrorist and peacekeeping operation there, we should leave it in the hands of the Afghan government and those supporting it to create a situation of some stability. The security position of the authorities has to be sufficiently strong to ensure that the Taliban does not dominate large parts of the country’s territory militarily.

Another hard question is the role and place of Pakistan in Afghanistan, so that Pakistan is brought around to negotiated outcomes. That means the interests of Islamabad should be compatible with the interests of the Kabul government, as well as with the general outcome of the negotiations we are talking about.

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<sup>17</sup> This topic was discussed before President Biden announced in early April 2021 his decision to withdraw American forces by September 11, 2021. Despite the situation in Afghanistan has changed dramatically since then, this part of the interview is left as it is as an example of an accurate prediction that foresaw an unravelling future. Ambassador Pickering was correct in his forecasts -- unfortunately the Taliban took full charge of Afghanistan in August 2021.

Neither of these efforts were entirely successful, although Pakistan made some movements in the direction of the negotiated outcome. Zalmay Khalilzad<sup>18</sup> worked very hard to make progress. He had also established regular contacts and continued talking to his Russian counterpart, Zamir Kabulov, who is a good expert on Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> The U.S. and Russia have some common interests in Afghanistan, but that does not mean that we are in one hundred percent agreement with Moscow.

We started undertaking negotiations with the Taliban about six years ago. Some years before that, I spoke with the U.S. military leadership, and they were willing to consider negotiations when the military situation was brought under their control. I argued that it was important to begin contacts with the Taliban while we still had a lot of negotiating leverage left in terms of improving the situation. They failed to accept my position then.

The Afghan leadership saw the military solution as so far-reaching as to be totally beyond the capacity of the United States and its allies to realize, much less the Afghan military. This means, in effect, that Khalilzad had to negotiate an arrangement with much less leverage than he could have had, with the Taliban having a significant upper hand because of their growing military and security dominance across the country.

Khalilzad, interacting with a hesitant local government, had to release prisoners and make other concessions. My concern is that at the end of the day, this will very much resemble Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's negotiations of a U.S. exit from Vietnam—not a glorious period in American history—in terms of its recognition that the harsh reality on the ground was not favoring us. It also reminds me of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan at a time when it was certainly not possible to claim that as a victory.

There is a great reluctance in the American military community to leave Afghanistan. The only basis to continue to be engaged is to chase sunk costs. In my humble view, there is no military solution to the problem, only a diplomatic one, and the longer military involvement goes on, the worse a diplomatic solution will be. One of the arguments for continuing a military operation is to be able to deal with the terrorism that exists in Afghanistan now, but if that is the American strategy, then we also have to consider the question of whether it is necessary to occupy Somalia or other countries for the same reason. The answer is, it is not possible and not realistic.

Some even feel that keeping a military base in Afghanistan will allow us in the future to use small units to counteract the growth of Islamic terrorism exported abroad. Again, such an approach is highly unlikely to work under current circumstances, particularly if the Taliban eventually—through a combination of negotiation and post-negotiation military moves against the Afghan government—becomes the dominant force in the region. So Trump's idea of getting out of Afghanistan because it is increasingly costly to stay there was not in itself entirely faulty, but the question of how and when to do that is enormously controversial in the United States.

If the Biden administration is going to settle this very difficult problem, we need to involve Moscow in a conversation about how it sees the future of Afghanistan, because in many ways we have joint responsibility, and also a shared need to consider the evolution of Afghanistan with respect to our different security interests. That is not an absolute answer to the problem, but it is, in my view, a

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<sup>18</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad is an Afghan-American diplomat who has served as the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation at the State Department since September 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Zamir Kabulov is a high-ranking career diplomat and Russian presidential envoy to Afghanistan.

useful and potentially necessary set of conversations to maintain as we consider what to do in the future.

Trump's inclination was to walk away because he had little sense of history, and less of strategy. Walking away has its cost—it is not free—but walking away may be less costly than perpetually maintaining our presence there. At the same time, the solid conclusion, certainly widely apparent now, that a military solution is not possible does not contradict the fact that a diplomatic solution is highly unlikely without some kind of leverage, particularly military leverage, and it might be necessary to evolve in that direction. We have to be willing to live with the current reality rather than a reality we can completely determine. Khalilzad's efforts to improve the situation in the short term (to facilitate a withdrawal of our troops) or in the long term (to protect our strategic interests) are almost completely reliant on a future government in Afghanistan. Russia is very familiar with that problem and can recognize it from its own history.<sup>20</sup>

### The UN and Multilateral Diplomacy

**VG:** *In your diplomatic career, the UN occupied a special place. You were approved as U.S. Ambassador to the Organization almost unanimously (with only one absent vote) by the Senate in 1989 and became one of the most successful U.S. representatives to that international body. Your key role in providing diplomatic support for the formation of a broad international coalition against Iraqi aggression and its capture of Kuwait is undeniable and has been included in the textbooks of modern foreign affairs. How do you see this institution? The UN is considered a universal forum endowed with unique legitimacy, an international collective security system, and the main element of multilateral diplomacy. But it arose almost 80 years ago, during the formation of a post-World War II order. How outdated is this system? What could be changed based on the real balance of forces and positions of the leading stakeholders? Have any efforts been made to modify the UN system in the post-Cold War period?*

**TP:** The UN was created at the end of the Second World War. We were moved by the cataclysmic consequences of the war and by the failures and mistakes of the 1930s that led to the global conflict. We tried to correct the errors of the League of Nations during negotiations for the formation of the United Nations, of which the Soviet Union was a part. The USSR obtained some benefits by way of extra votes at the General Assembly<sup>21</sup> and a veto in the Security Council. It was a real step forward from the open veto in the League Council and the League's General Assembly,<sup>22</sup> but it was a short step if we look at the questions of unanimity, majority, or other voting arrangements rather than the veto. My sense is that we need something that reduces the impact of the veto or takes it away entirely. When I was at the UN, I made public speeches to open up the veto issue. I never got instructions and

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<sup>20</sup> Comments made by Ambassador Pickering as of 09.05.21: "The key questions now are how the Taliban is to govern. Spokesmen for them have been more positive than expected about some key issues of treatment of women and former Afghan government officials and others but with caveats. How this will turn out is uncertain."

<sup>21</sup> A demand by the Soviet Union that all fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics be recognized as member states in the UN was countered by a proposal by the United States that all of the then 48 states be similarly recognized. Ultimately, two Soviet Republics—Ukraine and Belorussia—were admitted as full members of the UN, so between 1945 and 1991, the Soviet Union was represented by three seats in the United Nations.

<sup>22</sup> Unanimity was required for the decisions of both the League of Nations Assembly and the League Council, except in matters of procedure and some other specific cases such as the admission of new members. This requirement reflected the League's belief in the sovereignty of its component nations; the League sought a solution by consent, not by diktat. In the event of a dispute, the consent of the parties to the dispute was not required for unanimity.

was never told to stop, but I had to be careful. One of the ideas was that it should not be a unilateral veto, but a collective one—say three or two permanent members opposing a text rather than just one. It might initially be applied only to specific subjects, instead of to almost everything, as it is now. We could start, for example, with a collective veto on issues of genocide that do not affect the vital interests of the U.S. or Russia. It is an area where we can gain much if we can act to prevent genocide and lose much if potential conflicts start to generate genocides. It was easier to find a common solution to this matter in the early 1990s than it is in the 2020s.

We advanced the Bretton Woods agreements and the Dumbarton Oaks ideas to repair problems in international investments, trade, and finance. As a result, we went from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to the WTO and built a system that allows open economies to operate in a way that does not transcend justice or legality. It would be naive to think that we had a grand plan and that the plan was rolled out and organized in a perfect manner but later, over time, showed difficulties, inconsistencies, and mistakes to the point where a new grand plan was urgently required. International institutional arrangements are never perfect and never will be. It is necessary to be more pragmatic than philosophically ideological to be successful. There is a strong preference in the U.S. and the West for pragmatism when working on issues. But such an approach is more tactical than strategic. Does that mean strategy needs to be a new part of our thinking, and how would we differentiate between strategy and tactics? If the global situation were resolved largely by Western-led consensus, would that mean that it was in the best interest of the global population? Another question would be: if there is an alternative, then what would that alternative be?

### **Democracy v. Autocracy**

**VG:** *The world has entered a period of liberal retreat after the global financial crisis of 2007-2009. Currently, the threats to liberal democracy come not from communism, but from financial and economic instability, as well as soaring inequality that has generated growing nationalism, radical populism, and a new autocracy that some describe as informational autocracy. Applying Samuel Huntington's theory of democratic waves, we are witnessing today the reverse process, a wave of authoritarianism. Authoritarian rulers pretend to provide revenge, justice, order, and security, as we can see in many countries of the world. They would like to seize the initiative and offer their own alternative.*

**TP:** Right, at the moment, the best one could come up with is an alternative that is more autocratic and dictatorial and less democratic. Nobody has achieved a perfect democracy—we do not even know the definition of that. There is an ongoing struggle between efficiency and what we call social justice, fairness, and equality. It certainly takes place in economics, but I am beginning to think we are also in an important phase of such a struggle in the realm of politics—wondering about the most efficient ways of running a political system and the fairest ways to do so.

I suspect that Putin would argue that he has conceived the most efficient way of managing a government and Trump would too. On the other hand, there is a strong need today for public engagement and for public involvement. No system that has been totally authoritarian has lasted. The question is whether our system, which is broadly democratic, can last. We cannot prove that it will, so we will have to see. In reality, however, countries that have failed to respect democratic activity have had to face the torment of popular opposition. Countries that have a significant amount of democratic activity face the issue of how to resolve differences through public choices. There is a way to do the latter in the democratic system, but there is no way to do it in an autocracy. As we go down this road, it is important to keep that in mind.

Fascism is headed our way today. From fascism one can adopt the notion that trains run on time, but they also do this in democratic Switzerland, a country that has made significant efforts to promote justice and fairness. The global system as a whole has serious problems determining the imperatives that are necessary for state efficiency—so the struggle still goes on. But I do not see a revolutionary alternative to what has been characterized as the liberal world order.

Yet any system has to keep doors open. I used to be a diplomat, so I believe that these open doors are needed to find a way to move forward through conversations, consultations, and diplomatic agreements. I think that the leaderships of countries that maintain authoritarian power will always be opposed to a democratic system that offers more ways for people to impact their national development. And there are many places in the world where the struggles between democracy and dictatorship will continue. Preferences in the United States will always be heavily biased toward a liberal order. In China, and in Putin's Russia, governing leaders will lean toward the authoritarian pole.

The alternatives for dealing with this conflict are pretty stark. We might have to go to war, but I am not sure war would settle the matter or that anybody would be willing to pay the catastrophic price of using nuclear weapons. Reality pushes us toward diplomacy and negotiation.

However, that does not necessarily mean one side will dictate the answers to the other. Most states are concerned about autocracy because they see it as undermining their capacity to negotiate a better deal. Nevertheless, military conflict should be avoided to the greatest extent possible. It should be our common middle ground, because it is existential.

The three big players, China, Russia and the U.S., should be acutely aware of that. And if war is not a solution, then the problem has to be negotiated—and the question will be how to find a way to begin to deal with problems that does not threaten the existence of a state but can produce a set of arrangements in which broader cooperation becomes possible.

I think the preference in the West and on the U.S. side would be to decide whether to concede enough to build more stability in the power equation. We cannot resolve conflicts without building up a set of ideas that retain the overlapping interests of both parties in a manner they can use.

In the normal course of events, when you have competing ideas about the way forward, this can generate distrust, and distrust can never be solved by promises alone. It is almost always solved by action, as demonstrated since the beginning of the Cold War. We have subsequently used certain procedures that have involved the building of trust through actions that allow for verification of the implementation of agreements.

Looking at the international system from that point of view, we should for many good reasons be putting more effort into diplomatic activity that allows us to seek and find answers. That means mutual respect on all sides and avoiding unilateral activity that might try to gain narrow advantage at the expense of the opposite side, as well as a willingness to focus time and attention on questions that would allow us to move forward on a more open basis.

In this regard, another area that ought to be out of bounds, but probably never will be, is the propensity for intervention in internal affairs. It is very hard to prevent and difficult to monitor, but it is also very unsettling, and in many ways the best answer to it is reciprocity—we can do damage to you and you can do damage to us, so it is in our common interest to avoid such interventions and resolve problems on the basis of negotiated solutions.

Some countries will feel uncomfortable negotiating with big powers, and big powers will feel uncomfortable negotiating with each other, until some system of trust can be built. And until some framework can be devised (maybe it has to be reciprocity), we have what we have called for years the golden rule: you get what I get, and I get what you get—or, do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.

What is a fair deal and how you want it to work out is not an easy question. But at least this provides us with an alternative, one that has been around since the days of the city-states in Greece and Italy. It has never been perfect, and it probably never will be, but it is better than the use of force.

In that way, we can move forward toward institutional arrangements that play a useful role in the outcomes that we pursue. We should capture the attention of the other side by avoiding threats to their existence and by focusing on problems where tradeoffs can be made in a win-win fashion, even if they are disparate: I give you something here and you give me something over there. In the simplest of terms, those are the formulas that we should be thinking about. They relate to all of mankind and can be useful in bringing together people who represent second-, third-, and fourth-order powers and encouraging them through international institutions and international cooperation to participate in the common good. We are not seeking to turn the world into a kind of single unitarian entity or even confederally administered rule. We are instead looking for a world of relationships made up of multiple international organizations and networks.

### **Multipolarity vs. Unipolarity and Bipolarity**

***VG:** There is another dimension to the international system, measured by so-called centers of power. How do you feel about the concept of multipolarity, actively developed by Moscow and Beijing? Can that multipolar world, if we really move toward it, be more stable than a unipolar or bipolar one? Of course, the question arises of where these poles will be and by which criteria they are determined.*

**TP:** Let me put it this way: people talk of a unipolar moment after the post-Cold War period. My view is that this is an unwarranted conclusion about a situation. Considerable U.S. security, military, and economic power was a dominant feature of the world landscape. It included having allies, coalitions and friends. Their presence and influence helped to reinforce that of the U.S. That is not pure unilateralism.

Of course, there are people in the U.S., particularly on the right, who believe that we have to maintain sufficient military power to do what we want anywhere in the world at any time. It is an extreme view, but it does crop up from time to time in official papers such as national strategy documents. It is unnerving, but it has a political role in domestic politics. We find it hard to discard the idea that other big powers have some of the same propensities. Over time, we have tended to resist the notion of multipolarity because it leans toward saying that equality of power and strength is now an established fact, rather than there being a need to consider the serious interests of other parties on the basis of their positions and strengths.

On the world stage, there are three big powers—the U.S., Russia, and China—as well as emerging big players like India, United Europe (if it happens), Japan, maybe Brazil and others, and they have some special relationships between them.

A serious question is what happens if two out of the mix decide to combine against one. That brings me back to my basic point: a military solution is neither feasible, possible, nor advisable.

On the economic side, if two powers unite against a third would that create an existential threat? I don't think so. There are enough arguments to say that two against one has limited impact, as we saw when China and the U.S. dealt with the Soviet Union. The aftermath of that alliance was quite evident: a resolution of many traditional Sino-Soviet problems, one of which related to leadership in their part of the world, another concerned a border conflict, and the third addressed economic cooperation and economic competition.

Multipolarity has a role to play, but the principal interests of other states must also be considered.

*VG: There is a rather popular view today that only countries that represent such power centers enjoy full sovereignty, while all other nations do not.*

**TP:** Sovereignty is a bad word because it is so ambiguous. In its purest sense, it means an absolute right to do anything a state wants, certainly at home but maybe anywhere. First of all, a state has to have the physical, economic, and political capacity to exercise sovereignty. But we are born limited; we do not come out as the dictator of all that. We have imperfect sovereignty: a possible right to decide, but not always the implementation capacity. The world long ago realized that sovereignty which implies capacity, force, dictation, and domination is not an appropriate response to questions of governance; we have therefore adopted the idea that cooperation and agreement provide a better framework than the dictation of absolute sovereignty. We are born as a person or state with limited sovereignty. We accept treaty limitations on absolute sovereignty because they provide more win-win responses than the failure to execute absolute sovereignty does.

In reality, multipolarity includes a limited group of states, and it is necessary to look at what their long-term common interests are. Long-term common interests, in my view, have never been the domination of one state over another on a long-term basis. We have rid ourselves of colonialism in its various forms, although perhaps the lingering vestiges of it still remain, but the last death gasp of colonialism occurred in December 1991, with the dissolution of what was effectively the Soviet colonial or neocolonial system.

We also have to deal with all other countries that are involved in an international system. We have a bigger audience than a multipolar audience, and we have bigger obligations as multipolar countries, as leaders rather than dominators. This obligation should be a part of what one would call “noblesse oblige”—we have a role to play.

Economics is one of the great forces that teaches us that “noblesse oblige” is something very much in one's narrow interests, because in a trading world you have to look at markets and raw materials, which are not necessarily assigned to six or eight multipolar powers. There are a lot of other economically meaningful places in the world and creating multipolarity means creating significant economic and political obligations to work out agreements that lead to a much more mutually beneficial world.

It also includes the ability to find instruments, systems, and directions that make these agreements functionally effective over a long period of time. Finally, we need to have a constant capacity to correct mistakes, and we are a long way from that. We are not talking about a world government; we are talking about world cooperation. It is a broad look at an involved world, rather than a narrow look.

We cannot discard multipolarity, but out of respect we have to understand that this carries a lot of obligations: it brings authority, but also accountability. Therefore, we should operate in a way that can move things along: countries have to consult much more closely and begin to build notions of trust.

## On China

**VG:** *Foreign policy analysts are divided in their views of China. Is it a rising or decaying power? Does Beijing have the capacity and will to replace a global order? Will the growing strategic partnership between China and Russia be a real challenge for the West? And what kind of relations should exist in a geopolitical triangle among Washington, Beijing, and Moscow?*

**TP:** U.S. relations with China are a very big and challenging issue. There are many parallels with the problems between Russia and the United States, but China is in an earlier phase of its geopolitical competition with the U.S. than Russia, although many American experts believe that our Chinese policy is moving in the same direction as our Russia policy.

I think, however, that it is reasonable to put aside the nuclear equation, which is not trivial by any means, but not a fundamental driver of the relationship between the U.S. and China at this stage.

China's deterrence strategy has seemingly been to be capable of destroying one or a few large American cities with high confidence. To have sufficient deterrence is not necessarily a terrible strategy, and it is not one that necessarily provokes a nuclear arms race.

Beijing has developed road mobiles and other arrangements to protect its retaliatory force, which they believe has the deterrent capacity to prevent an American first strike on China, especially with increased numbers of potentially more effective mobile missiles after the United States withdrew from the ABMT (Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty) in 2002. China has recently been seen to be build hundreds of new missile silos in its desert western provinces of Gansu and Xinjiang. At the same time, it was, in my view, a self-deceptive and weak strategy to consider the involvement of China in any strategic arms limitation treaty an absolute necessity, the way Trump did.

Both in the US and elsewhere, there is a big sense of uncertainty about Chinese international objectives, considering China's rapid economic growth over time compared to the slower development of its more expansive security and foreign policies.

Particularly under Xi, the question arises: Are we facing an existential threat from China, and if so, how do we deal with it?

The former question is still open for discussion, even though there are influential groups in the U.S. (some of them fueled by military budget considerations, although not entirely) that wish to assume that China is inevitably an implacable enemy whose growth and capacities fundamentally pose an existential threat to our future. There are others who take a less absolutist view, believing that China's long-term interests are not directed toward world hegemonic dominance and control, but are more designed to ensure China's survival and growth, as well as China's preeminent position, at least in East Asia, if not in Asia as a whole and perhaps even in the developing world.

All these areas today have dominated China's serious interests. The Chinese leadership has acted rather carefully to create the impression that it does not have an immutable strategy that might potentially be exploited by the other side. Flexibility and agility are assets in finding win-win solutions; rigidity is not.

On the one hand, no country can be faulted for making a major effort to develop friendly relations around the world with whomever it comes into contact and in whatever way it wishes. On the other hand, the rapid growth of a major power of that sort, whose aspirations are driven by a deep sense of national destiny, becomes an important new factor in international affairs and has become the subject of a lot of discussions. It represents a new form of governance that has been evolving beyond Deng Xiaoping's "work hard and keep a low profile" into something like "work hard and let the rest of the world know how good you are."

What has appeared on the scene in the last decade could be called Wolf Warrior Diplomacy.<sup>23</sup> In many ways, it can perhaps be seen as part and parcel of Xi's general approach; he has also changed the ten-year governing cycle of Chinese leaders to accommodate his own ambition to remain around for a lifetime, much as we have seen leaders do in some other countries, including Russia. All these steps do not affect one country alone, but the attitudes of many people around the world.

There are three main opinions about that in the U.S.. One proceeds from the premise that we should obviously prepare for the worst-case scenario but also try to generate the best outcome, since we see ourselves as part of a world order that seeks to avoid conflicts and solve international problems in a non-warlike, diplomatic manner.

A second has much less respect for the diplomatic approach and says that we have to be totally prepared and ready to take the initiative in fighting a war because we will inevitably have some kind of conflict with China. It is therefore better for us to choose when, where, and how to do that than to let the situation slide. Such voices are not the predominant ones, but at this point they cannot easily be cast aside.

These ideas are entrenched among military strategists, who have been told that they need to prepare for the worst, that their role is to defend the country, and to do it in the best way they can economically.

The third school is different, and it runs along a continuum, but most of that school would say it is very important to have the capacity to draw red lines in our relationship with China and make clear to Beijing about which lines we are concerned and which push us to act.

Some in that school believe, of course, that the action we should take is military: protecting navigational freedom with military vessels in the South China Sea; increasing our deployments there; strongly supporting and funding our allies' military preparations; building stronger relationships with Taiwan; and so on.

Some proponents of the third school believe that those steps also have to involve sanctions, whether limited to trade restrictions that would give us leverage in negotiations or designed more broadly to influence U.S.-Chinese relations and alert China to the existence of red lines that should not be

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<sup>23</sup> Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is a new brand of diplomacy taking hold in Beijing that is characterized by the use of confrontational rhetoric and an aggressive style. It was applied by the Chinese side during the first high-level meeting between U.S. and Chinese officials under the new Biden administration in Anchorage, Alaska, in March 2021.

crossed. This is a unilateralist strategy that involves taking steps that are non-military, but could be military, and would look a lot like what we did in Iraq and Afghanistan, where we depended on military activity on the ground, and not on diplomatic negotiations, to produce a solution—an approach inspired in part by a deep distrust of diplomacy.

The first school of thought, by contrast, has prioritized diplomatic interaction, and it is popular among experts and policymakers who have diplomatic experience, a deep understanding of what the relationship with China could be, and an awareness of the effective results of our diplomatic and communication efforts in the international arena. It involves people like Bob Zoellick, a former senior U.S. official who ran the World Bank for some time.<sup>24</sup>

As a former diplomat, I have also moved toward this approach and supported the robust deployment of this policy. Whatever steps we take to push back, it is also important to open the door for positive outcomes through negotiation, or at least try to do that.

Other approaches involve more use of threats and a greater coupling of aggressive military actions, with diplomacy occupying a second place. Some of our actions in Iraq and Afghanistan have mirrored this set of ideas, but for reasons that are now self-evident have not been successful.

I am not against the use of leverage, the creation of some red lines, or the application of other instruments and methods that send signals to China about important objectives that we would like that country to understand and seriously consider. But we have to be prepared to engage with Chinese objectives that include more intensive discussions and negotiations—something that Trump, in the trade arena, tried to develop and exploit, not totally successfully, but not entirely unsuccessfully either.

In this regard, we could give credit to Trump’s negotiating team that engaged with China on tariff restrictions and trade. However, the results they produced should be evaluated for their compliance with our principal goals. How much were their efforts central to the overall long-term strategy of developing relations of confidence and trust between the U.S. and China and how much did they take away from that objective?

The fact is that U.S.-Chinese relations became tenser under Trump. The Biden team needs a thorough policy review to find new opportunities and ways to deal with China.

I think that areas of focused bilateral communication and negotiation should be extended to topics beyond trade, and certainly there is great potential for the United States and China to have a more significant strategic dialogue. We have substantial differences on many issues, including the DPRK. Discussions of North Korea issues, and steps toward their resolution, even ones as expensive and imaginative as reunification of the peninsula in ways that do not threaten the China on the Korea frontier or northeastern region, might help delicately and carefully raise important problems with China, reduce the level of distrust and skepticism on each side, and remove self-made artificial barriers to approaching these issues.

We could see progress and push things forward if we organized a continuing intensive dialogue between responsible people with authority from the top and high confidentiality.

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Bruce Zoellick is an American public official and lawyer who was the president of the World Bank from 2007 to 2012.

**VG:** *Does Russian and Chinese cooperation make a difference for the U.S.?*

**TP:** Of course. Since the Cold War, the United States has had a deep concern that Russia and China will create a diarchy and will constantly oppose the U.S. anywhere and anytime. We were, however, aware of very significant differences—on ideological grounds—between the Soviet Union and China over which would have the top role in the leadership of the then Communist world.

We also see that in the past, China's cooperation with the U.S. grew out of China's concern about its military clashes with the Soviet Union on its northern border. At present, we are witnessing the blandishments of a closer relationship between Moscow and Beijing, but we cannot exclude that both sides might continue to have significant differences in the future.

Their duopoly seems to me less likely today, but there are of course many Americans who fear this. U.S. policy in that regard is tricky and needs to be very carefully done. Let's put it this way: a bilateral "marriage" might bring a lot of problems, but a trilateral relationship is much more complex.

There are things that we need to do and should do both with Russia and China, but at the same time our policy should not be dominated by the notion that we have only the single objective of ensuring that these two countries do not get along. That could, in many ways, have the opposite effect, pushing them together.

### **On Japan**

**VG:** *U.S. relations with Japan are based on a security alliance that began after World War II. Currently, there are 85 U.S. military facilities in the country. The nuclearization of North Korea and the rise of China have given a second wind to that security collaboration. In the economic domain, two mutually reinforcing trends between the U.S. and Japan have always coexisted: deep cooperation and strong competition, with a trade balance that has been in Tokyo's favor for decades.*

*Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe,<sup>25</sup> Japan continued to be a free trade leader in Asia, supporting the Trans-Pacific Partnership despite the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement. Among Abe's evident achievements was so-called Abenomics,<sup>26</sup> which renewed economic growth in the country. At the same time, Abe tried to improve relations with Russia by resolving an ongoing territorial dispute. He failed to reach this ambitious goal and sign a peace treaty with his northern neighbor. How do you see U.S.-Japanese cooperation in regional and global context? What can be expected of Russian-Japanese relations?*

**TP:** Democratic administrations have historically paid more attention to China than to Japan, while Republican administrations have generally leaned more toward our alliance with Japan, although Trump was an exception. No one knows where it will go in the future, especially now, when the relationship with China has become more tense and contentious.

To some extent, the U.S. has always had some problems with Japan, and these are not going away due to the competitive and contentious Japanese and U.S. mindsets, which makes them think about a

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<sup>25</sup> Shinzō Abe was Prime Minister of Japan and President of the Liberal Democratic Party from 2006 to 2007 and from 2012 to 2020. He is the longest-serving prime minister in Japanese history.

<sup>26</sup> Abenomics refers to a set of aggressive monetary and fiscal policies, combined with structural reforms, that pulled Japan out of its decades-long depression.

question as if it were a football game, in which there is always a winner and always a loser and everything is zero-sum. However, Japan generally has escaped significant troubles that have been part of the U.S. public attitude toward such countries as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

Some longstanding issues between the U.S. and Japan have to do with military bases in Okinawa and on the main island, Honshu. The Trump administration added to the bilateral agenda a question about the cost of the security partnership, drawing up a demand for “cost plus 50,” or the full cost of American bases plus a 50-percent premium.

On the other hand, the Japanese have continued to consider the U.S., at least in general, as an ally and are willing to cooperate with us on their defense, particularly because they have obvious historical reasons not to create their own nuclear weapon even though they have the capability to do so (they have a significant amount of fissile material for potential production of nukes should they wish to become a nuclear weapon state. The U.S. will strongly oppose this under current policy).

When it comes to economic cooperation, Japan is the United States’ fourth-largest trading partner and the largest source of foreign direct investment into the United States. Japanese competition has mostly moved toward high-tech goods and services. Some Americans see such competition as a result of Japanese economic nationalism that favors its own economy and restricts competitive imports.

As for relations between Japan and Russia, we know that since the end of the Second World War they have been bedeviled by their competing claims to the four Southern Kuril Islands—a conflict to which a solution may or may not ever be found. Most recently, the Japanese seem to have indicated that they would like to obtain at a minimum the two smallest islands, which are closest to Hokkaido—that is, they are willing to “split the baby.”

President Putin, for domestic reasons strongly opposed to the alienation of “Russian” territory, particularly the new constitutional impediment to alienating any Russian territory,<sup>27</sup> has built a defense-in-depth around any movement on that particular issue. However, one can imagine that if Putin really thought it was important for national security reasons connected with Russian-Japanese relations, he might be able to convince the Duma<sup>28</sup> to make it happen.

One has a sense that this territorial dispute is of much greater national interest for the people of Japan than for the people of Russia, although the history of the 1990s, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, impacted Russian views about alienating any further territory and would clearly still be a question of significance for Russians.

Were Russia interested in improving relationships with Japan, the Kuril Islands territorial dispute would be a principal stumbling block that would have to be removed. The US has never hesitated to support the Japanese recovery of the four islands and believes that they have historically belonged to Japan, but Washington has not raised the question of the return of South Sakhalin to Russia after World War II.

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<sup>27</sup> The July 2020 constitutional amendments banned the alienation of any part of the Russian Federation (with the exception of delimitation, demarcation, and re-demarcation of the state border of Russia with neighboring states) and introduced a ban on calling for such action.

<sup>28</sup> The Duma is the lower chamber of the Russian Parliament.

I do not think the Japanese have any intention of recovering the four Kuril Islands with military force. Russia has a much stronger military hand in that region, and from time to time has used sea-based forces to deal with Japanese fishing incursions.

At times, we have heard from Moscow that these four islands should be excluded from the U.S.-Japanese defense alliance and that this is the main obstacle to a peace agreement between Russia and Japan. The U.S. does not find this explanation as to why the problem cannot be resolved very persuasive.

There are two aspects of the problem for the U.S.: whether the Japan-U.S. Peace Treaty-related security commitments will be extended to the islands if and when they are returned, and whether American troops can be located on the islands.

In my view, there is absolutely no reason that U.S. forces will be on the two small islands that are closest to Hokkaido for military reconnaissance and observation purposes. With modern intelligence technology, it would make no sense to station them there. At the same time, it is hard for the Japanese to say in an international treaty that part of Japanese territory will be excluded from the U.S.-Japanese defense alliance.

But such a treaty could include provisions about Japan having no intention to deploy Japanese or permit American military forces to be there and about law and order on the islands being maintained by the appropriate Japanese police units.

The question is now much harder to address than several decades ago, but technically still clearly resolvable. I have a sense—reinforced by the constitutional amendments—that there are sensitive reasons for Putin not to alienate the Russian territory and so he will continue defending it. That fits very well with his continuing appeal to Russian nationalism as a major factor in preserving his leadership position in Russia.

We may be looking through the telescope from the front to the back and from the back to the front, but there is no question that Japan is a major country in Northeast Asia, and that this region presents a number of non-trivial unresolved problems and security issues. What is in no way a secret is that Northeast Asia's uncertainties over Korea, the growing influence of China, and significant U.S. military presence are an explanation for strong Russian military deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in the Far East and particularly in the easternmost stretches of the Russia-China border. For Moscow, it is the most plausible defense against China's huge manpower, which could be mobilized in the region to threaten Russia.

### **The North Korea Connundrum**

***VG:** For a long time, North Korea has been a challenging point on the Northeast Asia security agenda. There have been mixed developments regarding the Pyongyang nuclear program in recent years. In Moscow's thinking, Kim Jong-un has learned from the failures of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi and sees nuclear weapons as the only guarantee of his regime's survival. How efficient could a multilateral diplomacy toolkit be at presenting a possible solution to the North Korean conundrum?*

**TP:** North Korea is obviously a difficult question with a historical background. Most of the world is convinced that in June 1950 the North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel that separated them

from the South Koreans. According to historical records, Kim Il-sung consulted both Chairman Mao and Josef Stalin and they did not pose any objection to launching an assault.

It may be that some actions on the part of South Korea and the United States helped precipitate an invasion. Some also consider that Dean Acheson's statement<sup>29</sup> that South Korea was not in an American sphere of interest might have invited a reaction from Mao and Stalin.

The war continued for over three years. The losses on both sides were very significant—approximately five million people died—and it remains a problem in the American consciousness. The Korean Armistice Agreement left a peace settlement totally unresolved. The U.S. does not have diplomatic relations with DPRK and has had relatively little contact.

Over time, some opportunities for diplomatic activity came up. When I was in the UN, we worked very closely with China and South Korea on the joint admission to the UN of North and South Korea. China had very significant influence on the DPRK. The nuclear problem arose in the 1980s and we reached an early agreement on shutting down DPRK nuclear activity in response to the temporary provision of heavy fuel oil and later two nuclear power reactors at the beginning of the 1990s under the Clinton Administration. The deal fell apart over time as a result of DPRK foot-dragging and delayed U.S. and other responses, in part because of Republican opposition in Congress to parts of the deal.

***VG:** However, North Korea policy under President Clinton is mostly remembered in the context of the 1994 nuclear crisis and the risks of a new war in the peninsula, when North Korea blocked international inspections of its nuclear facilities. The next crisis happened eleven years later, in 2005, when Washington alleged that Pyongyang produced counterfeit Federal Reserve super-notes using its Central Bank and laundered money for its nuclear program through a private bank in Macao.*

**TP:** It also appeared in the second term of George W. Bush that an agreement on the exchange of fuel aid for the shutdown of Yongbyon nuclear facility had been violated by the North Koreans. They continued using centrifuges to enrich uranium—something that one could claim was not directly in the agreement, because they ceased production of plutonium as the fissile material of choice for nuclear weapons. But they produced a highly enriched uranium, and one could say that it was certainly against the spirit of the agreement.

As a result of these disputes, the agreement finally collapsed, because in the United States, particularly in the right wing of the Republican Party, there was deep political opposition to it. In Congress, Republicans made it harder for us to fulfill our obligations, which included shipment to the North Koreans of heavy oil for energy generation pending provision by the U.S., Japan, and the ROK of a nuclear power reactor for electricity production, which was never really consummated.

The agreement had the advantage of giving the DPRK a short-term solution to their electrical problem and then, subsequently, two light-water reactors for power production that would be financed by South Korea and Japan. In part negative attitudes toward 1990s Nuclear Framework deal emerged due to U.S. domestic political opposition, but in part it also took time to acquire the funding, because the Japanese had a special issue with the North Koreans—the abduction over the years of Japanese citizens who became in effect part of the intelligence collection structure of North Korea. That remains an outstanding problem for Japan with North Korea today.

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<sup>29</sup> Dean Acheson was Secretary of State in the administration of President Harry Truman from 1949 to 1953. He played a central role in defining U.S. foreign policy during the initial stage of the Cold War.

The nuclear issue then moved on. Under the Bush and Obama administrations, we did not undertake bilateral negotiations with North Korea, but preferred to conduct negotiations in the larger format of Six-Party talks, which include the two Koreas, the U.S., Japan, China, and Russia. Russia played perhaps the smallest role in this process but was not totally absent.

Trump put all of his emphasis on a combination of threats, leverage, and pressure, such as increasing military presence, through military exercises and changing the character of military exercises, which had included air activities that pointed toward practice for a potential nuclear weapons attack by aircraft against North Korea, as well as speeding up the pace of intelligence coverage.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in was against the escalation of confrontation, including when North Korea sank a South Korean Navy corvette and launched an artillery attack on a nearby South Korean island, which led to growing tensions and difficulties on the peninsula.

Trump wisely focused on trying to solve the nuclear problem, but attempted to do it with maximum pressure to achieve a “Grand Bargain.” In the meantime, through the combination of an inability to carry out negotiations and a reduction in its level and number of military exercises as leverage, North Korea began to develop and test nuclear weapons. One test appeared to show thermonuclear capability or an “enhanced” or boosted weapon. The DPRK also intensified its testing of missiles in, over, and around Japan, which contributed to a high level of anxiety in the region and with longer range tests in the U.S.

Under these circumstances, Moon Jae-in used the relationships he had developed with Kim Jong-un and his principal advisors, and brought a message to President Trump that Kim Jong-un would be willing to have a summit, which took place in Singapore on June 12, 2017.

This meeting produced a not-very-extensive communiqué that promised much but delivered little, and was followed by the Hanoi summit, where professional diplomats and U.S. negotiators began leaning toward the idea that if we could have a step-by-step process of confidence-building and dealing with the elements of North Korea’s nuclear posture, we would have a better chance of achieving the long-term objective than if we remained mesmerized by the notion that Trump could strike a grand bargain to solve all the problems at once.

Despite the lack of progress—or perhaps because of it—there was a subsequent meeting between Trump and Kim Jong-un, suggested by the South Koreans, in the demilitarized zone, when Trump actually stepped onto North Korean soil. But nothing significant was achieved there; the negotiation process was left in the hands of regular negotiators. There was no willingness on the U.S. side under Trump to look further at a step-by-step process, which seemed to be an interest of the North Koreans.

It is clear that the last thing in the world they want to give up is the possession of nuclear weapons, and it is a very hard problem, but there are important steps that could be taken to limit the further development of both nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles over time.

The North Koreans began to demonstrate that they had longer-range delivery vehicle to hit the United States. The answer to the question of whether they have adequate nuclear warheads for those long-range ballistic missiles remains unclear. But the conservative view is that yes, they do, or they are close to producing them.

Recent developments between the U.S. and North Korea have not delivered very much and have confirmed that the U.S. has a very strong interest in maintaining its close relationship with South Korea. In recent months, the Biden administration has begun to indicate an interest in a step-by-step process, but with little public contact with North Korea to date.

Beijing, a major player, has tended to think of the present status quo as more favorable to its interest, in large measure by seeing North Korea as a strategic buffer between China and South Korea and any U.S. forces stationed there.

Were that situation to change, China—to protect its interests—would clearly want to play a key role in working things out with North Korea. Beijing is not interested in seeing a transformation in Pyongyang, both to preserve the buffer and maintain its control relationship, as well as to avoid the expected high refugee flow if the situation becomes chaotic or uncertain.

To sum up: North Korea continues to be a multi-faceted, challenging international problem that has temporarily been put on the back burner of the diplomatic stove because of the global pandemic crisis.

### Central America

**VG:** *You were appointed as the U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador in the midst of a brutal fight between military-led governments and left-wing guerillas. This bloody and tragic civil conflict lasted 12 years, from 1979 to 1992, but the effects are still felt in the country and throughout the whole Central American region. How do you assess these events 40 years later?*

**TP:** I was in El Salvador from September 1983 to July 1985, and subsequently from time to time until last year. I have also had contacts in Guatemala in an effort to try to find a way—totally from outside, in a kind of track 2 or track 1.5 possibility<sup>30</sup>—to convince the Guatemalan leadership that they need to pay more attention to some of their serious problems, including the treatment of the ethnic Mayan groups, which constitute a majority of the population.

There is no question at all that in both El Salvador and Guatemala, the roots of the problem go back to the 1930s and even before, when large numbers of *campesinos* (peasants) were exploited by the ruling families who grew out of nineteenth-century arrangements for land ownership, coffee production and leadership.

In El Salvador it was most difficult beginning in 1972, when (surprisingly from a very conservative military used to participate in ruling the country with the infamous fourteen oligarchical “families”) a liberal military junta took over. Before then, it was generally true that the military controlled the presidency—but they did so under the influence of major families, gathered in an extreme right-wing party, the National Republican Alliance (ARENA), that was strong up until the time of the current president, Bukele, who was elected two years ago.

At the end of the 70s, an opposition to the military government that was united around four or five leftist para-military organizations gradually went into armed resistance. For many years, the 14

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<sup>30</sup> Diplomacy can occur in a number of forms, or “tracks,” that engage multiple official and non-official actors. Traditional diplomacy is usually called track 1 diplomacy. Track 1.5 and track 2 diplomacy are common in conflict resolution and are often referred to as “back channel” diplomacy.

families and the military leadership had appointed presidents, but later, in my time, a civilian, José Napoleón Duarte, was elected president. The right-wing party still held a lot of sway, but many of its leaders and their families moved away, mostly to Miami, out of fear for their own safety.

The guerrilla organizations created a central leading body, the FMLN, that became a coordinating mechanism.<sup>31</sup> It was quite clear that the FMLN had strong ties to Nicaragua and Cuba, and behind them the Soviet Union, which provided training and military assistance. They were very effective at bringing weapons into El Salvador.

Halfway through Duarte's first term, despite a deeply divided country, elections began to provide some answers to the problems. Duarte came to realize that there was no military solution to this conflict and thought he had to open the door to negotiations, which he did with U.S. support in 1984.

However, right-wing death squads in El Salvador were engaged in many atrocities and cruelties. There was serious misconduct and violations of human rights with respect to the treatment of civilians on both sides.

Late in 1983, just after my arrival, the guerrillas launched a highly successful military campaign. They soundly defeated a number of poorly trained government units. It was a very nasty situation, but the guerrillas had trouble exploiting their victory.

At the same time, the U.S. tried—without total success—to improve training and improve Salvadorian military behavior toward civilians. When I left El Salvador in mid-1985, the government's forces had progressed, albeit very slowly with respect to civilians.

More intensive negotiations under UN auspices from 1988 eventually led to the conclusion of the conflict in 1992—with the wholesale rebuilding of structural elements of the country's security operations, a reduction in the size of the military, and cooperation with guerrilla forces to achieve a political outcome. Heads of the former guerrilla organization FMLN became political leaders in the capital city and in the region around it and traded off the country's elected leadership after 1992 with the right-wing party ARENA.

In the post-conflict period from 1992 until 2018, these two major in effect saw rotating control of the government, but fast-paced, intractable issues related to crime and gangs have persisted. Both FMLN and ARENA have also had serious problems with systemic corruption and have quite reasonably blamed each other.

Over the last two years, El Salvador has had a new populist leader—Nayib Bukele—in a new political arrangement, more as an autocrat than a democrat. We are waiting to see where that will go.

Since 1992, the U.S. has deported large numbers of mainly young Salvadorans who had come to the United States—many illegally and some legally—and coalesced into gangs that waged war against each other in the U.S., principally in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. Their forced repatriation by the U.S. has given rise to a gang culture that has turned into El Salvador's principal problem. Gangs

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<sup>31</sup> The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) was founded as an umbrella organization coordinating several separate guerilla groups in October 1980. In 1982, France and Mexico recognized the FMLN as a legitimate political force. Currently, the FMLN is one of the political parties in El Salvador.

control large parts of the country and engage in extortion and other criminal activity, including very high rates of murder.

The U.S. has also been struggling with gang violence in Honduras and instability in Guatemala at various times. The Obama administration made a \$4 billion fund available to deal with Central America's problems without notable success.

The Trump administration tied up the whole thing with the Mexican border in an effort to stem the flow of refugees—large numbers of which come from unstable conditions in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Local governments are not very strong but did adopt policies to please President Trump, whose major approach was getting them to do everything they could to stop refugees and resettle them on their own territory rather than permit them to go on through Mexico, while simultaneously closing the Mexican border and starting to build a wall.

President Biden has now asked Vice President Harris to lead the effort to deal with the criminal and ethnic issues in all three Central American countries to slow and stop illegal immigration to the United States.

### **Cuba and Venezuela**

**VG:** *The Biden administration has signaled that its relationship with Central America is under review, and not only when it comes to policy on refugees. Juan González, the National Security Council's senior director for the Western Hemisphere, said recently that any leader unwilling to tackle corruption will not be considered a U.S. ally. We also cannot exclude possible adjustments to the U.S. approach to Cuba and Venezuela.*

**TP:** The Trump administration reversed almost every element of Obama's Cuba policy – a policy which was based on a negotiated settlement and a re-establishment of Cuban-U.S. relations.

That shutdown happened in large measure because of Havana's long-standing and continued support for Maduro in Caracas as well as the Cuban-American community's dislike of the Obama approach. Florida is an important state in U.S. domestic electoral politics. In the U.S., policy on Cuba has been driven by the Cuban community in Florida, principally acting through and with Senator Marco Rubio, who became a bedrock supporter of Trump. As a result, Trump pursued policies that were very anti-Cuba.

Relations with Cuba became a part of the domestic political order, perhaps more significantly than other aspects of our foreign policy under Trump. This means that there are still opportunities to begin a new journey and reopen our relationship with Cuba under the Biden administration, as happened under Obama.

Currently, U.S.-Cuban ties are at a very low level, although the Cubans have been quite careful about becoming major links in a drug trafficking chain toward the U.S.. They seem to be aware of the danger that would represent to their own country.

Havana is trying to develop economic contacts with Western Hemisphere countries like Canada. Spain has traditionally led in the areas of investment, trade, and services. In general, mainstream European attitudes have also been much more favorable toward Cuba.

There is an understanding on the part of Democrats and Europeans that pressure and opposition will not resolve the Cuban problem—more likely, it will be resolved through diplomatic negotiations and policy changes, which hopefully the Biden administration is looking at.

However, there are still a lot of challenges for U.S.-Cuban relations on both sides. It remains to be seen whether progress can be made in preserving for Cuba, one of our nearest neighbors geographically speaking, a satisfactory degree of independence while the United States re-establishes a more stable, secure, and productive relationship.

The Cuba embargo is, in a strange way, still seen by hardliners in the U.S., and by a number of folks of Cuban extraction, as a device that will produce a miraculous change—a free and fully democratic Cuba in the medium or even short term.

There are certain indications that some in Cuba, unreconciled to change, see the embargo as a kind of insurance policy against reforms and against a potential flood of American tourists and businesses that could threaten both the ruling elite and their collectivist-based programs.

***VG:** How do you envision likely modifications of U.S.-Cuban relations? Some believe it is better to wait for regime change—Raúl's departure in favor of a new leader or set of leaders—since the generational transition in Cuba has already begun.*

**TP:** In my judgment, the hope that a new leadership Díaz-Canel will be less fixated on animosity toward the U.S. or the continued application of statist solutions to economic and political challenges amounts to a small triumph of hope over reality. Indeed, Raúl Castro has now stepped down and Miguel Díaz-Canel is much the same.

More than likely, the quality of the relationship will not be marked by philosophical shifts in a large compass, but by continued slow change and steps forward where the two sides share a mutual interest.

Opposing drug trafficking has been one. Reconciling the migration of Cubans to the United States with what might be a more hopeful period of domestic economic development is another.

Cuba will not only have to decide how many Americans it wants to receive as dollar-spending guests and tourists, but also what relationships and ideas they will bring.

Certainly, “enclave tourism” behind heavily gated community barriers was and is likely to continue as Cuba’s first response. But some Americans will want more than just new sunny beaches and sand between their toes, which they can also get in Miami or elsewhere in the Caribbean—perhaps more effectively and painlessly.

Relief from the embargo will only come with a consensus between the Executive Branch and Congress, Republicans and Democrats, and hardliners and moderates at the right time. The chances of that happening seem slim in the short and medium term given the implications of such for Florida voting in the coming 2022 mid-term elections.

One longer-term idea that has some support, in addition to the withdrawal from Guantánamo, is to find a creative future use for a former military base area that might benefit Cuba, the Hemisphere, and—in a “smart power” sense—even the U.S., perhaps as a high grade, graduate university focused on Hemispheric development.

*VG: It seems that the Biden administration has a real chance to keep Obama's promise and finally close the Guantánamo detention camp, but then, of course, the question arises of what is next.*

**TP:** The easier question, but not a simple one, is the future of Guantánamo. The U.S. could still have exiting rights even if the prisoners were gone. The Navy would seemingly have the first call. We still have not solved the issue of prisoner relocation, but return to home countries seems easier than relocation to the U.S. right now.

The Navy some years ago gave up its interest in Vieques and Roosevelt Roads in the relatively near Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. It is not clear that they would easily relinquish their interest in the larger, better harbor facilities at Guantánamo, even if the needs have diminished.

While not part of a domestic base-closing scenario now, budgetary pressures, higher Navy priorities, and a greater focus on Asia might result in the relinquishment of continuing interests in the base.

One idea might be—with Cuban full participation and cooperation—to make the base area and facilities part of future high-level postgraduate educational establishment to support hemispheric development in all spheres and regions. A graduate-level university with a rotating faculty from the Hemisphere—and elsewhere—of the best professionals in research and teaching in a wide range of disciplines like economics, health, agriculture, nutrition, research and development, basic science, industrial applications, and technology from computers to energy might be a valuable option to explore and carry out.

Cuba would and should be a central participant and a major player in areas where it has experience, like medicine and biology. The U.S. would help to finance it and provide part of the faculty, including a small permanent group that would be joined for shorter periods by a larger group of Hemispheric and world experts.

The work would be divided between research and teaching. The degrees would be supported by the entire Hemisphere. The OAS could play an important role in the organization's management and governance bodies.

No venture this large could get off the ground rapidly. A step-by-step program should be developed to implement the idea, beginning with U.S. decisions on the evacuation of detainees and future use. That could be followed by a Cuban-U.S. agreement on arrangements to return to the general lines I mentioned earlier, bringing in the Hemisphere, while keeping Cuba informed and engaged as first steps proceed.

Selecting and supporting the student body will require some careful consideration. Foremost among the concerns here is to ensure that only the very best get admitted while also ensuring diversity. At the same time, the widest representation should be sought from among the states and regions most in need of well-trained and capable leaders in the fields of most importance to them.

Tuition might be heavily subsidized—based in large measure on need—but with a requirement that each student pledge a significant amount of future service to their native state or to an important multilateral organization in the Hemisphere, at a generous and rewarding level of compensation.

There is no easy course here, but a remarkable challenge to take a matter that has had a divisive and controversial past and turn it into something that can be of great value to individuals of merit—and,

most importantly, to the progress and future of the states of the Hemisphere. It could help remove the bad odor that now surrounds the name and reality of Guantánamo while returning it to Cuba.

*VG: Frankly speaking, such an idea sounds absolutely fantastic in these times, beyond the usual horizon of political planning. On the other hand, it is an opportunity to think about a strategic perspective and see the problem from a different angle and in a different light. It is the only way to stop being held hostage by the status quo of the “original” Cold War and avoid the prospect that it will remain in place for another 60 years. At the same time, more urgent actions are needed to solve the ongoing Venezuelan crisis.*

**TP:** Venezuela has been a long-standing, escalating problem. The Trump administration adopted more forceful opposition to the Nicolás Maduro regime than Obama did, increasing sanctions and all kinds of pressures, including military exercises and statements from the U.S. military command in the area.

The Maduro-Guaidó political battle has been in view for everybody to see. It is evident that Venezuela’s conundrum cannot be resolved through sanctions or mere military measures. Mindful of the mistakes made in Iraq, the U.S. has quite scrupulously avoided launching any actions that would involve us in a direct military conflict, particularly a ground war.

On the other hand, the U.S. has been tepid in promoting negotiations because there has been distrust among Republicans that negotiations will lead somewhere. They were caught in the middle, believing that you cannot win militarily and cannot succeed through negotiations, so you should just keep on doing what you are doing, and hope for the best.

In the meantime, Juan Guaidó, who was popular several years ago, has seen that popularity tempered because of an inability to make real progress and move things forward. Conditions for the Venezuelan people have grown worse—they are hungry, they are without jobs, and they are in a miserable economic situation—and U.S. sanctions have contributed to the development of the crisis. But that has not necessarily meant an increase in participation in street protests against Maduro.

Nor has strong support for the opposition on the part of the EU, the Lima group, Brazil, and others been converted into a negotiation process. Norway has tried to play an intermediary role—it was an important effort, but at the moment it does not have real legs. New efforts in Mexico with Norwegian help may make progress.

Maduro managed to organize elections for the new National Assembly that was the centerpiece of political opposition under Guaidó. A very low participation rate—and Maduro's total control over military and security services—put him in a very strong position and assured a favorable outcome for him. Guaidó did not participate in the elections, which were not recognized as legitimate by Washington, Brussels, and many other international actors.

Russia, China, and Iran, in their own way, have taken the opportunity to become part of the support mechanism for Maduro, mainly through shipments of Venezuelan oil. Despite its claim of having the largest oil reserves in the world, Venezuela’s oil-producing and refinery structure has been badly eroded and its oil export capacity has been vastly reduced.

It seems that the different sides in this conflict are pulling very hard on a rope, but that rope is not going to break. No one is moving in the same direction, but there are no referees, so it hurts everybody, and nobody has the capacity to change things.

The U.S. has adopted a hands-off attitude, albeit not a directly negative attitude toward negotiations. It takes the view that the U.S. can succeed only after Maduro disappears from the political scene. Guaidó has been on and off about the negotiations and, in the most recent ones, has been unwilling to go very far because he sees them as destructive to his capacity to be the next president.

**VG:** *It seems that the Biden administration has continued to recognize Juan Guaidó as the legitimate leader of Venezuela and at present is not going to negotiate with Nicolás Maduro. In the meantime, the pandemic has exacerbated the socio-economic and political crisis, while the authoritarian regime continues to flirt with untenable ideas of tropical socialism.*

**TP:** In the end it will be the people of Venezuela, acting through representatives, who will negotiate an outcome, use an electoral process, or both to try to find an acceptable result.

**VG:** *It would be the best solution and hopefully a starting point for the country's rebirth and structural reconfiguration. Its fundamental problems have come from the oil-dependent nature of the Venezuelan state, whose extremely inefficient and corrupt forms of governance have been mixed with destructive practices of authoritarian populism that have turned the country in an institutional desert. Such a disastrous development completely fits the textbook concept of a commodity-dependent economy. Paradoxically, the activity of foreign corporations—Chinese, Russian, and American—has kept the country's crude oil production afloat despite a U.S. oil embargo.*

### **Business and Foreign Policy**

**VG:** *What role does big business play in determining the foreign policy of different countries, particularly the United States? Following a distinguished diplomatic career, you have held a high managerial position at the Boeing Company and understand better than anyone else the interaction between the government and private sector in the international arena.*

**TP:** In general, I do not think business interests control the U.S. government. The U.S. administration regulates the activity of commercial enterprises and tries to treat U.S. business interests abroad with care. Its foreign policy has been based on an assessment of the broad interests of American society, including commercial ones.

Business defines its interests as having to operate efficiently, to provide growth of shareholder value, and to protect any intellectual property and know-how.

Large corporations have certainly understood the very high price they have to pay for acting contrary to the law through the federal Foreign Corrupt Practices Act and other regulatory actions.

Overall, if business interests closely parallel the direction government is going, then it is more inclined to take those interests into account.

Smart companies are constantly aware of how the government is operating and figure out ways to conduct their business in a manner that does not pit them against the government.

Over the last four decades, commercial enterprises have increased their capacity to understand U.S. strategic interests abroad and developed their contacts with foreign governments by hiring a number of people with long experience in government relations. Obviously, if you bring in people from the

government, they have to learn how to manage private business, while people from the business world have to learn how the government works.

The U.S. authorities, in the main, are prepared to listen and develop channels of communication with business, but in my view, government is clearly not in the hands of commercial interests. There is a widespread misunderstanding outside of government that if government would only operate the way businesses do, everything would be a lot simpler, smoother, and safer. In truth, the differences are large. The government has a Congress that looks at and governs governmental operations, whereas a set of shareholders and a unitary management system with a board makes things go a lot easier for companies. Many things Congress wants government (the executive branch) to do are already governed by legislation and thus are complex and challenging to achieve.

### **The Middle East and North Africa**

***VG:** Your professional career has been closely tied to the Middle East, where the tectonic plates of global politics continue to collide. However, the region has changed a lot since the 1970s, when you were U.S. Ambassador to Jordan, and even since the 1990s, when you represented the U.S. in Israel. How do you view that regional evolution?*

**TP:** The changes that have taken place in the region affected Egypt's diminished role, from which Cairo is slowly trying to recover. Such hotspots as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Sudan have become a substantial (and non-trivial) part of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) agenda. But uncertainties have continued in Algeria that offset more positive developments in Morocco and Tunisia. For years, three "I" countries—Israel, Iraq, and Iran—were the primary preoccupation of the U.S..

Overall, we can see declining interest on the part of the United States in a political process in the MENA, with the exception of fighting against Islamic terrorism, maintaining a close relationship with Israel, and having partial involvement in the Middle East peace settlement—but not in a way serious enough to match Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger.

Russia, on the other hand, has been steadily and systematically excluded from those regional affairs, mainly because of its domestic weakness in the last decade of the twentieth century and to some extent in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Moscow has since extended its presence in the MENA mostly through military activities, albeit accompanied by diplomatic approaches. The Kremlin has serious commitments in Syria and is increasingly frustrated by its inability to produce an outcome that will reduce uncertainty there.

Nevertheless, Russia has become a major player in the region. Moscow has also interacted closely with the U.S. and others on Iran on a non-proliferation program, while showing very little preoccupation with the conflict in Yemen and maintaining a growing interest in the ongoing civil war between the UN-recognized government in Tripoli and the commander of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army, General Khalifa Haftar.

Part of Russia's preoccupation is that some other countries, including Turkey and Egypt, have developed their own activities in Libya and have different visions for its future.

The Biden administration, on the other hand, has a clear view of Yemen as a prospective opening step to resolving problems through negotiations, brokered perhaps by the United Nations, but not without triggering potential movement in that regard by Saudi Arabia. Iran is enjoying in Yemen a position as spoiler and thinking of exploiting that to make it advantageous, but Tehran is apparently willing to do this only at a very low cost.

**VG:** *Is it possible that world powers will return to the JCPOA<sup>32</sup> or will it be necessary to renegotiate a nuclear deal with Iran?*

**TP:** At the moment, the Biden administration is focused on going back to the JCPOA as it was originally negotiated—what has been called “compliance for compliance.” However, there are always uncertainties, because it is just a starting position, and a new treaty is not totally out of the question. It does not appear that Russia is against reviving the 2015 agreement with Iran and the Europeans and other members of the P5+1 group<sup>33</sup> also seem to be looking in that direction.

The Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA and tried to find a narrow benefit with maximum pressure against Iran, going through the UN with a “snapback approach”<sup>34</sup> under the JCPOA, even though it is no longer a member, and trying to force Iran to accept no further deals for trade coming in or going out, but eventually failed. Russia and China were against the reactivation of the UN sanctions and blocked them by opposing and ignoring any efforts by the U.S. to use a Security Council resolution to extend the embargo, in part to preserve the agreement and also because of their own business interests and commercial military sales to Iran.

There are some in the Biden administration who feel that Trump created additional pressure on Tehran that should not be squandered. Getting Iran back to the JCPOA would probably mean taking off all the sanctions that Trump put on Iran after withdrawing from the agreement. This is not something that is totally settled and is very complicated.

The Biden administration would like—probably subsequent to a return to the JCPOA—to achieve another round of agreements to supplement the JCPOA. Whether that will involve just nuclear and ballistic missiles or other questions remains open and unlikely to be clarified before a “compliance for compliance” resuscitation of the JCPOA is reached.

In Syria, Russia has achieved two very important objectives: first, supporting Assad to the point where it no longer appears, as it did when Russia came in, that he might be losing militarily; and second, guaranteeing itself a principal—and maybe even the primary—seat at any negotiating table dealing with the future of Syria.

At the same time, Russia has not yet been able to crystallize Assad’s full military victory. Under Trump, who recoiled from the idea of being in Syria after dealing with ISIS, the U.S. remained there ostensibly to maintain Syria’s production of petroleum, but in reality to support Kurdish allies against

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<sup>32</sup> The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, was signed on July 14, 2015. It placed significant restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. On May 8, 2018, President Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA and reinstated U.S. nuclear sanctions on the Iranian regime.

<sup>33</sup> The P5+1 group includes China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

<sup>34</sup> Snapback is a mechanism for dealing with resolutions and sanctions. The Trump administration demanded the reactivation of UN sanctions resolutions on Iran that had been terminated as part of a bargain. The negotiators of the deal agreed on a complex process to “snap back” (re-institute) those resolutions if Tehran broke its commitments and other dispute resolution mechanisms failed.

Turkey and anyone else who would like to minimize or eliminate the Kurds as a factor in the future of Syria and as a factor in Kurdish survival in the region.

The U.S., however, has not yet adopted the political position that Syrian Kurdistan will be a next step on the road to full Kurdish independence, a big piece of which is established de facto in Northern Iraq by the Kurdish regional government. An interesting question is whether Biden will follow the Trump pattern of getting out and leaving the situation in Syria alone or whether he will seek once again to re-engage the United States diplomatically.

Trump thought of getting out of war, and spoke about Iraq, Eastern and Western Syria with some success. But it is quite clear that the Islamic State is not a dead issue, that the group still has its hand in scattered pockets of resistance and could be resuscitated into an even more violent and radical group than we have seen.

There are many players who would be involved in a diplomatic resolution to the situation in Syria, including three or four big outsiders: Russia, the United States, Iran, and possibly Saudi Arabia. The former often ignore the Syrian players themselves: the Syrian opposition, Assad, and the Kurds. On the other hand, the extreme preoccupation with internal Syrian issues of these domestic players makes the question of addressing Syria's future, whether diplomatically or militarily, fraught. Russia's military presence in Syria has given Moscow access to and a reliance on military base infrastructure in the region.

This does not please those in the United States who are very suspicious of Russia—of whom there are many among both Republicans and Democrats—and this has added tension to U.S.-Russian relations. The U.S. and Russia have never been very close partners in the Middle East, and bridging these differences has only become harder over time.

*VG: The recent escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has shown the fragility of a construct that has been supported and nurtured by the Trump administration. President Biden has made significant adjustments to U.S. Middle East policy, returning, for example, to the concept of a two-state solution. Overall, there remains a sense of a diplomatic vacuum in the region that is exploited by internal and external political players.*

**TP:** Under the Trump administration and its peace proposal, any possibility that the traditional Palestinian-Israeli conflict would be fixed became even less likely. In essence, Trump's approach would make possible a continuation of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian lands in the West Bank.

It certainly opened the door for the hard-right-wing Israeli solution to the Palestinian problem: eventually moving Palestinians out of the West Bank into Jordan and other neighboring countries. It is a long-term prospect, but every step that has been taken, including new settlements in the West Bank, has reinforced the possibility of the Israeli right wing doing this.

Technically, the Palestinians have been left with two options: a two-state solution or a one-state solution. A one-state solution—frequently portrayed as a democratic one—will, however, never be accepted by right-wing Israelis, nor by Palestinians, if it amounts to living under a permanent occupation.

Internally, Palestinians are badly split, with very weak leadership. And Netanyahu is not without his own problems, including his court cases, which increasingly make him the bull's eye targeted by opposition politics in Israel, causing the collapse of his government coalition and a stalemate which

has led to a new right-wing coalition government. There are also evident disagreements between Netanyahu and the Biden administration on Iran as well as Palestine.

Israelis will be very reluctant to support a negotiation process without someone they can trust to lead it, to avoid what they would see as a calamity for them rather than as a necessary settlement. The right-wing politicians—with Trump's full cooperation—have tightened up the terms of a wildly unrealistic potential peace settlement. They have set negotiation goals so high that they are unlikely to be achieved.

*VG: Would any outside influence be able to induce the Israelis to change their aspirations?*

**TP:** Right now, given the circumstances, it is very difficult for the U.S. to push Israelis persistently in any direction, particularly if Israel continues to be dominated by a Likud-run right-wing government. Moreover, many Americans would like to shift away from the Middle East and focus more on China and the Far East.

The U.S. under the Trump administration adopted a whole range of Israeli right-wing ideas to avoid the creation of a Palestinian state and moved ahead with a right-wing concept of settlement in the occupied territory. It took advantage of some interest on the part of the Gulf Arabs in improving their relationships with Israel by adopting common opposition to Iran because the Gulf states would like to see more American support against the existential threats they see coming from Tehran.

At present, the most likely long-term “solution” is the gradual expulsion of the Palestinians from the West Bank and the increasing annexation of land by Israel. In the end that will extend the Jewish Israeli State from the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea to the Mediterranean, leaving a small Arab minority, perhaps even smaller than the current percentage of so-called Israeli Arabs (20% of Israel), inside the green line.

This would be a “solution” reprehensible to international law and to the very concept of human rights. It would also threaten the future of Jordan by perhaps killing the monarchy and turning the country into a republic of Palestinian exiles. A majority of Jordan’s population is already Palestinian in origin, if we begin counting from the World War I era.

Israel’s political right, in my view, will strenuously oppose and never accept either a unitary state with equal rights and representation of Palestinian Arabs and Jewish Israelis or a two-state solution, which is for them, if not the least worst, probably the next least worst outcome.

A scenario in which the U.S. would increasingly push Israel would require a fundamental change in the Israeli electorate and victorious parties from the center to left of the political spectrum, represented by a leader comparable in stature with Rabin. There is no such person in sight and it is unlikely the Israeli moderate opposition will coalesce. That is why my sense of the current situation is rather bleak and not very promising.

I also think that any coalition of Europe, Russia, and China, operating without the United States in the Middle East, would become an even greater problem and maybe throw the Arab-Israel peace settlement back into a Cold War-like contention between Russia and the United States. That is something that the Biden administration would like to and should avoid.

*VG: You have talked mainly about the West Bank, but what about that other self-governing Palestinian territory, the Gaza Strip? Two weeks of horrific violence in May 2021 was mostly Israeli-Hamas*

*confrontation, when more than 4,000 rockets were fired at Israel from Gaza. Can we expect a real de-escalation under the current ceasefire agreement mediated by Egypt?*

**TP:** Prime Minister Ariel Sharon pulled Israeli settlements out of Gaza in 2005 that created a situation in which the Israeli occupation of Gaza remains at arm's length by concentrating its military force around the Gaza Strip.

Hamas and some parts of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organizations, which are not completely under Hamas control, from time to time attack Israeli territory next to Gaza, and in return, Israelis attack Gaza.

The Palestinian leadership is so highly fractured that it is difficult to envision any serious reconciliation between the Hamas-led Gaza and a Fatah-led West Bank. To some extent, Hamas has increased its activities into the West Bank. However, Israeli intelligence, using police and military cooperation with the Palestine Liberation Army and more recently Fatah, have found ways of controlling Hamas' efforts and influence in the West Bank. Those forces will remain an effective instrument for containing Hamas in the short and medium term.

Practically all the new Palestinian leadership are in Israeli jails, and the Israeli administration now decides whether somebody like Marwan Barghouti will participate in the political life of the Palestinian Authority. Barghouti's popularity has diminished because of his long stays in jail and the fact that he has been out of sight politically.<sup>35</sup>

It is highly unlikely that anyone else will emerge who could pull Hamas and Fatah together into a joint effort. If such a hypothetical future merger between Hamas and Fatah were realized, one could think of a two-state solution or a three-state solution: Gaza, West Bank, and Israel becoming likely.

***VG:** During the Trump administration we saw some unexpected shifts in relations between several Gulf countries and Israel through back-channel agreements. Does that diplomatic approach hold any attraction for the Palestinians?*

**TP:** What the UAE did, signing a normalization agreement with Israel in 2020, set a precedent. It was a strong message to the Palestinians of non-support.

U.S.-brokered talks encouraged the UAE to join the small group of Arab states that had established diplomatic relations with Israel. Bahrain was next in line to sign a deal with Israel, followed by Morocco and Sudan. Israel has also had unofficial contacts with many Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, which is seen as the major prize in such a policy move.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has developed close relationships with Israeli officials, particularly with the military and intelligence authorities. However, the crown prince has to deal domestically with his father, the king.

King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud has rarely put his foot down, but in the case of Saudi relations with Israel, the king has made it very clear that the Haram al-Sharif mosque, the great holy site for the Muslims in the Old City of Jerusalem, should not be under Israel's control. The Saudi royal

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<sup>35</sup> Marwan Barghouti is serving five life sentences in Israeli prison for his role in planning deadly terror attacks against Israelis in the Second Intifada. He is widely seen as a rival to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

leadership consider itself a protector not only of the great mosques in Mecca and Medina, but also of the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem that is the third holiest shrine in Islam.

The issue pits the Saudis against the Jordanians, who in a peace treaty with Israel in 1993 were given serious oversight responsibilities through the charitable Muslim organization (Waqf) that operates the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.

It is a fraught and difficult question whether King Salman, who is still alive and mentally competent, will move in the same direction as the UAE, but this seems unlikely.

It is also highly unlikely that the Crown Prince of the UAE and effective ruler of the country, Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan (despite the fact that his elder relative is the Emir), signed the treaty with Israel without making sure that the Saudi crown prince was informed about it in advance and without knowing that the Saudis would not punish the UAE for it.

Israel's position in the region is evolving in two directions. First, the country is hardening its stance regarding negotiations with the Palestinians and rejecting the two-state approach. Second, it is bringing the Gulf nations more into alignment with its own opposition to Iran.

The Saudi response has not been entirely consistent: from time to time over the past 50 years, Riyadh has carried on track 2 conversations with Tehran to revive efforts to build a consensus regarding the future of the Middle East rather than to try to block each other's potential domination. That is something that the Iranians, say they are less worried about than the Saudis, who are much more concerned about intensifying rivalries between Shias and Sunnis across the region and growing Iranian influence over Shia communities in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Such talks have been occurring.

### **The Arab Spring**

**VG:** *Many experts believe that current events in the MENA region, in one way or another, are related to the Arab Spring that erupted 10 years ago. Was the Arab Spring inevitable?*

**TP:** Despite the fact that the actions taken during the Arab Spring did not succeed, one can say with confidence that the chain of events in response to the Arab Spring was truly inevitable and eventually separated the population from politics. Since then, non-monarchical Arab states have enforced strict security policies to strengthen their domestic control, as has the military in Egypt, while Syria, Yemen, and Libya have been destroyed by civil war.

The Arab monarchies—with the exception at this stage of Bahrain, with its internal uncertainties and difficulties—have attempted to stay in power through a combination of very strict security measures and monetary benefits to low-income groups in the population (which have been at least somewhat successful at addressing social and economic dissatisfaction in their countries). Whether monarchies over a longer time will be able to avoid the factors that generated the Arab Spring is hard to know.

It is true, however, that the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood to perform effectively in Egypt, and the resurgence of the military in that country, have further split Egyptian society. The people who demonstrated and protested in Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011 could not reach their objectives.

Egyptians are now back in a situation heavily dominated by the military and with the strong presence of the Muslim Brotherhood, which constitutes a very significant share of the population, with its proselytization of religious ideas and charitable efforts among the most disadvantaged Egyptians. Many of them are now in jail or under extreme pressure.

Yemen, on the other hand, remains at loggerheads in a civil war. The Saudis have given some indication of being willing to bend toward a negotiated solution, but things are not moving very well or very fast there, even after the Biden administration announced that it would end its support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen and reduce military aid to Riyadh.

It would seem to be an over-simplification to look at that conflict as a struggle between the tribes living in the South and the rebel Houthis who have gained control in the North. The civil war in Yemen began six years ago as a two-way split based on religious and governance differences, but it has turned into a multi-dimensional hostility that includes clans and tribes, making it much more difficult to resolve.

An Arab Spring was inevitable ten years ago and will probably be inevitable in the future, because a significant share of the Arab population—in the monarchies and the non-monarchies alike—remains unsatisfied. People who wish to promote democratic reforms that may lead to change are deeply afraid for the time being of organizing further protests or public demonstrations.

At present, they are more than likely to create what one would call quiet forms of resistance. In a number of states—those that have recently faced civil wars—social, economic, and political aspirations have become even more remote and diminished.

### **The Second Gulf War**

***VG:** Some observers see the roots of the Arab Spring in the Second Gulf War, which provoked mixed reactions with diverse effects across the region. What is your assessment of the 2003 military operation in Iraq?*

**TP:** It was a huge mistake. I remember that Brent Scowcroft<sup>36</sup> wrote a very important op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* on August 15, 2002, saying, don't invade Iraq under any circumstances.<sup>37</sup> He was immediately cut off by George W. Bush, the son of a man with whom he had had an extremely close relationship, George H.W. Bush. After that, Brent was no longer consulted, was no longer influential, and no longer had any access to the administration. He found himself in a very difficult position. There were, among President George W. Bush's advisers, a number of people whose knowledge of the Middle East was close to nonexistent and whose general relationships in the region were very superficial, often driven by associations with right-wing Israelis.

The notion now seems to be predominant as they explain their support for George W. Bush's intervention is that he would take Iraq and turn it into a benign democratic republic—something far beyond the possible.

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<sup>36</sup> Brent Scowcroft was a two-time National Security Advisor, first under President Gerald Ford and then under George H. W. Bush.

<sup>37</sup> Brent Scowcroft, "Don't Attack Saddam," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2002, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1029371773228069195>.

I think that they exaggerated and pushed the intelligence community to promote the idea of the danger of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. There were some reasons to believe that biological weapons, which we knew less about, were likely there—and they certainly knew that chemical weapons were there. But I also think, based on what I saw at the end of the Clinton administration, that with any degree of research and with any degree of intensity, their belief that Iraq had nuclear weapons, or was about to get them, was false and did not support the U.S. invasion.

The decision to intervene had all kinds of negative consequences and destabilized the Middle East. The U.S. was not able to use military force to reach political objectives.

The responses to some of those questions were influenced by people who remembered the end of World War II in Germany, when we were able to force the enemy to surrender and then, through an occupation, to build and cultivate alternative leaderships with significant democratic commitment.

None of that was possible in Iraq. Some people had crazy ideas that the Ba'ath party was something like the Communist Party of the Soviet Union or any kind of fascist party—that it was a mighty machine that would continue an underground war. The Ba'ath was a weak official party. You had to belong to get a state job. The real problem turned out to be very simple: Iraqis did not want to be under foreign occupation; it was unacceptable to them as a way of ruling their country.

The U.S. had very little colonial experience in running places like that and allowed the Iraqi army to be disbanded—200,000 trained people with guns in their hands. Mistakes were also made in the political sphere with the domestic opposition, particularly the Sunni opposition, when their traditional rulers were put out to pasture and were ignored by the Shia.

That finally developed into a civil war, which had the objective of expelling the Americans when they were planning to depart the country. Much of that instability spread around the region, particularly to Syria, weakening Assad's control over the country and raising questions about a leadership change in Damascus. The country that benefited most from this second Iraq war was probably Iran.

### **Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan**

**VG:** *You have already spoken with great concern about Jordan, a country that you know very well thanks to your Ambassadorship there from 1974 to 1978. How do you picture its future?*

**TP:** Jordan has become increasingly reliant on American subventions. The country's prospects also depend on whether the king himself is able to affect popular sentiment in a favorable way.

King Abdullah II is not his father, who artfully ruled the nation for over 40 years. Abdullah has some disadvantages because of the mixed marriage (Arab-UK) of his father, King Hussein, which resulted in the son studying, training, and growing up abroad, and led him to focus too much on things outside Jordan. He became unexpectedly king in 1999 just two weeks before his father's passing, speaking less than fully polished classical Arabic and with a reportedly weak understanding of the political movements that existed around him and even against him—whether Arab religious radicals like the Muslim Brotherhood or Palestinian factions. Over time, he has overcome many of these difficulties but not eliminated them.

Arguably, Jordan has treated Palestinians better than any other neighboring state where they have wanted to find refuge, particularly in large numbers. Palestinians, however, still see themselves there, especially through the eyes of the monarchy, as second-class citizens. In the military, they can aspire to technical jobs but not senior operational command posts as generals. In politics, they are tightly controlled with respect to their roles and places of leadership.

The country has increasingly adopted a position in which its intelligence service (Mukhabarat) has provided important assurances that the monarchy will remain in power. How long that will continue is not known. It has a reputation, on the one hand, for dealing harshly with regime dissidents and opponents and, on the other, as a first-rank collector of international intelligence, particularly in the Arab world and its immediate neighborhood, which has long allowed it to enjoy a close relationship with the U.S. CIA.

The monarchy has benefited from very significant grants of assistance from the United States and other countries over the years, which in large measure have helped prevent adverse—to them—political changes from occurring in the region.

The kingdom has also received support from Israel, which is aided by the Jordanian monarchy with intelligence assistance and cooperation, particularly under the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty of 1994, and even before that.

So to say that Jordan is on the brink of falling and seeing nothing but disaster around the corner is too radical a view. However, to say that the country is still a comfortable kingdom with modern reformist ideas and willing to go down the path toward constitutional monarchy of some kind, devolving greater authority to elected political figures, is equally wrong.

The country continues to walk a tightrope between two outcomes: one that backs the monarchy but increases popular discontent, and another that allows popular discontent to get large enough that it might lead to the dissolution and disappearance of the monarchy, perhaps even in a violent way.

The Arab monarchies will likely support the kingdom of Jordan, although they have limited incentive and a tradition of straitened cooperation with Amman.

The Saudis have always felt that the Jordanians were created as a refuge for the Hashemites, traditional rulers of Mecca after the post-World War I civil conflict between the Al Sauds and the Hashemites, to take territory away from them and to prevent the Saudi royal family from getting full control of the peninsula. Both countries have laid claim to the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula, and in effect waged war against each other in the early 1920s over that issue.

Riyadh has also long believed that the Jordanian Hashemite monarchy, with its tradition of close familial descent from the Prophet and which evolved from traditional leadership in the city of Mecca, is not exactly what they want to see in Amman, and have avoided becoming too generous with the Jordanians. On the other hand, the Saudis would feel safer maintaining the present Hashemite Kingdom than seeing a radical Palestinian leadership take over in Jordan.

Israel's close and partially secret intelligence relationship with Jordan has meant, on the one hand, increased mutual dependence when it comes to dealing with terrorism and Islamic radical organizations and regimes and, on the other hand, growing concern in Jordan that it is seen by the Israeli right wing as the "alternative homeland" (*al watan badiil*) to which all Palestinians under Israeli occupation will someday be consigned, in effect replacing the monarchy and east bank Jordanian dominance of the state with a Palestinian republic.

## Lebanon

**VG:** *In our conversation, we cannot avoid the reality of a long-suffering Lebanon, which for a time was dubbed the Switzerland of the East, while its capital, Beirut, was known as the Paris of the Middle East. Now much of that seems to be a thing of the distant past, and the country is again going through political, social, and economic turmoil.*

**TP:** Lebanon today is the messiest of messes. It is a country with a weak and disappearing leadership, representing the continuing tragedy of political division, mainly abetted by serious religious differences between and among many sects and varieties of Christians and Muslims, and fractured even further by the huge humanitarian disaster of the August 2020 disastrous Beirut harbor explosion.<sup>38</sup>

There is no Christian unity in Lebanon. Shia influence through Hezbollah has become even more pronounced in the government. At the same time, failures on the part of the ruling authorities have increased public protests.

There is also a consistent national preoccupation with the fighting in Syria. Huge inflows of Syrian refugees have further weakened the Lebanese state, and no one and nothing seems to be coming along to offer sufficient relief.

The international community, particularly France, considers it important not to allow Lebanon to fall once again into a violent multi-directional civil conflict actively supported by outside players, which seems to be the current negative direction in which Lebanon could go.

Are the Lebanese capable of bridging their divisions and putting in place a nominal government that will run the country or is Hezbollah strong enough, despite public opposition, to prevent that from happening and itself return to power through surrogates and chaos? The answer to that is difficult to know.

Will the international community come to the rescue of Beirut and Lebanon to the point that stability can be reached? We have to say, there is little U.S. interest in this, maybe in large measure because the Trump administration seemed to support only certain actions in the region, in particular those of Israel, because Israel plays well in American politics.

The Biden administration's main contention with the region is that the Middle East has produced more problems than the U.S. is interested in addressing.

Perhaps President Biden is a hands-on guy, but the mountains of pressing issues piling up in his office inevitably leave many problems as second and third priorities. Even if they, including Lebanon are not relegated to the second tier strategically, he will not have enough time to tackle them.

To date, the only way this has really worked is by having a strong President and a strong National Security Council. An NSC which will allow cabinet departments to execute such policies rather than

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<sup>38</sup> The horrendous blast of more than 2,000 tonnes of ammonium nitrate in the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020, killed 178 people, left more than 6,500 injured and 300,000 homeless, and severely damaged critical health infrastructure and medical supplies.

having White House and NSC staff serving as the implementers trying to direct to the field, both embassies and military commands.

### **The Art of Diplomacy**

**VG:** *You have had the chance to demonstrate your capacity to deal with very different international players in challenging environments, particularly in the Middle East, establishing trustworthy relationships with Israel, the Palestinian leadership, and the royal family of Jordan. This is a critical—and rare—diplomatic art. How can one develop such extraordinary skills and bring them to fruition in real life?*

**TP:** It is very difficult and requires first and foremost developing and building trust. You have to proceed very carefully and always be sure that what you promise has a strong chance of being carried out. You have to avoid situations where everything you say is diminished by your incapacity to make it work.

You have to establish trust and talk very frankly with the leadership of countries about what is realistic, what is less realistic, and what options might exist.

To some extent, of course, that does not depend on you alone, but on the policy your country adopts. You can build trust and confidence with foreign leaders, but you have to guard against mistaken policies and make sure that Washington is not going to undermine you while moving things ahead.

Foreign leaders need to have you speak to them in a very open way and understand that you are not somehow a conniving opponent who speaks indirectly to undermine where they want to go or what they want to do.

At the same time, they need to hear a true presentation of the issues and that you are not going to undermine them, but respect and appreciate their leadership and the fact that they know their country better than you do, and always will.

There is a great deal of mutual dependency at work, and you can help them as an outside observer. It is a very delicate and difficult mission, particularly when developing U.S. relationships, which are in many ways shaped by U.S. domestic political considerations. We have a saying in the field that in any negotiation, 60 percent of your issues are with Washington. That may not be too far off.

In conclusion, personal relationships are important. Over time, they can serve to overcome large obstacles. They need to be cultivated, and truth is the coin of the realm in that regard. Good diplomats understand this and practice it.

### ***Afterword: A Life in Diplomacy***

*Many foreign policy experts seem to believe that cynicism is an integral part of a diplomat's toolkit. They argue that it is often necessary to put geopolitical considerations ahead of human destiny.*

*Tom Pickering is not among them. The esteemed ambassador, who turns 90 this year, has never been afraid to show concern for ordinary people or sympathy for their joy and suffering. In a stellar career*

*that has spanned five continents and five decades, such “weakness” has helped him better understand the irrational, subjective, emotional side of geopolitics and geoeconomics.*

*Notably, his views are not the naïve ramblings of a first-tour diplomat, but rather the fruits of a lifetime in diplomacy that began at the height of the Cold War in the late 1950s and continued in a challenging international environment for more than half a century.*

*In a career devoted to elaborating and implementing U.S. foreign policy, Pickering maintained a humanitarian approach during the relatively long bipolar era with the Soviet Union, as well as the unipolar American phase of foreign affairs in the 1990s and early 2000s, which he saw as predominantly filled with democratic alliances and pragmatic agreements supporting liberal values, rather than as pure American hegemony.*

*Currently, Ambassador Pickering is focused on assessing the emergence of multipolar realities and the opportunities and vulnerabilities they bring. Here again, he rejects a narrow and simplistic view of the historical process, preferring to see it through a broad, polyphonic, communitarian prism.*

*Indeed, his insights into the extensive obligations and accountability of those realities enrich the concept of multipolarity and reveal how to move forward into a mutually beneficial world.*

*Throughout his diplomatic journey, the complex metamorphosis of our global world structure has not shaken Pickering’s devotion to Wilson’s set of ideals and aspirations, grounded in the principles of democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law, free trade, and peaceful cooperation between nations.*

*As a consistent supporter of a liberal world order, Pickering firmly believes that disputes between democracies and autocracies need to be resolved peacefully: “We might have to go to war, but I’m not sure war would settle the matter.” He envisions a world of relationships made up of multiple international organizations and networks.*

*Essential to Pickering’s foreign policy concept is concern for the fate of our planet amid the existential threat of a nuclear war.*

*He returns consistently to that troubling core idea: if such a war begins, no one knows when or how it will be stopped. That danger cannot simply be dismissed. Reality, he insists, drives us toward diplomacy and negotiations.*

*Pickering’s choice has always been unequivocally in favor of reasonable compromises that balance long-term interests. He sees diplomacy as the tool of first resort in any conflict situation.*

*The ambassador employed diplomacy in the bitter civil wars in El Salvador and Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s. While pressing the military to change its attitude toward civilians, including minority ethnic groups, he also promoted the ideas of elections and peaceful internal dialogue, which later prevailed.*

*Tom Pickering proves the value of thoughtful and active diplomacy in moments of crisis, when events shift and historical decisions loom.*

*He has demonstrated a keen ability to tackle crises while keeping the long view in mind. We see both attributes at play in his thoughts on U.S.-China relations, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the origins and prospects of the Arab Spring, and the future of Guantánamo, the U.S. base in Cuba.*

*In many hours of conversations, I was struck, as a Russian who lived in Russia during that era, by the way the Ambassador explained the consequences of hyperinflation in Russia of the 1990s—not through “dry” statistics but by measuring the impact on human lives. He vividly described families’ struggles to survive in these difficult conditions, noting in passing that he learned of the challenges they faced by talking to them.*

*His deep, insightful approach to foreign policy comes through clearly in his explanation of the Clinton administration’s motives and logic for supporting President Yeltsin in Russia’s internal conflict of 1993 and in the 1996 elections; his examination of the evolution of ruling monarchs in the Middle East; his recollection of episodes of the now-forgotten Korean War; and his detailed study of the second American invasion of Iraq.*

*He is also refreshingly clear-eyed in his survey of the current state of international affairs, explaining how the United States’ role in the world has evolved from being a dominant nation calling all the shots to becoming more of an equal partner with other countries, including adversaries and allies, and the challenges such a shift represents for today’s diplomacy.*

*Through it all, Pickering provides an important lesson for any diplomat: be skillful and efficient by building relationships of trust.*

*As America and the world face new complexities in the decade to come and beyond, Tom Pickering’s wise and strategic insights will provide a reliable compass in the often-bewildering and rapidly changing arena of international affairs.*