CENTER FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (CSIS)

THE CSIS-SCHIEFFER SERIES DIALOGUE:
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE
OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S FOREIGN POLICY

MODERATOR:
BOB SCHIEFFER,
CHIEF WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT, CBS NEWS &
ANCHOR, CBS NEWS, "FACE THE NATION"

PANELISTS:
STEVE COLL,
PRESIDENT, NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION,
STAFF WRITER, THE NEW YORKER

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN,
FOREIGN AFFAIRS COLUMNIST,
THE NEW YORK TIMES

DAVID IGNATIUS,
COLUMNIST & ASSOCIATE EDITOR,
THE WASHINGTON POST

TUESDAY, MARCH 16, 2010
5:30 P.M.

Transcript by
Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.

JOHN HAMRE: Hello, everybody. Thank you all for coming. We're delighted to have you here. This is going to be – this is going to be a lot of fun. I mean, I always wondered what it's like when journalists get together after something and sit and have a drink and talk with each other about what it's like. Well, we're going to get a little insight. That's what it's going to be like today and we're looking forward to hearing –

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN: Close. (Laughter.)

MR. HAMRE: It's going to be really great. Thank you all for coming. We're delighted to have you here. Of course, this is something we do jointly with the Schieffer School of Journalism at TCU. Bob Schieffer has both lent his name to TCU and he lets us borrow it here once in a while, and we're able to do this jointly with him and it's a wonderful, wonderful program that we're able to bring to you. And I want to say thanks to our friends at UT who make it possible for us to make this available for all of us.

I should tell you Steve Coll is on the way. We got a phone call from him; he's a little bit delayed. He's going to be coming, en route – but we're not going to wait! We've got too many people here and too much fun, so we'll get started. Let me turn it to you, Bob.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Thank you very much, Dr. Hamre. I think these two will be able to hold the space here while we're waiting for Steve Coll to come. (Chuckles.)

Welcome on behalf of CSIS and the Schieffer School down at TCU. They always say in Washington that the longer the title, the less important the job is. The shortest title in Washington is "president," and we all remember that.

It's kind of that way with biographies, too. Sometimes, the longer the biography, you know. So – (laughter) – we won't spend very much time introducing these two fellows today. David Ignatius, columnist with the Washington Post, former editor of the International Herald Tribune. Multiple awards: six novels and I'll tell you, he's done something the rest of us haven't. One of his books has actually – well, a couple of them, have they? – have been made into movies – "Body of Lies," which was a big box office hit.

Tom Friedman, three Pulitzers, four books, columnist for the New York Times, and he does have, David, one thing over you: One of his books, "Hot, Flat and Crowded," actually has become a song. (Laughter.)

Maybe I should add that I'm the one that wrote the song! But it did!

MR. FRIEDMAN: If you haven't heard it, it's absolutely priceless.

MR. SCHIEFFER: We will not be hearing that today.

And speaking of short, as we start to do this – I was just thinking about this going over for the questions – and Steve will join us here shortly – I don't even have to ask questions today because –

MR. FRIEDMAN: Here's Steve.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Is Steve there? Here he comes! I'm going to introduce him on the way up here. Steve Coll, longtime foreign correspondent staff writer for The New Yorker; six books, including "Ghost Wars," which is kind of a definitive work on Afghanistan about right now. And just two Pulitzers for Steve. (Laughter.) We're glad to have him today.

And I was just saying, the subjects –

DAVID IGNATIUS: Tom's on the board, isn't he? Is that a conflict? (Laughter.)

MR. FRIEDMAN: David can't get any more. (Laughter.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: The subjects are so obvious, we could keep them really short. I mean, all I have to say is Middle East, Tom.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Well, anything happen this week? I've been away. (Laughter.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: (Chuckles.) It's been very quiet.

MR. FRIEDMAN: You know, just to dive in, I'll just give you my very short take. I think that what happened this last week in the confrontation between the Obama administration and Israel, it had a lot of different levels to it. I think at one level, it was – it had really almost nothing to do with this particular housing project of 1600 apartments to be built in an area that was in what's considered the annexed part of East Jerusalem.

I think part of the reaction of the secretary of state, the president and the vice president was in the name of every secretary of state, every president, every American ambassador who's had Israeli settlements shoved in their face, slipped under their door, slipped beside them, prevaricated and pushed forward against the will, interest and urging of the United States of America. So on one level, this was a lot of anger that had been building up in the bureaucracy I believe over many, many years.

At the second level, I think what you saw reflected here – this came out a little bit in Dave Petraeus' background briefing about Israel, which came out last week – a sense that, you know, Israel, we do a lot for you in the world. We're trying to organize a global coalition to diffuse the Iranian nuclear threat, which is in our interest, but you would be one of the chief victims of that if we can't. We took out Saddam Hussein for our interest, but after all, Saddam is the man who launched multiple SCUD attacks on your country and was offering $25,000 ransom for any Palestinian who committed suicide. We have 3 billion in military aid – the most

advanced military equipment for Israel in the FY-2011 budget. And we defended Israel against the Goldstone report at the United Nations.

Having done all that, and then when you consider the particular context we're in right now, a context in which, to his credit, Prime Minister Netanyahu's economic and security policies in the West Bank have strengthened Salam and really helped produce probably the most effective Palestinian interlocutor we've had, I think, ever, including Yasser Arafat, and a Palestinian security force that has won the grudging respect of Israel. We have a Sunni Arab world obsessed with Iran, and therefore more willing to, I think, engage with and support Israel than ever before.

Given all of that, is it too much to ask by the United States of Israel that it engage in what I would call a win-win strategy? Which is to say, you know what, President Obama, the American people, this Bud's for you, okay. We're not going to do any building in Jerusalem; we're not going to do any building in the West Bank. Palestinians say that's the problem. We're not going to do anything. We're going to simply test whether there really is a Palestinian partner on the other side. It's a win-win. If there is, negotiations will advance. And if there isn't, it'll be clear to the whole world.

But instead of going for win-win, it seems to me that they wanted to opt for lose-lose, which is, insist on these policies which will only cause tension with the United States and give Palestinians and those of ill will an excuse to blame Israel for where we are.

So I think that's the junction of where we are. That's how I see it. I believe the president did exactly the right thing in drawing this red line; exactly the right thing for American interests. And I personally supported it.

I think there is one thing still missing, though, and I'll stop after this. I do believe that right now there are five key players in this equation. There is the Palestinian government of Salam Fayyad; there is the network of resistance, which is Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah; there's the moderate Arab States; there's Israel and America. Of those five players, only two have a strategy: Fayyad has a strategy; and the network of resistance, Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah have a strategy. And by the way, they are opposed. They are mortal enemies right now.

America, the moderate Arab states and Israel I do not believe have a coherent long-term strategy for how to resolve this conflict. And I think that while it was necessary what the Obama administration did, it is not sufficient. I think this administration is the weakest Middle East policymaking team I've ever seen. In fact, I couldn't even tell you who makes Middle East policy in this administration and it's a subject I have some interest in. And while it was important and necessary to draw this red line, it is not sufficient. Ultimately, we need a really strategy.

MR. SCHIEFFER: David?

MR. IGNATIUS: Well, Tom literally wrote the book on this subject and you just saw why he is so authoritative. I agree with what Tom said. I just would add a few points.

I mean, Tom, it's true that there are lots of different wheels that spin in this administration's policy team at different speeds and that makes it difficult to follow policy and often difficult for them to formulate policy.

But on the question of who makes Middle East policy, I think the answer's clear: President Obama does. I think that he takes this issue very personally. I think it's no accident that the first thing he did, really, when he got into the Oval Office was begin to make phone calls to the leaders in the region. He called the Palestinians, he called the Egyptians, he called the Saudis, he called the Israelis; he said, this issue is going to be crucial for me. What's the first big interview that he gave? It was to an Arab television station.

You know, consistently on the way to giving his speech in Cairo, he was signaling, this issue is going to be mine. And then he gave this very memorable speech in which he really planted the flag, if you will, as an American president saying, I am committed to reaching out to countries that we've seen as our adversaries, countries that are across this divide in the Muslim world in trying to engage them, trying to make a new push for peace. It was very much personal presidential diplomacy.

Netanyahu came here very early in the president's term. He had a meeting in the Oval Office. He came away just stunned by the intensity of the president's feeling about settlements. Went up to Capitol Hill thinking he'd get a much friendlier reception there, and he didn't. And Netanyahu went home really concerned that there was real unity in Washington on these issues. I think the Israelis were really, really concerned – the Netanyahu government.

Netanyahu did something very smart, which is he waited for the president's popularity to decline. I mean, over these months, Obama got weaker. The power leeched away. And we've all watched that. That's the larger story that we're looking at. And I think that that did have repercussions in terms of Middle East diplomacy.

In a way, Netanyahu gave this administration a gift, which was to do something so outrageous, so blatantly inappropriate for an ally when Vice President Biden went to Israel that the administration found its voice. And an administration that's really been struggling suddenly began to speak with great intensity and we've seen in the last week a new conviction, you could say, that the process which just seemed as dead as can be has got some new energy. Like you, I'm very uncertain about where it's going to go.

I would just add one other thing because I think that it's a mistake to think that just getting angry at the Israelis about settlements both at the beginning of the administration and in the last week is really going to be a decisive change.

When the president came into office, many of his advisors argued that the way to start this process was not to focus on settlements but to make a clear and coherent statement of all of the things that have basically been agreed in the peace negotiations that we've all been watching for several decades.

As we often say, as Tom and I write in our columns, we all know what the settlement is going to look like. It's no mystery here. We could name all of the basic elements of it. The Israelis know it, the Palestinians know it, but it's never said officially by the United States because we're afraid of blocking the negotiating process. In truth, we're afraid of upsetting the Israelis by saying, look, folks, Jerusalem is going to be an issue on the table.

And part of what we saw in this last week was the Israeli right insisting that the ambiguity that the U.S. and the Israelis have both drawn around this issue of Jerusalem was intolerable; that everybody should know, we're not going to give up one inch of Jerusalem. And here to show you how serious we are about it, the Israeli interior minister was saying, we're going to put these new settlements into East Jerusalem just as an emphatic statement.

And I think the response isn't just to get angry at that but to take the next step, which is to state clearly and directly, what are the basic outlines as we go into this negotiation that we all know are going to be part of the package? And I think if they don't do that, in truth, they'll let the opportunity that was handed to them slip.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Steve, would you like to get in on this? Where do you see this going?

STEVE COLL: You know, I don't really – literally, don't have much to add of the same quality of that discourse, but just listening to the two of them – I'm happy to talk about the things I know best, Pakistan and Afghanistan, another subject – but listening to them confirmed an observation that from a greater distance I have made over the last couple of weeks, which is that there's an anomaly here.

Tom described it as the accumulation of anger in the bureaucracy. David described it correctly as something that came from the president from the first time he had a bilateral in this new office. This refusal to allow Israeli settlement policies to go on past an American policy, whether – but the anomaly is that that is a landmark in American foreign policy decision-making and in presidential action in the relationship with Israel. But it was detached from strategy. It wasn't brought to bear as leverage for the pursuit of something, any way that was achieved, and so you ended up having, in a sense, this eruption. Some of it spontaneous as a result of the accident of Biden's visit; some of it calculated and accumulating.

But my question is, maybe just to round this off with the two of them, is what is the right way to bring to bear American outrage about the settlement constructively toward a result? Because my memory – again, somewhat amateurish – is that Bush 41 sort of did that with the housing/finance problem and managed to actually link it to a broader narrative of negotiation and progress. So what should be done in that – (inaudible, cross talk)?

MR. FRIEDMAN: Well, I think it's a very good point. I actually wrote my column about this for tomorrow, apropos of that point. Don't tell anybody. (Laughter.) Don't tell anybody – don't let it out of this room.

But if we're going to have a fight, let's fight over something really big, okay. And by the way, if we're going to work together, let's work together with Israel over something really big. So basically what I would argue – and I think you're exactly right: How do you connect this with something larger? And that's why I started out by saying two people have strategies right now, as I can see it. So let's start there: Fayyad and the Iran/Hezbollah/Hamas strategy.

Fayyad, I think, is the most interesting new player in the Middle East in a long, long time. He is in many ways the anti-Yasser Arafat. Arafat's whole strategy was let's get international recognition for a Palestinian state and then we'll build the institutions. Fayyad came along and said, no, no, no, you've got it completely backwards. Let's build institutions – financial ones, security ones that Israel can trust, that our people can trust – and then we declare a state. So that is the path he's on and he said, we're going to do this in 2011. By then, we will have our institutions up and running. So he's on that track.

I think the Iranian/Hamas/Hezbollah strategy has multiple parts. I think they're out to destroy Israel through, first, a process of – or a combination of asymmetric warfare, which was saw in Lebanon and in Gaza. (Coughs.) Pardon me, just a drink here one second. Excuse me.

So asymmetric warfare. Second, delegitimizing Israel on the world stage. By using asymmetric warfare, you basically force Israel to engage in what some will call war crimes because Hamas and Hezbollah are nested among civilian population.

And then lastly, you try to attempt Israel into imperial overstretch. Iran's fundamental interest, Hamas's fundamental interest and Hezbollah's fundamental interest is that the Israel occupation of the West Bank be perpetuated because they believe that imperial overstretch will erode Israel morally, physically and economically. So Fayyad and the Iranians are actually on a collision course, which is why you saw last week Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, telling the Iranians to stay out of their business.

The three other players are sitting on the sidelines. The Israelis have no clear long-term strategy, the Arab moderates are completely feckless and this administration, as you noted and as David noted, have not actually laid down where they want to come in. So what I saw is what the job of the other three is, is to support Fayyadism.

Now, it gets complicated because Fayyad – because of the split among the Palestinians, Hamas in Gaza and Fatah, Fayyad and Mahmoud Abbas controlling the West Bank, they cannot enter into a final peace arrangement because the Palestinian parliament cannot ratify it because they're split between Hamas and Fatah.

So what I believe the right strategy is is a phased approach where we promote a Palestinian state within provisional boundaries. And that would be to give Palestinians a state with all the accoutrements of it in those areas of the West Bank known as areas A and B basically – that is, all of the West Bank minus the blocs of Israeli settlements. That would be the interim solution. They would take over there as a state. And then phase two is, as David alluded to, then you would negotiate about refugees, Jerusalem and final status.

I believe that's the strategy we should be pursuing. My own view is that we should be laying that on the table. And as David said and as you said, connect what we're doing here, okay, to that larger strategy. And if that's the administration's approach, I don't know about it, but that seems to me how you connect this with that.

MR. IGNATIUS: Well, I just briefly – I think if – I agree with Tom that Salam Fayyad is an important new player. And I think his two-year transitional plan to get to Palestinian statehood is something that we should support. Like Tom, I've written saying, you know, our policy should be to forthrightly say, we back this transition to a state in two years. When I wrote that, an administration official called up and said, but that is our policy. (Laughter.) And I said, well, you know, if that's our policy, you ought to let people know – (laughter) – because it's news to me.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Exactly. Yeah, it's real news to me too.

MR. IGNATIUS: If Fayyad was here, what I think he would say to all of us is, you know, I'm really glad that Tom endorses my plan, but what I need from the U.S. government is something more than that. What I need is political momentum on precisely on the idea that there will be a final settlement – not something transitional, provisional, which – sorry to say, folks – the Palestinians and Arabs just, you know, they're not going to buy that.

They're not going to be – they're going to – they will think this is an attempt to buy them off with a half of a loaf, a third of a loaf, however much of the loaf it is and the Israelis are just going to hang onto the rest. And they'll end up losing out and they'll suffer a historic reversal. So he would say, what you need to do is push now clearly on the broader context of negotiation, so I will have a political base when I finish my institution building to take the next step.

And I think he's – I think he's right. I think, you know, Tom, that while that's a useful transitional approach, it won't build the political support on the Palestinian side. And also, to be honest, it allows everybody – Israelis and Palestinians to duck the hard issue. That's what we've been doing now for, you know, 30 years. And it doesn't work.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Let me just say, I think you are exactly right. I couldn't go into the detail of it in what I wrote tomorrow, but in the full plan, the idea is you would have a bilateral letter from the United States to the Palestinians that says, we support negotiations on the basis of the June 4, 1967, boundaries. And you have a bilateral assurance to the Israelis, which Bush already basically gave, that we would support mutually agreed upon border adjustments. So I think as part of this, you would have to have that absolutely from day one.

MR. IGNATIUS: Can I just say, I support the Friedman plan. (Laughter.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: While we're in the neighborhood, let's shift over to Iran. How are we doing on Iran these days? Steve.

MR. COLL: Well, you know, what's happening, which is an attempt to adjust the sanctions so that they create conditions that support whatever residual resistance there is to the

regime as it evolves over the next six or eight months raises the price on the IRGC and tries to find a way to have an effect on the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and its networks among the Iranian elites that is analogous to the effects that were created on Milosevic and his cronies in the late period of the Kosovo conflict – (inaudible, cross talk).

MR. SCHIEFFER: Would you think there's a real chance they can get meaningful sanctions?

MR. COLL: Oh, I'm sure that they can, through the combination of multilateral sanctions and then targeted command sanctions, raise the temperature some. Yes, I mean, you know, I'm not at all sure where things go with the Chinese at the end. But I don't really think that planners are imprisoned by that. That's public diplomacy. And then there's also a track with insurance and shipping and other kinds of targeted sanctions that are – that it's much more granular and more the sort of Treasury's track.

The problem is that I don't think that the targeted institutions and individuals are as brittle and as easily reached as the analogous situations. None of the evidence from Iran – as opaque as it is, as complicated as it is – when you really go down and look at the flow charts of families and leaderships and clerics and institutional relationships – these institutions and individuals who are being targeted are self-funded in very resilient and elastic organizations.

And as long as Iran is able to ship unrefined petroleum – unrefined oil and gas, there's going to be so much money flowing through those self-funding organizations and networks that I think they'll remain resilient absent some kind of political turning point, which, again, I don't see evidence – (inaudible, cross talk).

MR. SCHIEFFER: Do you think that we're going to have to learn to live with a nuclear capable Iran?

MR. COLL: I mean, well, we're – you know, we're just about there, aren't we? I mean, to some extent the question is, what is the dynamic by which Iran manages the decision about whether to go from capability to deployment or to capacity? And what is the pace at which they make that decision?

There are those who argue that it is still possible that even this Iranian regime would decide not to weaponize if the right international equation is created. Beyond the virtual weaponization that they're already pursuing and the missile capacity that they're already building. I mean, you know, you can get to a fairly fine point on these questions. But in any event, they already have capacity in a fuel cycle sense. And they have the intellectual capacity. And it's not at all clear that anyone can take that away from them.

MR. SCHIEFFER: How long will – getting back to Israel – how long will Israel tolerate that? At what level do they no longer tolerate it?

MR. FRIEDMAN: You know, none of us really know, Bob. I agree with something Steve said. I think that Iran has an interest in, you know, leaving all the parts on the table and

not actually weaponizing and not, A, making itself an easy target. I'd say that's one thing I would agree with.

The other thing that just has to strike you as you watch the diplomacy around this issue is that nobody wants Iran to get a bomb and nobody wants to use military force to stop it. And I'd even put the Israelis in that category. My guess is based on absolutely – I mean, if you've noticed the statements coming out of the Arab world – Prince Saud of Saudi Arabia basically said to – was it Bob Gates who was visiting?

MR. : Yep.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Kind of, what are you and the Israelis waiting for? You know, I mean, it was quite a remarkable public statement. And that's been communicated privately just as much. I've been saying for a long time, if Israel does decide to use an air strike against Iran, there's going to be a lot of Arab radar off that night. Oh, Mohammed, you didn't turn the radar on? (Laughter.) You know, I can guarantee you that.

That said, based on absolutely no information whatsoever – and I think this is the plot of David's last book or will be the plot of his next book – (laughter) – if I were to bet anything, it would be you will pick up the paper one morning and read about a terrible fire in the Natanz nuclear reactor. And people will all look up and say, was it lightning, was it – you know. (Laughter.)

Because the problem with an external air strike is multifold. First of all, you will get a retaliation. And for Israel, it could be quite substantial. And second of all, you actually strengthen the regime. The beauty of an internal explosion is that it makes the regime look weak and it's impossible to retaliate – who did that? It was a fire. It was a bad – bad wiring.

And so I have a feeling that given the events inside Iran today, there are a lot of people for sale and that there are a lot of people who do not like this regime. And based on absolutely no information, I have to believe that David's book will be about the Mossad, MI6, the CIA all working independently and collectively to turn Iranian nuclear physicists into putting in some really bad wiring and you will read one day of a very bad fire there. That's where I'd put my money.

MR. IGNATIUS: Well, that was my last book. (Laughter.) It makes a great gift. (Laughter.)

MR. FRIEDMAN: I was teeing you up there.

MR. IGNATIUS: (Inaudible, cross talk) – coming up. The book was called, "The Increment." (Laughter.) And the book speculates – I want to underline "speculates" – about the way in which a clandestine sabotage program that seeks to intervene in the Iranian supply chain could introduce problems for the Iranian nuclear program that would delay the progress that they expected to make and would result in a much slower pace of enrichment of nuclear materials and other problems. And that in fact is what we're saying.

I just would note that if you look carefully at IAEA reports coming out of Iran, what's striking is that they keep running these centrifuges, although fewer and fewer of them seem to work. And their output of enriched material is steady even as they claim they're adding more capability, they're not getting any more output. Why is that? What's the problem here? Are they having technical problems with the equipment that they imported and have been using? You know, what could have happened here? So this is an area we can speculate about.

What Tom is introducing is another level of this discussion. If we were talking in government, we'd say that we want to move to having a lethal program because you can't have a fire in Natanz without the risk of people getting killed. And you know, with nuclear materials, there are all sorts of collateral dangers. And I think that's a complicated line to cross; it certainly would be complicated for our government. And it's one of those things that, you know, not knowing any – probably best to leave it there.

The only thing I want to add to this is that a year ago, Iran looked like it was on a roll. Iran looked like this unstoppable force in the Middle East. Everywhere that Tom and Steve and I travel, you know, you'd find the Iranians gaining strength, funding groups. You know, they were waging a kind of across-the-board covert action program from Iraq to Lebanon to Egypt with remarkable success. It was the most really striking instance of covert action that I've seen in that part of the world.

I think that after their election and the way in which the regime has been exposed as having a very weak base. Iran used to be proud of its democracy, proud that morally it was different from Saudi Arabia and Egypt and all these other places that essentially have authoritarian regimes. They can't say that anymore. And that's a big change. And I think it is something, you know, as we think about the future of that part of the world, why, I agree with Steve that the Iranians are tough and smart and hard to reach, they are so much weaker than they were in terms of the fundamentals a year ago in my judgment.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Let me just ask you all – and quickly because I want to talk about Afghanistan –

MR. IGNATIUS (?): Not a requirement. (Laughter.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: What if the Israelis come to this administration, to the national security adviser and say, we've taken all we can take on Iran. We're going to go for it. We're not going to do what Tom Friedman said. We're going to bomb 'em. What does our government say to that?

MR. FRIEDMAN: I don't know, Bob. I think it's a real dilemma. If you take the little things that have been said by different officials over the year – the past year, clearly we've got our own planning going on for how we would do this if it came to that. But I think it would be a – just a huge, huge dilemma.

Because I'm not sure the Israelis – you're talking about multiple targets, which means multiple sorties almost certainly over multiple days – because if you do this, you cannot miss. Okay? So if you're going to shoot, you better shoot to kill because you're not going to get a second chance and you're going to have to absorb a huge retaliation.

I'm still not convinced the Israelis can do this on their own without us. And I'm not sure they have the bunker-busting bombs to do it. It is ironic, though, that the head of Israeli military intelligence is the man who piloted the plane, who put the bomb through the roof of the Iraqi nuclear reactor. And he knows a lot about this. And I won't speak for him, but I think there are a lot of people who are very sober about how difficult this would be.

MR. COLL: Well, I think it's important to be clear about what Iranian capacity is now because it is distinct from having a single reactor as in Syria or in Iraq. And it also goes to this question of, what is your strategy over time? I agree that a clandestine approach including one that has psychological aspects of the appearance of a clandestine approach is superior political to overt bombing.

But in either case, let's remember, we know a lot about Iranian capability. They got a full package of blueprints and technology almost 20 years ago from the Pakistanis. They're on their second generation of centrifuge technology. They have multiple generations of engineers that have worked on this.

It's tricky, hard, really difficult. Even if you've got great electricity and beautiful, clean environments, it's hard, so they struggle with it and it may be that we're helping them struggle with it as well. But there is an enormous breadth of infrastructure on the weaponization side, the military side. They have for – almost everyone is certain – clear Chinese blueprints for a pretty simple bomb to make.

So it's not obvious that even the best targeting lists buys you more than a few years. And it's absolutely the case – I've not heard anyone argue otherwise – that you need a lot of time over target. You'd really need 14 days, 21 days, to really feel like you'd taken your best shot at buying five years or something along those lines.

MR. IGNATIUS: I think I agree with Steve's analysis. You asked, what should the United States say to Israel as Israel sees the Iranians continuing with this program? Let's say, a few months from now, if serious U.N. sanctions are not enacted, what would you say to the Israelis?

And I think the first thing you'd say is, don't start something you can't finish. Don't start something in the expectation that we'll have to come in and get the job done. And I am not convinced, from what I know, that the Israelis have the capability to take this program out in a way that would decisively alter the balance.

So in initiating a strike, I think they'd be hoping that we would come in. And you know, I've heard people from Arab governments in the region say, if the Israelis do strike, we hope the

United States will destroy the power of the Revolutionary Guard regime that has essentially ceased power in Tehran.

I think what we are saying to the Israelis is that it is not in our interest to the time when we're still involved in two wars to get into a third and we are telling you that any action of this sort on your part is contrary to American interests and we, you know, we tell you as your crucial ally, do not act against our interests. And I think that argument was made emphatically pretty much in those terms during the final year of the Bush administration. I think it's been reiterated by officials of the Obama administration.

And it's – as I understand it – it is basically on those terms. It is contrary to our interests. You have to decide what your interests are, but we're telling you, it is contrary to our interests for you to do this now. And my sense, for what it's worth – I'm curious if Tom and Steve agree with this – is that basically the Israelis are not likely to take action of this sort, certainly this year. I just don't see it – don't see it happening.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Can I just say one quick thing? I think the people who are most sober about this in Israel are the military in my sense.

MR. SCHIEFFER: All right, let's shift over to your territory, Steve, Afghanistan. This is now President Obama's war. I think a lot of people would say that now. He's sent all these troops over there. Did he do the right thing? How's it going? And where do you see this going? And bring in Pakistan along with it.

MR. COLL: Well, I think he did the right thing myself. And I think it's early days in the three big lines of operation that this campaign contemplates. There are – I think right now, sort of, more optics than substance to measure. But the plan is in motion and it's clear where it's going. And I think there is one area where the ball has moved a little bit further than in two others.

So the three critical risks – lines of investment and operation that have to interact with each other – are to build Afghan security forces, to change the equation on the ground sufficiently to protect an adequate Afghan state. So I use that very carefully – not to suggest that Afghanistan is going to be remade or the experience of all Afghan nationals of their government is going to change profoundly. But there has to be a reversal of the Taliban's challenge to even a weak state. So that's the counterinsurgency piece.

And then the third and most critical one is to influence Pakistan's decision-making about its own interests in the war and to convert Pakistani support fort he Taliban from a covert campaign to support a violent proxy militia to a political strategy that seeks to pursue Pakistan's interests by other means than Taliban violence. And by creating that conversion, buy enough space for the Afghan security forces to be built up to a sustainable force in the next, sort of three to four or five years.

Now, of those three lines of operation, the Afghan security force project has been under-resourced for years. Every time the United States government recommits to it, it still seems to be

slow to get off the launch pad. There are sources of success in the Army. The police are still a chronic problem. It's early days. But everyone that I speak to involved in the project recognizes that it's an uncertain project and may not work.

You are asking the Afghan security forces to play, to some extent, a role they've never played in Afghan national life. On the other hand, there are lots of sources, in Afghan history, to support the view that Afghanistan can have a successful army – a multi-ethnic army that performs the function the United States contemplates it doing. But anyway, big, risky project.

On the counterinsurgency side, barely begun. Marja is just a kind of priming-the-pump operation. The big campaign is going to be in Kandahar. What's interesting about that is, they're not only going to have to push the Taliban out of all the space that the Taliban owns in Kandahar province and out toward the Pakistani border; they're also going to have to clean up the Afghan government, without quite saying that, that's what they're doing. So this is a counterinsurgency operation that is aimed both at the enemy and at the ally, in some respects.

But the area where I actually think things are shaking around and changing and interesting things are happening are in the strategy negotiations with Pakistan. And it's a very complicated subject that I won't try to break down here because I'd go on too long, but I would say that there is more honest discussion, there is a more realistic discussion. There is a fuller exchange of views about each side's actual interests, as opposed to their arguments to each other, than I've seen, in tracking this over a long period of time.

It's not obvious to me what the Pakistan government, particularly the army, is going to decide about how to play its hand, here. I think they are still arguing with themselves about that. And I'm not sure that we are as far along in our own efforts to push them – to create the perfect blend of incentives and disincentives to get them to convert their covert, violent war to politics. But I have to say that it's a much more adult exchange and a fuller conversation than our government's managed to have – or theirs, for that matter – certainly since 9/11.

MR. SCHIEFFER: But this is going to take a long, long time?

MR. COLL: Well, you know, the Pakistanis have a proposition to them, which is, if you want to protect your interests in Afghanistan, and if you agree that a Taliban government – a revolutionary government that is engaged in the pursuit of revolutionary violence against your own state is not the outcome you're seeking, since it really seems like an irrational goal to pursue, then you have an alternative course, which is – and now is the time – to achieve, by political means, what you have sought to achieve by covert war.

And we are offering you the pathway to get yourself to the table and to define your interests in a post-American Afghanistan, and to define, in specific terms, how you want to lever your position to secure your existence against India, your strength against India, to manage your portfolio with India. And if you don't seize the moment now to convert your long, self-defeating policies of proxy violence to political tracking with our support and our partnership – you're never going to get a better price than we're offering right now.

Because, you know, we want out of here. (Chuckles.) We recognize that you are offering partnership to help us get out in a way that leaves a stable, independent, viable Afghan state behind, but this deal is not available, you know, in 2014. And there is an even subtler aspect of this. If we succeed in building the Afghan security forces right on their border, or if we fail, and they don't seize this moment to negotiate for their interests, they lose.

They end up with either a muscular, independent Afghan army sitting right on top of their border that isn't really aligned with their idea of what Afghanistan should be, or the security forces crack up and they get the civil war that will create certain instability in Pakistan for the next 10 or 15 years.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Tom, do you want to add to that?

MR. FRIEDMAN: You know, Steve's forgotten more about Afghanistan and Pakistan than I know, so – I had the pleasure of being on the Pulitzer board when we gave "Ghost Wars" a Pulitzer. So I really defer to him. You know, I was a dove on Afghanistan, to say I really did not want to go in farther. I expended enormous amount of intellectual capital and, I guess, journalistic capital supporting the Iraq War, which I still support and still hope will come out well.

So all I know is, you know, the whole thing – my own view was, change Iraq; you really change the Arab world. You change a great Arab capital. I felt you got less resonance out of Afghanistan. I understand why the president did what he did. I really wish them well. I'll do anything – I'll write anything that will support it. But I really – I'm still trying to baby sit this other one, right now, called Iraq, and I'm just going to leave it at that, you know. (Laughter.) I'm still sitting on that egg. (Laughter.)

MR. IGNATIUS: That egg is hatching. What it looks like – (laughter).

MR. FRIEDMAN: We don't know what the baby looks like, though.

MR. IGNATIUS: Like Steve, disagreeing some with Tom, I thought that the president's decision was basically correct. I think what the president was deciding was that the only exit ramp from Afghanistan is one that involves consolidating the situation on the ground and giving the Afghan government the best chance possible to survive and govern, with institutions that start off weak – a weak army, weak police – but get stronger and hopefully, make it.

And I think that's right. I think the idea that you can just leave places that are a mess and say, ah, this didn't work out; so long – that's just wrong. And I think that what happened in Iraq taught us that – that there is a difference between a really bad outcome and an outcome that just sort of bad, you know, or just okay, which is kind of what we have now. I mean, no one would describe today's Iraq as a country in great shape. It's still so fragile you can't be certain.

But there's a big difference between the way it is now and the way it was in 2006, when the political pressure in the United States to bail out was enormous. And so I think we all ought to have learned something from that. There's a difference between 2006 Iraq and 2009-2010.

And I hope that will be true in Afghanistan. I don't think that, by July 2011, when the president says he will begin to withdraw troops, that we're going to see a fully realized project – a country that's stable, an army that's strong.

But you know, there are an awful lot of smart people involved in this. You know, I'm sure, like Steve and Tom, whenever I travel overseas to these war zones, the thing I'm most struck by is the quality of the U.S. military. I mean, the people in the military have learned so much – and I don't just mean about fighting, but about working in other cultures, about dealing with different kinds of people, about solving – these people on their second, third, fourth tours really are skillful.

So you have to say that they – they're working hard; they're really smart; and you hope they'll succeed. Pakistan – I agree with Steve. The difference that I've seen in the last year – I mean, in April, when I was there for the first time last year, I really thought the country was coming apart. The Taliban was breaking out of the Swat Valley into Buner, the neighboring district, moving toward Islamabad. The country seemed incapable of dealing with the crisis – the existential crisis – that the Taliban seemed, to me, to pose.

And they got it together in the next couple months. They pulled together the military, decided it was going to get serious and really fight these guys in the Swat Valley. And they were successful. And militaries like to win. They like to be popular. And the Pakistani army found, to its pleasure, that people really liked what it did. And they were encouraged by that. And they went into South Waziristan. That was a more ambiguous operation because they left so many people untouched. But again, they felt good about what they were doing.

They're getting pounded. I mean, the number of military and intelligence officers who have been targeted in these Taliban bombings – you know, it is really dangerous to be a Pakistan military or ISI officer now. And that makes people mad. And I think they're getting more serious. So I think Steve's basic point is right, that the key thing that's happened, strategically, is this change in Pakistan.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Let's just go around quickly and touch on Iraq. How would you evaluate Iraq right now, Steve, and what's happening there? Is this going to be all right? I mean, are we getting ready to leave?

MR. COLL: Well, you know, I think that David's characterization is – I'll sign up for that. I think if you look at the fault lines, the fundamental fault lines that were present in the worst of the civil war – 2006-2007 – some things are better and some things haven't changed. So the status of the Kurds and the negotiation over their place in Iraq strikes many of the people who come and go from that negotiation, over a long period of time, as sort of, fundamentally still structural.

And the question that was at issue in this election, which is whether or not a new, non-sectarian nationalism could emerge from democratic politics, at least pulling Sunni and Shia together to negotiate peacefully with Kurdish claims, which would be a sustainable path, I'm watching the results and trying to figure out whether that's actually going to happen or not.

You know, you take heart from the aspiration and then you're sobered by the record of performance of these governments after these votes. And you know, there is, in the end, probably a limit to how much mediocrity these kind of seismic problems can withstand from the leaders who are now, sort of, called upon to live up to the promise that many of them campaigned on.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Tom, what would you say at this point in our history, is the biggest threat out there against the United States right now?

MR. FRIEDMAN: I think the biggest threat we face is a really slow, but steady erosion of our economic strength and innovative power in this country. There's a lot of bad things in the world that happen without the United States of America. There are not a lot of good things that happen, at scale, in the world without the United States of America, whether it's the recovery or Europe, the stabilization of Asia, stabilization of Central Asia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan that Steve and David have referred to.

And so if you want to know why I haven't written a column until this week about the Arab-Israeli conflict, if you want to know why I really wasn't throwing myself into Afghanistan, it wasn't because I hadn't studied it or didn't understand the arguments that Dave and Steve have made. I respect them and I really hope they're right. It's that my real focus right now is nation-building at home. I really think my country has lost its groove. I think that we have a political system that is in peril, that cannot produce optimal solutions.

And if you – as I tell my European friends – if you did not like a world with too much American power, trust me, you are really not going to like a world with too little American power. And I think we are really in peril of that, and I think it is the biggest domestic and foreign policy issue for the United States of America.

MR. SCHIEFFER: How about the relationship with China?

MR. IGNATIUS: Well, I think we all recognize that the big issue for the rest of my life, our lives, is going to be the rise of this very powerful China, and how the United States and its power fits with China. I am not one of those people who think that we are fated to collide – that there's an inevitable conflict between the two. The Chinese clearly made a decision, on their way up, that they were going to kind of slipstream us.

You know, it's like in stock car racing. There's this, you know, big, fast car in the lead and then another car slips in behind and doesn't have to hit the pedal as hard. And that's what the Chinese have been doing. They've been following in our wake, accommodating to our interests, accepting the reality of our power. I don't think they're going to challenge that, in a military or strategic sense, anytime soon. So the notion that we have to have all sorts of new weapons systems to deal with the Chinese threat is a mistake.

I think that the Chinese system is somewhat more fragile than, I think, Tom does. I think the problems in the Chinese economy, the very opacity of the Chinese systems, the fact that it's

so hard, really, to understand what the numbers mean – you know, what's the level of credit and the potential problems of debt? What's the nature of the overheating? What is the bubble in China? I think those are real problems. The reason I think they're real is because the Chinese leadership keeps referring to them, and about its own worries about them. And they don't say that unless they're actually worried. But the Prime Minister Wen has been very clear about that in the last couple of weeks.

I'm going to disagree with Tom a little bit on one point, which is that in the year, year-and-a-half since the financial disaster – you know, we had an absolute panic in global financial markets, complete breakdown of trust. Nobody knew what anybody else had or was doing and, you know, you had markets just about to lock up. And I've been struck recently, to be honest, by the resilience of the American system. I mean, this is still an American-led global financial system.

And you know, trust, liquidity, all the things that make global commerce, are coming back into the system. And to me, that's a sign of the strength of parts of our system. You know, I think the global economy is going to come back pretty strong. What worries me is our political – (inaudible, background noise). We really have a breakdown. We cannot make decisions about issues that matter to the country. You know, President Bush had a good idea for dealing with immigration – you know, very sensible policy. He couldn't get anywhere with it.

President Obama has been struggling with an issue which we all know is a fundamental issue for the country, which is, how are we going to deliver health-care? How are we going to make it work? And he can't – you know, I mean, it's just so painful to watch. And that dysfunction of our political system, I think, is a huge problem. I think President Obama understands it, is trying to deal with it, and we all see he's not getting very far.

MR. FRIEDMAN: Can I just say once – because I've got to run –

(Cross talk.)

MR. FRIEDMAN: Because the reason I've got to leave is actually a really good thing. I get to be the speaker at the Intel science awards tonight, okay, for all the next-generation American scientists. And if there's one reason for hope, it's there. So I'm going to slip out and let you guys finish, if that's okay.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Steve, do you want, just, some closing remarks?

MR. COLL: I'll just say one thing about China. Well, I don't know how to penetrate the opacity of China. And I read David very carefully on this and think he's made some very careful observations about Chinese leadership's eyesight on their own economy. But the observation that I hold in my mind – and we're all influenced by our experience – and mine is as an India person.

So India has a huge, internal-demand-led economy that has already sorted out many of the pressures of politics and pluralism that a rapidly changing society driven by economic growth

and middle-class formation has to cope with. China, on the other hand, hasn't sorted out the legacy of the Cultural Revolution or any of the challenges of pluralism that are going to be created by rapid social change caused by middle-class formation and sustained economic growth.

So if you look at big, emerging societies and economies, especially those that adhere to some version of free market rules, I can't think of one that hasn't had a bust come up, at one point or another. I mean, it's just the way we innovate. It's the way these societies – and so all I think about when I think about China is, they have not actually been tested yet. If you bring the global financial crisis crashing down on India, they know how – they've already built resilient systems, politically and socially, to deal with that.

They have challenges of inequality coming, and other pressures on their society. But I just wonder, once you move past this march that China has enjoyed, what stresses China has not yet tested in its own social and political fabric. And I would be very interested – I think that's coming, over the next 20 years, one way or another.

MR. FRIEDMAN: To say one thing, I think that's all true. And China's got bubbles and all of these things. But I think the adaptability and resilience of that system may be far more than we realize. I make no predictions. But one thing that did strike me, being in Hong Kong in January, is that, what if – when you look at the infrastructure that China's put in place and the education of, now, 28 million students in the university system. You put that infrastructure with that education, and what if – I don't know – but what if we haven't seen anything yet?

MR. SCHIEFFER: I think on that note, thank you all very much, from CSIS and TCU. (Laughter, applause.)

(END)