Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Global Security Forum 2012

Turkey-Iran-Russia: Dynamics Old and New

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Speakers:
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Former National Security Adviser;

Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft,
Former National Security Adviser

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JON ALTERMAN: Good morning. I'm Jon Alterman. I'm the Brzezinski chair in global security and geostrategy here at CSIS. I also direct the Middle East program.

It is a great pleasure to welcome you all here. I want to thank Finmeccanica for making today possible. I want to remind you to please silence your cell phones. I want to remind you we will be live-tweeting from @CSIS_org. We're using #GSF2012. That must be meaningful to somebody. (Laughter.) I'm not sure exactly who.

MR. : Not to me.

MR. ALTERMAN: Following the panel, we'll take questions from the audience. Please wait for a microphone, identify yourself, and please be sure to ask your question in the form of a question, which is not to make a statement and then say to our distinguished speakers, what do you think of my statement? (Laughter.)

Lunch will be served during third session, starting at 12:30.

This panel on Turkey, Russia and Iran arises out of a project we're doing at CSIS led by Steve Flanagan to look at this part of the world that has been in many ways interrelated in ways that don't necessarily involve us. You have three remnants of empires who have been interacting for millennia with each other, sometimes as rivals, sometimes as partners, and yet it's not really at the center of what we think about.

And we thought it would be good, as Turkey's role changes, as Russia's role changes, as the world continues to try to think of what to do with Iran and how to deal with Iran, that this would be a good venue. Two people who are I think unparalleled in their insight, both into this part of the world and also the questions of geostrategy -- General Brent Scowcroft, twice national security adviser in the Ford and Bush administrations; Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security adviser in the Carter administration. I think to a Washington audience they need absolutely no introduction.

There is a tremendous amount of wisdom on this panel. My children will hasten to tell you that I add to that wisdom not one bit. (Laughter.)

So let me go right to asking you, General Scowcroft, in the last 10 years, Turkey's role in the world has changed dramatically. In your view, what are the most important ways that Turkey's role and Turkey's policy has changed in the last 10 years, and what are the constants in the way Turkey looks at its role in the world?

LIEUTENANT GENERAL BRENT SCOWCROFT: I think the chief change has been that Turkey is no longer facing 90 percent to the west. It has turned east or broadened its scope to the east.

Right after the end of World War II, remember our reengagement in the Cold War really began in Turkey and Greece, with aid to Turkey and Greece. And Turkey became a pillar of

NATO and a very close, in the military sense, ally of the United States. And they were one of the best members of NATO. They helped us in South Korea in the Korean War. They sent -- Turkey sent troops there.

We had a very good relationship with them. It was a surface relationship with them. They were -- they were good allies and we had this kind of comfortable relationship.

Now Turkey, as I say, is reaching out to the East, the South, in all directions, and they are -- their foreign policy expression is no enemies anywhere around. So it's a very imaginative but very different relationship. And I think we need to adjust to that and I think while Turkey is not the comfortable friend that it was before, its role is even more important than it was before. And I think the relationship between -- that has developed between President Obama and Prime Minister Erdogan is really very healthy.

MR. ALTERMAN: Dr. Brzezinski, not a comfortable friend anymore -- how do we accommodate ourselves to a Turkey that is doing more and more things that make some of our policies more difficult? And I'm thinking particularly about the growing trade relationship between Turkey and Iran at a time when the U.S. is trying to cut Iran off from economic support around the world.

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI: First of all, let me say that Turkey is an independent country, right? So it has a right to whatever kind of relationship it wishes to have with any of its neighbors. And if we want Turkey to follow the path that we favor, we have to be sensitive also to its interests. Reciprocity, even if not totally balanced, is the name of the game in international politics.

Let me go a little further. I agree with everything that Brent said, but I would add the following to it: Turkey's greater scope of reach today is a reflection of its internal vitality, the relative success -- continuing success of the Ataturk model that they have now been pursuing for 90 years, and in the process transforming Turkey much more successfully than the comparable process of change immediately to the north of Turkey -- namely in Russia -- because the transformation of Russia began under Lenin, in the 1920s. The transformation of Turkey began under Ataturk in the 1920s. And today Turkey is a more democratic and more stable a democratic country than anything that exists today in Russia, and with much less bloodshed.

And their modernization has been far more comprehensive. The change in the alphabet, in the style of clothing, in the mannerisms and education of the country -- modeled very much, incidentally, on early 20th century Germany, and very deliberately so.

So Turkey is, in that sense, a successful case of modernization and progressive democratization, which still has some shortcomings.

Its foreign policy in recent years is a byproduct of this success, but also something else that I would like to add to what Brent said -- namely, disappointment. The Turks took very seriously the European decision to invite Turkey to join the EU, and they have been trying to meet the very tough standards for EU membership, but they have been trying to meet them. In

the meantime they have learned from at least two principal European countries that maybe they're not welcome in Europe. That's been a real shock to the Turks. And in that sense, that sense of rebuff has conditioned some of the Turkish idiosyncrasies that we see on the world scene.

Secondly, as you know, the Turks were not enamored of our decision to go into Iraq militarily and unilaterally in 2003. They weren't enamored of it and they weren't pleased to have their arms twisted in order to get them to join us. That, too, has affected their outlook.

So they are a little bit, I would say, inclined to be more assertive in terms of their independence. But fundamentally, if one looks at the geopolitical map of Eurasia -- Turkey is a pivot state. It's critical in terms of the security of Europe, insofar as the turmoil in the Middle East is concerned. It's a source of some opportunity for the new "Stans" in terms of their becoming more part of the world and less dependent on Russia. And then on top of it, Turkey has pursued a relatively independent policy towards Russia in which they have reached an accommodation.

So all of that gives Turkey special prominence. All of that -- and I'll stop right here because probably we'll go into some other aspects of this very soon. All I'll say additionally is, all of that could be very badly threatened if things in Syria go badly and if things with Iran go badly, and worst of all, if things go badly both in Syria and in Iran, thereby linking these problems into an escalating dynamic. And that would be a major threat to the region -- a very, very significant threat to Turkey itself.

MR. ALTERMAN: Thank you.

I was in Ankara a couple of weeks ago and a former army colonel came up to me quietly and said Turkish policy in Syria has been a disaster.

GEN. SCOWCROFT: A what?

MR. ALTERMAN: A disaster. That Turkey has been much too aggressive confronting Bashar al-Assad. How do you assess the way Turkey has looked at the problem in Syria and tried to position itself, both in the neighborhood and more broadly in the world?

GEN. SCOWCROFT: That's a very interesting examination because I think it tells you a lot about Prime Minister Erdogan, because five years ago Turkey and Syria were very close. Their trade across the border was booming. They were very, very close together.

Erdogan, I believe, has now decided that Assad is a menace and needs to go, and Erdogan is now on a -- sort of a democracy kick. I say sort of because it -- you see the results; you don't hear the discussion that much. But I think that Turkey has decided that the internal situation in Syria is serious enough that Assad can't deal with it and needs to go. And so he has turned from a -- not an ally but very -- fairly close to Assad to probably his worst enemy now.

MR. ALTERMAN: Do you think that was the right -- the right way to orient Turkey and have -- should Turkey have been more circumspect, in your mind, than they've been?

MR. BRZEZINSKI: You know, I don't feel I can really fault the Turks. First of all, I'm sure they know much more about this problem than I do, and I'm pretty sure -- absolutely sure -- that they know much more about it than the U.S. does. (Laughter.) So I kind of defer to the Turks and secondly to the Saudis insofar as Syria is concerned.

I think we have to drop the practice of announcing publicly when things are going badly in some country that its leader must go, with an emphasis on the word must, because these kind of categorical announcements from on high, which aren't then followed by any action, don't produce anything except more tension and conflict. It's much better to have some sort of notion of what one is going to do before one talks.

And insofar as Syria is concerned, my view from the very beginning was that this is not like Iraq. Assad is not like Gadhafi, and the distribution of forces within the conflicted country is very different in Iraq -- in Libya, I'm sorry. In Libya. I was talking about Libya. In Libya you had significant opposition to Gadhafi from the very beginning and territorially based in half of the country, which, so to speak, politically seceded.

If you look at the map of the conflict in Syria, it's sporadic. It's here; it's there; it's in this town; it's in that town; it's in this region. But it's not clearly divided or enduring. Basically the country is in a kind of occasional anarchy in some parts of the country, but there are no clear lines.

And our ability to deal with it from this area, from here, is relatively limited. So I have been of the view that we should back whatever the Turks and the Saudis decide, period. Whatever.

MR. ALTERMAN: What about the Russians?

MR. BRZEZINSKI: If they decide they want to go in, we'll back it, as we did the British and the French in Libya. If they decide they want to play it cool, we should back them. If they want to go to the U.N., we should back them.

What about the Russians? Well, the Turks are certainly sensitive to Russian concerns. And we know what the Russian position is. It's much more reticent. It's much less inclined to write off Assad from the day one.

The problem is in fact that while Assad has now become a brutal dictator, there is no viable alternative to him, and he seems to have the elements of power still under his control. So unless Turkey is prepared to mobilize its armed forces and send them into Syria -- and I don't count on the Saudis doing anything like that; they can provide the money -- who else is going to do it, and how?

So I think, frankly, we just have to let this problem work itself out with the Turks and the Saudis and the Arabs nearby basically taking the initiative, not freezing out the Russians or the Chinese with condemnations to the effect that their conduct is disgraceful, disgusting and so forth, which was said publicly by senior U.S. officials, but see if we can create some sort of a consensus that back the Turks and the Saudis in trying to resolve this problem.

MR. ALTERMAN: General, a number of people have talked about the importance of using Syria as a way to isolate Iran, to cut off Iran's access to a frontline state against Israel. You cut off Iran's access to the Mediterranean. Do you see this as a principal way to isolate Iran, and if so, what are the policy proscriptions that follow from that?

GEN. SCOWCROFT: Well, I don't -- I don't see that as a way to isolate Iran. I see that as a way to prevent Iran through Hezbollah and Hamas in interfering in the Palestinian issue. So I don't see action in Syria especially as an attempt to deal with the Iranian question.

And I agree with Zbig. You know, there are some problems that don't have obvious solutions. Syria is one of the most complicated countries in the region in terms of ethnic, religious, cultural, traditional splits. It's badly fractured, and that's why you have -- it's not one center. It's not like the tribal system in Libya. But -- and we can't treat it that way.

And, you know, in the geopolitical sense, to bring the Russians in again, the Russians and the Chinese abstained on the U.N. resolution on Libya, and the U.N. resolution said the use of force is authorized to protect civilians. We used the U.N. authorization to overthrow Gadhafi.

And so to condemn the Russians and the Chinese for vetoing a similar resolution on Syria is -- well, I found it astonishing. Because what they were saying is -- you know, you fooled us once; you're not going to fool us again. You're out for regime change in the region. Well, regime change just ipso facto is anathema to the Chinese. And then the Russians -- for the Russians it is as well, especially since Syria is their last, shall we say client-state. Thirty years ago the U.S. and Russia were struggling for leadership in the Middle East. The last stronghold of that was in Russia.

So that's more what the issue is, and I think if the regime changed in Syria -- well, I don't even know what regime would follow. If Assad left tomorrow, you would not have a peaceful Syria. There is no obvious threat. And as Zbig says, the centers of power in Syria are still largely intact -- that is, the military structure is run by Assad and the Alawites, even though the bulk of the ordinary soldiers are probably Sunni, not Shia. The business community is hurting, has not fundamentally deserted. So there isn't anything there to get hold of.

MR. BRZEZINSKI: You know -- let me just add to this. We have to think of this problem of Syria exactly the way Brent looked at it, in this larger setting. And suppose we were to push harder. Suppose we start really seriously arming the scattered opposition. It's not going to prevail, certainly not in the short run, but the level of violence will certainly intensify and the tension in the region will grow.

Suppose in this context a conflict starts with Iran. Iran gets bombed by the Israelis. The Iranians retaliate against us, of course, because they'll view us as having inspired it. We'll have to do something about it. So we get in the conflict also with the Iranians in this setting. So we are, so to speak, supporting an escalation of violence in Syria, and now we're retaliating against Iran.

What do the Iranians do? Well, the easiest thing they can do right now to hurt us is not only to make like more miserable for us in Western Afghanistan, where we are planning to withdraw steadily and peacefully over the next year, but they can destabilize Iraq very quickly by inflaming the Shi'ite-Sunni connection, thereby linking that violence with the violence in Syria. And all of a sudden we have violence that spans from Pakistan all the way to the Mediterranean if we are not thoughtful and intelligent and really strategize before we issue sort of categorical commands to other countries about how they are to run their affairs.

Now, what happens in that context with the Russians? First of all, it's very close to them. Secondly, if there is a conflict that involves Iran all the way to Syria, there is a real risk -- and there is some evidence for it now developing -- of some conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan because the Iranians are beginning to blame Azerbaijan for some of the subversive activities that have been conducted within Iran. And they could lash out at Azerbaijan, which is a very important source of energy for the West.

And then to compound this dilemma, there are some interesting alerts developing regarding the situation in the Caucuses. The Russians in the last few months have upgraded their 58th army, stationed just north of Georgia, to the highest level of technological competence of any one of the Russian armies throughout Russian territory. And the Georgians are becoming very much alarmed that if there is a conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan, the Russians might do something to take care of the Saakashvili regime, which means that the Baku-Ceyhan line, which is of such importance to European energy independence, would be cut.

So we can have, all of a sudden, an escalating conflict that has many different ramifications and could have very serious consequences for us.

So my sort of basic advice to everyone is play it cool and think through what this might mean because this is a very volatile region with potential for explosions in several different spots that could link themselves.

Now, this may sound terribly catastrophic, but the fact of the matter is that is the actual situation. Not to mention, of course, the problematics of Israel and the Palestinians or of Egypt, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

I think we better be aware of the fact that our dominance of the Middle East is rapidly diminishing and our capacity to influence it simply by verbal commands is close to zero, and we better work with others intelligently in how to manage this problem.

MR. ALTERMAN: General, if we're wise enough to avoid a whole arc of crisis scenario but you still have an Israeli strike on Iran this summer, what do you think that means for Turkish

interests, both in the near term and in the sort of two- to five-year timeframe, given that Turkey has relations with both Iran, with Israel and also with us?

GEN. SCOWCROFT: Let me go back to answer that and start with the prime minister again. Prime Minister Erdogan has had a falling out with the Israelis, and I think it principally stemmed from the fact that while he was -- he met with the Israeli leadership shortly before the operation into Gaza, he was not told anything about it. And I think as a result of that and the interception of the ship into Gaza, the relationships have gotten much worse.

And I think that an Israeli strike on Iran would not be taken kindly by the Turks. It would -- as Zbig says, it would produce almost incalculable results for the United States. It would make the region much more difficult for the Turks, who are really trying now to play a diplomatic role in the region. And I think it's a role, however dubious the prospects may be, it's a role that we should welcome because it is fundamentally in our interests.

And I think that the Turkish role, for example, in hosting the talks in -- with the Iranians is a very useful way that Turkey can go. And so I think that a step of this character by Israel would sharply diminish the utility of what Turkey can do and sharply increase the antagonism.

And Erdogan is a very volatile personality. And he has -- you know, he has walked off the stage in a meeting like this, for example, at Davos. So he reacts viscerally to what he sees as injustices or hurts. And so that also we have to keep in mind here.

And you know, frequently -- frequently we have a tendency to think this is so complicated. You know, just -- let's just use a little force; let's just clean this thing out. Well, I think Zbig has painted a good picture of the consequences of just doing that. And complicated and difficult though the situation is, it can be worse, and almost certainly would be should somebody take a turn to strong violence.

MR. ALTERMAN: You both talked about China's interest in maintaining the status quo -- China's involvement in Syria. As we look at the relationship between Turkey, Russia and Iran, does the rise of China affect that relationship, or is it really just outside -- it's an external driver that doesn't affect the intimacies between these three countries? Dr. Brzezinski?

MR. BRZEZINSKI: It probably doesn't affect the intimacies, as you put it, between these three countries, but I think it does affect sort of the general attitude towards this issue. The Chinese I don't think have any particular stake in any particular kind of an outcome in Syria. They have a stake in the region not blowing up. I think that's the fundamental concern.

They are fully aware of the fact that if the region gets ignited, the consequences are unpredictable, they will immediately hurt their own economic interests, and particularly because of their dependence on energy from the Middle East. But it will also hurt stability more generally in Southwest Asia, including the Islamic element that is a concern to them. They do border Afghanistan, after all, and they have problematics in Xinjiang.

A conflict in this region will certainly not help them in coping with the social and economic problems that they confront and which probably on the political level are becoming more difficult to deal with even within China itself as the society becomes more politically conscious.

So I think the Chinese have a generally conservative attitude towards this kind of a problem, but they don't want to be involved in it themselves because they feel they don't have to be.

Now, the Russians don't quite feel that way because the Russians are closer. They could become involved. But they could also see opportunities for themselves if things begin to go up in flames. So the Russian attitude is inherently different, but the Chinese and the Russians by and large share a common attitude here, which is one of let's not push the envelope too far. Let not things get out of hand.

And this is why there is an international potential that the United States I think could intelligently exploit in order to dampen down the problems of Syria and of Iran rather than allow itself to be pushed into a situation in which, let's say, by late September, early October, we will be evidently giving the Iranians the choice of either a humiliating capitulation to new demands and restrictions that would be imposed on them only and not in keeping entirely within the NPT provisions, or economic strangulation, in which case you don't know how the Iranians themselves might behave. They might even lash out. It's not a terribly well-organized or disciplined government. Some units in it are more extreme than others. We could have all sorts of ways in which the conflict begins, not just with an Israeli, necessarily, attack on Iran but even with the Iranians lashing out.

Regarding all of that, the Chinese simply from their kind of semi-aloof position are saying to everyone else, just dampen down the pace. Don't make categorical demands. Don't make extreme threats. Don't issue orders from the Olympic heights which you cannot then enforce. Just cool it. And I don't think that's necessarily an unsound approach to this issue.

GEN. SCOWCROFT: I think Zbig is right. And the Chinese -- we try to get the Chinese to intervene in a lot of places. That's not their way. This is not their world order, and so they only grudgingly reach out.

On -- Iran is a special case. The Chinese attitude has been, we get about 20 percent of our oil from Iran, they're a good commercial customer, that's all we're interested in. But they're beginning to realize that if something happens and there is a conflict -- whether the Israelis strike, we do, something -- there's a conflict in Iran, what does that do to their supply of oil and to the price of oil? And so now they're beginning to realize, I think, that they do have equities that they need to protect there.

But in general they are very much against the use of force, especially just endemically -- the use of force in situations like Syria because they relate everything to themselves -- suppose there is an insurrection in Tibet? Those kinds of things. So they are against intervention in

anybody's affairs. But they cannot avoid in the Middle East their critical dependence on oil and the consequences for China if things go badly there.

MR. ALTERMAN: OK --

MR. BRZEZINSKI: Can I just add something to it? That's a very important point, and I think it bears on something else that's related here. Look at who is, so to speak, in an occasionally public, more often private fashion, pushing for more action: The British and the French. Now, from a historical point of view, isn't that food for thought? What are they perceived -- how are they perceived in the region? As the recent colonial imperial powers. And they're kind of, you know, indicating to us, you know, be tough, do this, do that.

It worked in Libya -- I supported what they did in Libya because I thought that was doable. Here I think it will just produce a big mess. So the Chinese attitude in some respects is more enlightened than the attitude of some of our friends who seem to think that it's going to be a cinch. The Iranian facilities get bombed, the Iranians complain, hardly do anything, and the problem is solved.

MR. ALTERMAN: When you were in government --

MR. BRZEZINSKI: I don't think it's going to be that way.

MR. ALTERMAN: -- the idea that the Chinese would be the status quo power and we'd be the revolutionary power was probably the farthest thing from your mind. But that seems to be -- seems to be the place we're in.

MR. BRZEZINSKI: Yeah.

MR. ALTERMAN: Should we be hoping for a change in government in Iran, in your view? Should we be pushing for a change in government? And you were in government when the Soviet Union disappeared. What does that experience tell you about how we should treat these kinds of changes in countries?

GEN. SCOWCROFT: I think one of the worst policies we have adopted is to solve our problems by regime change. First of all, we don't know how to do it. Secondly, we don't know virtually any country well enough to know what the consequences of regime change would be -- whether it would be better or worse. And it puts a color to a relationship that is very bad.

You know, when we, for example, said the solution in North Korea is regime change, that put the Chinese clear out. Regime change to -- scares them to death in North Korea -- the consequences. And now we're working much more closely together because we've abandoned that.

In Iran, I think one of the things that most -- is most disconcerting to the Iranians is our implicit regime change policy. And it seems to me that if we were to go to Iran and say, look, your regime is what it is; we're not trying to overthrow it. We understand you have security

problems and we're prepared to sit down with you and look at a security structure for the region in which you'll feel comfortable so you don't need to go this route, this nuclear route -- indeed, if you do your security situation will be worse, not better. And give the Iranians a way out other than abject surrender or conflict. And that is not all that clear to them now, and I hope that in these meetings that go -- that that will sort of show the way.

The Iranian government is a very complicated structure. There is the formal government itself, which doesn't have any fundamental power; there are the -- there's the religious structure, the mullahs, who in the constitution do have the ultimate political power; and then there's the revolutionary guard -- not the army, the revolutionary -- I mean, not their formal military strength -- the revolutionary guard, the Al-Quds, who are the enforcers.

Now, these three have a relationship with each other that we don't' fully understand, but playing around with that and deciding who are the good guys or who are the bad guys is, I think, beyond our intelligence capability.

MR. ALTERMAN: It sounds like an Algiers Accord-plus -- is that --

MR. BRZEZINSKI: Like what?

MR. ALTERMAN: Algiers Accord-plus -- that we tell the Iranians we recognize them, we won't intervene, and we actually would help establish a security structure in the region. Is that -- should that be the goal of our policy?

MR. BRZEZINSKI: Well, I think the goal of our policy right now ought to be an arrangement which is in keeping with prevailing international norms and the obligations of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The fact of the matter is that the United States right now is under considerable pressure to demand in the negotiating process things which go far beyond the NPT, which impose far more restrictive and truly humiliating conditions on the Iranians -- more or less to put them in a cage.

I think that policy, if it is pursued by the United States, will have the effect, first of all, not of promoting regime change but regime reinforcement because it unites the people with the government. I mean, the Iranians are proud people, 80 million, with really one of the several impressive histories in terms of statecraft. And they happen to feel strongly that they are entitled to a nuclear program, which most of them, I assume, think is not a weapons program. It may be a weapons program in some respects. It may have even been an actual weapons program several years ago, but right now it's unclear as to what it is. But in terms of the sort of Iranian perception of the issue domestically, it's their right to have a program which stamps them as a modern country and which meets their needs.

So we ought to be negotiating, in my view, on behalf of the international community and not on behalf just of ourselves or of Israel but on behalf of the international community that the Iranians are fulfilling all of the restrictions and obligations of the NPT. And if that is the case, I think we perhaps can have an accommodation that meets our needs and in the long run actually,

in my view, promotes political change in Iran because it reduces the collision that brings the government and the regime together.

But if we press in these negotiations for, in effect, a capitulation by the Iranians -- that is to say that they'll submit to restrictions which no one else is subject to, it's going to fail. And then -- well, we have tried to -- Brent and I have tried to present what some of the consequences might be, and I don't think they are in the American national interest. I don't think they're in the interest of the region. I don't think they're in the interest of major powers involved in this.

MR. ALTERMAN: When it comes to changing the nature of governments, you've talked about how you feel something is germinating in Russia, something political is germinating, that there is a nostalgia in the current Russian government. But your feeling is that Russia in the future is -- as you've written in your recent book, is a country that we should try to bring into the Western alliance.

What is the timeline, in your mind, for change in Russia? What does a different kind of Russia mean, both for the East-West piece of Russian foreign policy but also the North-South piece that gets into the Caucuses and into the Turkey and Iran relationship?

MR. BRZEZINSKI: Right. Well, I do argue in my book that both Russia and Turkey ought to be the countries we seek to engage into a diversified Euro-Atlantic community. I said deliberately "diversified" because it doesn't mean they have to join the EU with all of its obligations but some framework for a Euro-Atlantic community that embraces Russia and Turkey.

And to respond to you directly, first of all, it is my argument that Turkey is meeting the standards of what this community embraces in terms of political values.

Russia, culturally and historically, artistically, religiously, is a part of the West. But there's one aspect of Russian history which is totally missing in terms of its Western connection, and that is political values of constitutionalism, rule of law, supremacy of law over the state. That's missing, but it's beginning to emerge. This is the most interesting aspect of recent developments in Russia.

You have an apex, a political leadership personalized by Putin that is nostalgic for the recent past. He said famously that the greatest calamity of the 20th century was the fragmentation of the Soviet Union -- a century in which we had World War I, World War II, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki and so forth. No, the worst calamity was the dismantling of the Soviet Union, and he wants to recreate it as a Eurasian union, which he's pushing now.

But much more important than that is the fact that within Russia there is now emerging an internationally minded middle class composed of the younger members of the middle class located in the big cities, most of whom have continuous exposure to the West and to the world at large, who travel to the West, who study in the West in many cases, and who are partaking of the notion that they're a civic society -- that is to say, a society entitled to have the same privileges and rights that democracies in the West have.

This is something utterly new in Russia, and it is getting stronger and stronger. And it is accompanied by something which is also unprecedented in Russia -- totally without precedent -- the absence of political fear. The fact that someone now dares to go out on the Red Square and hold up the placard in which they show Putin behind bars to me us almost unthinkable since I dealt with the Soviet Union for most of my mature years. A person doing that 20 years ago, 30 years ago, 40 years ago would be hauled off immediately and, 30 or 40 years ago, shot, probably within a day.

The new civic society that is emerging is politically fearless, and that's a new reality. And therefore I think both Russia and Turkey can gravitate to the West if we are smart. But if we draw these categorical lines and particularly if we look with indifference at something that could erupt into really significant violence and we simply kind of play the game of being basically indifferent to it, I think these possibilities could fade away and we could be plunged into a period of considerable uncertainty on the international scene with essentially unpredictable dynamics at work.

And one thing you know about a war is it's easy to start it; you never know how it will end, how long it will take, and what might be some of the internal manifestations of what then takes place.

MR. ALTERMAN: You have all been very patient with me. We have some microphones. I want to open it up for questions.

Again, if you would identify yourself, to only ask one question because we have a room full of people, and also to ask your question in the form of a question.

Sir, right here in the front? Dan is coming to you.

Q: First --

MR. ALTERMAN: (Inaudible.)

Q: Hello? Oh. I'm James Farwell, Special Operations Command. First, thank you for your remarks.

I wonder if both of you could -- and you all commented a little on this when you spoke at the Atlantic Council in December, but I wonder if you all could each comment on how well you think that the administration -- I'm not looking for a partisan comment but just as an assessment -- how well the administration is doing in fulfilling the types of policies that both of you are advocating here today, and what do you think they should be doing next?

GEN. SCOWCROFT: I don't really know how to get my arms around a question like that -- the kinds of policies we adopt and how the administration is doing.

Let me -- let me -- let me just say that I think the administration is facing a very different world, and I think we see it. We see it in the Arab Spring -- I think the Arab Spring and its consequences in Russia, as Zbig has described very well.

The reaction will be different almost every place it happens, and so I think fundamentally we have to be agile, thoughtful and broadminded. The atmosphere in Washington today is none of those, and that worries me.

I think, for example -- in Russia, I agree completely with Zbig, and we don't always agree on things relative to Russia. But I think Putin is not a dummy. Putin was nostalgic for the Soviet Union. Putin was resentful of the West because he thinks we walked all over Russia at the end of the Cold War when they were weak. But he's not a dummy and I think he sees in the six years where Medvedev was the president that he got a lot of things done that Putin couldn't get done because he has a different atmosphere. He's not nostalgic for the Cold War and so on.

Putin, when he said, well, we're going to shift and now I'm going to be the president again and he's going to be the prime minister -- I think was actually surprised at the reaction inside Russia because he just thinks, you know, that's the way Russia works. Well, it doesn't now. But I don't think he's a dummy, and I think you may see a different Putin and a different Russia, which I think, as Zbig says, is -- I would say over some period of time, and I would say maybe a generation or more -- going to fill in what has been missing in Russia as a European member, and that is rule of law and civic government.

MR. BRZEZINSKI: I would just add this: I think it's unfortunate that we are confronting this very complex crisis, which I have no doubt the president, the secretary of State and secretary of Defense understand well. It's unfortunate that it is compounded by the simultaneous presidential political process. And that affects everything in a very, I think, complicating fashion. That makes a clear-cut response and a highly focused response much more difficult for us to mount. So I think that is a timing problem that really is a negative complication in all of this.

Q: Thank you.

MR. ALTERMAN: Question right up here.

Q: Steve Flanagan from CSIS. Dr. Brzezinski, you alluded to the changing situation in Afghanistan post-American withdrawal and also a little bit to the Caucuses, but I wonder if each of you might touch on how you assess the interests of these three countries, Turkey, Russia and Iran, in central Asia and the Caucuses and contrast their abilities and capacities to realize those, where they might come into conflict and, you know, where we might see further trouble in those regions, particularly given some of the shifts that we see, particularly after the American withdrawal from Afghanistan.

MR. BRZEZINSKI: Russia, Turkey and which was the other one?

Q: And Iran -- the three --

GEN. SCOWCROFT: Would you do that in two minutes?

Q: Yeah. (Laughter.)

MR. BRZEZINSKI: Well, I would put it this way: As long as the situation is non-explosive, the interests are not incompatible entirely. And that is to say, there is a kind of modus vivendi between the Turks and the Russians, and to some extent between the Russians and Iranians and the Turks and the Iranians, regarding trade patterns, existing status quo -- not necessarily liked by all of them. I think the Russians don't like, for example, the fact that Georgia and Azerbaijan are oriented towards us. Turks don't mind it -- it's actually useful to them. And the Iranians are sort of accommodated to that by necessity.

But if the situation deteriorates and becomes explosive, I fear that the antagonistic interests of these states will surface, and this is why very unpleasant things would happen in the Caucuses. They could also happen within the "Stans" in which there are some indications of Islamic extremism getting stronger. And if the fabric of stability in the entire region gets torn apart by unpredictable events becoming dynamic, then I think conflicts between them could become even sharper, further contributing to the negative consequences of an eruption.

This is why the stakes are so large, and this is why I do deplore the kind of limited sloganeering that is taking place at the political level regarding the problems of the region and why I don't sense sufficient serious strategic analysis of the potential for a really significant negative turn of events in here in this region in our political approach, strategic approach to these issues.

GEN. SCOWCROFT: You know, when -- just let me add one thing. One thing we ought to put back in our minds is the historic relationship between Russia and Iran.

During World War II, Russia occupied the northern half of Iran. We used Iran as a major conduit for military assistance to Russia in World War II. After the war, Iran was probably our first crisis with Russia where Iran wanted to -- or, I mean, excuse me, Russia wanted to put a satellite regime in Iran and we said no, absolutely no. And instead the Shah moved in. So there's a lot of history here that we forget about completely.

MR. BRZEZINSKI: Yeah, and actually that point -- that's a good point. We mustn't forget, a huge slice of what would be called Azeri Land -- forget Azerbaijan, which is the name of the state -- but a huge slice of Azeri Land is in Turkey and a very large number -- I'm sorry -- what am I saying -- is in Iran.

GEN. SCOWCROFT: Is in Iran.

MR. BRZEZINSKI: And a very large number of Iranians are Azeris.

GEN. SCOWCROFT: Yes.

MR. BRZEZINSKI: But we're living in the age of nationalism, and nationalism produces state identities that are sometimes in conflict. The potential here of this problem should not be underestimated.

MR. ALTERMAN: Right there.

Q: My name is Nicolette Jordani (sp). I'm a student at Johns Hopkins University SAIS. And I wanted to ask if you can speak a little more about Turkey's strategic stand with Iran, not only from a(n) economic and political standpoint but also vis-à-vis Iran nuclear program.

GEN. SCOWCROFT: I didn't -- I didn't hear --

MR. ALTERMAN: The question had to do with Turkey's position toward the Iranian nuclear program. What do you think Turkey is trying to do as it engages with Iran? How large a piece of its strategy is dealing with the proliferation challenge and what are its goals when it comes to proliferation with Iran?

GEN. SCOWCROFT: I don't really know. Turkey has not pronounced itself on the Iranian nuclear program. I think Turkey and Iran have a sort of a minuet about oil, and Turkey is dependent for energy resources on others.

I think -- you know, here are the two pillars of the region -- or if you include Russia, the three -- for centuries -- the Iranian empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Russian empire. And these sort of relationships go back and are intuitive in people's minds and attitudes in the way they think about these.

I -- my guess would be that the Turks are not so concerned about the Iranian program as we are, but I think one of the consequences if Iran proceeds and develops a nuclear weapons program would almost certainly be that Turkey would follow suit. So that would be my answer to the question.

MR. BRZEZINSKI: I would just add this. We do have some indications of what the Turkish attitude is towards the Iranian nuclear problem because the Turks and the Brazilians came up with a would-be solution to the problem and they negotiated it on the basis initially of not instructions but advice from us as to what they ought to seek. And they came out with a solution, but then we changed our mind on the subject and we decided that wasn't good enough.

It involved essentially a systematic effort to put Iran within the NPT box -- no more, no less.

MR. ALTERMAN: Did I see somebody back there? Yeah, all the way back in the corner. Thank you.

Q: Hi. Thank you. Alex Grigory (sp), Voice of America Russia Service.

Dr. Brzezinski, you mentioned this possibility that new Russian-Georgian war under some circumstances. How serious this threat -- what do you think?

MR. ALTERMAN: I'm sorry -- how serious --

Q: The threat of new Russian-Georgian war.

(Cross talk.)

MR. : Russian-Georgian war.

Q: Thank you.

MR. BRZEZINSKI: Without some sort of conflict erupting in the region, I wouldn't say very high. But if there is a conflict in the region which begins to escalate, then that possibility rises.

MR. ALTERMAN: Yes, sir, in the back?

Q: Thank you. My name is Harv Rishikof. I'm with the chair of the standing committee of the American Bar Association on law and national security.

What is sort of conspicuously absent from the remarks -- as always, very thoughtful -- is, other than the reference by Dr. Brzezinski of the role of the NPT, what do you see as the role of the international organizations -- the UN? I know both of you have spent a great deal of time trying to make those organizations relevant. Are there regional organizations or are they conspicuously not going to play a role as you see in the relationship between this power negotiation and so on, avoiding and managing conflict in the region?

MR. BRZEZINSKI: Well, I would say that it depends a great deal on how powerful are the forces that are colliding in some sort of a conflict. If they are of secondary or tertiary importance, I think regional or international organizations can be quite influential. And I think the best example of that pertains to -- there are several instances in which international or regional organizations have played a pacifying -- constructive, pacifying role in Africa.

The problem that we're discussing today unfortunately involves powers with more significant regional scope of influence or potential destructiveness, and that means in turn that the source of the resolution of these problems can only come from the major powers. And this is why it is so important that we and the others who work with us -- because we cannot solve it by ourselves -- have some sort of a shared strategy for coping with the problems that Brent and I have been discussing today. Because I don't think we can impose a solution and I'm not sure that we even have the right approach towards the problem.

Others -- let's say, like the Chinese -- may have the right solution but from more distance and with less engagement so they can't resolve the problem either. But if we can contrive a process in which the 5+1 in negotiating with Iran and we, talking to the Turks and the Saudis

regarding Syria and engaging the Russians and the Chinese in the background of that, perhaps we can cope.

But unless we do that very systematically with the larger concept in mind, I think the situation may slide out of control, and then secondary participants in the problem will set the pace. Iran gets attacked; not by us, but the consequences are felt by us. The situation in Syria deteriorates and someone overreacts -- that gets out of control, too. And this is why a really serious approach based precisely on the so-called 5+1 has to be pursued, but with a sense of collective responsibility and not only one country's -- perhaps just our own -- interests being uppermost in mind, particularly at a time when our policy is bound to be influenced by the presidential race, which gives them a particular short-term character rather than a strategic perspective.

MR. ALTERMAN: General, do you think we need more international organizations in --

GEN. SCOWCROFT: Well, I don't -- I don't know that we need more but I think we ought to push much harder to make them more viable.

You know, we live in a much more interconnected world now, but the international organizations are not resilient. The U.N. is the best we have but it needs a lot of help. It needs restructuring and it needs the efforts of the United States, and I think there we would get -- we could get Russian support and Chinese support.

The regional organizations -- the African Union, for example -- played a useful role in Darfur and so on, but have -- but our support for them has just sort of gone away. The Arab League and the GCC played a key role in the success of the Libyan operation. Those are things we should build on, to use the regional organizations for the kinds of things that aid and abet what we're trying to do, but they have the expertise and the local feel that we don't have.

So I believe that's a good question and we need much more effort in that direction.

MR. ALTERMAN: Yes, sir?

Q: Stuart Bernstein. My last job was the American ambassador to Denmark.

Turkey -- the largest Muslim country that's secular but has shown some tendencies to move away from that -- do you see that being a concern? And the influence of Egypt -- could Egypt become -- I mean, Turkey's such a good role model in that area. Do you see that changing?

MR. BRZEZINSKI: Well, I'm aware of the shortcomings on the Turkish experiment. There are problems, as you know, with the press. There are political trials involving the military, which may be justified -- I do not know. But there has been a history of military coups, so there is at least some basis for considering the possibility that there is some justification in these procedures. But they all reflect, obviously, certain inadequacies on the democratic political process.

Nonetheless, having said this, I think an overall assessment of Turkish modernization, secularization, democratization over the last hundred years has to be quite high. And the persistence with which the Turks have pursued it is impressive -- really very impressive.

So on the whole, I think Turkish -- the Turkish experiment is auspicious in its promise and it behooves the West to encourage it. And this is why I deplore the reaction of the Europeans to the issue of Turkish participation in the EU. They raised the Turkish hopes and they also reduced them.

But we can be, in a sense, a supplement, a reinforcement for Turkish aspirations if we think in a larger concept of the Euro-Atlantic community that really does embrace them, that embraces Russia eventually as well. And I think that would give the Turks, who want to play a global role but they live in a very dangerous neighborhood, a greater sense of security and participation in something larger than themselves. And I think that is the kind of policy that would in effect I think reinforce a constructive Turkish role in the region.

I think that's the challenge we have. I think the fact that the -- that President Obama and President Erdogan have a good personal relationship is a major asset here and helps a great deal. But I think we are now being tested in this regional context, and a great deal hangs on how we conduct ourselves over the next several months, literally. It's a conflict that could erupt and become very large, but the timeframe which will determine whether the match is being set, whether the fire is being ignited or not, is relatively short-term.

So it's very important to watch carefully what is being done and how we conduct ourselves and how we avoid the danger that we will be, for a variety of domestic reasons, abdicating our global responsibility in the short run with much worse consequences in the long run.

GEN. SCOWCROFT: I think there are questions about the direction Turkey's heading. It is probably slightly less than it was in 10 years ago -- less secular.

But it's ironic because about 10 years ago Turkey undertook a series of deep economic and political reforms, and in response -- significantly to the attempts to get into the European Union, which Zbig discussed before.

The consequences of those is that the central and eastern part of Turkey is now a part of Turkey in a real sense that it wasn't before. Turkey used to be Istanbul primarily -- Western-oriented, secular. Now Turkey is more representative of the whole of Turkey, and it -- and that is a less secular move. You can say that is a natural evolution from the harsh secularism of Ataturk to break the power of the ottomans, or you can say, oh, it's a new Islamist movement.

I don't think we know, but I think as Zbig says, it's up to us to encourage the evolution of Turkey in a way which is natural for them. And the harshness of the Ataturk reforms maybe don't need to continue so long because they've been successful.

Now, it's taken -- as Zbig said, it's taken 90 years for Turkey to evolve from the Ottoman Empire to a modern, secular, democratic state, but they've done it. And I think we should be relaxed about the things we see in Turkey. They're not all perfect, but I imagine the Turks are not all relaxed about what they see in the United States either. (Laughter.)

MR. ALTERMAN: We just have a few more minutes. And just as a sort of closing thought, you both talked about the importance of a more modest U.S. foreign policy -- less demanding, less declaratory, more oriented toward international institutions. Politically -- you talked about the evolution Turkey's been through. Politically, how do you get the United States to go to have politicians support the kinds of policies that the public support, the kinds of policies you've advocated this morning?

MR. BRZEZINSKI: When you say more modest, I wouldn't -- I wouldn't buy that word. I don't think it should be more modest. It should be in some respects more strategic, more visionary, more comprehensive. That is to say, we are living in a world in which turmoil is becoming more pervasive. We are living in a world in which, therefore, global cooperation is more necessary.

In order to have global cooperation you have to have larger units cooperating with each other so that their cooperation begins to spill into the world at large.

The global problems are not going to be solved by mechanical votes of very uneven states. They're going to be solved if the major entities of the world can cooperate. And this is why our policy has to be one in which we create a more stable balance in the Far East, not injecting ourselves into the problems of the Far East -- particularly on the mainland, through wars -- but by trying to balance and manipulate, the way the British did, European politics for a whole century, but without entanglement and promoting Japanese-Chinese reconciliation, mediating the Indian-Chinese rivalry. But not becoming a protagonist.

And last but not least, not demonizing China or trying to structure a stable relationship with it because China and we face an unprecedented challenge -- namely, can two major powers coexist without antagonism, which has been the predominant historical experience. We both realize we will suffer if we get in conflict, but each of us is now tempted to demonize, to pinprick the other. We have to be alert to that.

And in Europe and the other half of Eurasia, my view is the one that I have been sort of propagating -- namely, Turkey and Russia in the larger Eurasian framework in which we work together to resolve the problems of that region but engage also the Asian powers that would be affected by it.

This is why dealing with the problems we face in the near future, we have to be really conscious of the fact that our central priority is to work with others who share an interest in stability and not in drastic resolution of problems which they approach from a narrow national perspective without thinking of the larger consequences of the use of force.

I think the use of force should not be something that is left to do willful decisions of individual states but it should be something that takes place only in concert, particularly with those powers that share an interest in spreading the degree of stability in international affairs and enhancing their own cooperation with each other.

MR. ALTERMAN: General, can it be sold politically?

GEN. SCOWCROFT: Yes. You know, at the end of the Cold War, the first reaction of the United States was one of relief. No more problems; just relax. Let the world go. Then --

MR. ALTERMAN: I almost didn't have a job, you know, because of that. (Laughter.)

GEN. SCOWCROFT: Then came 9/11, and we thought, well, we're the only superpower; we'll remake the world and if you're not with us you're against us. And it was a unilateral rush to do a lot of things, which didn't work out too well.

But I think the United States remains the only country who has the ability to mobilize the world on behalf of the kinds of things that Zbig has just described -- not to direct it, not to run it but to get together the kinds of policies, the kinds of things that people can resonate to around the world. That's a tough role, but no one else can do it. The Europeans eventually may be able to but certainly not now. The Chinese can't do it. The Russians can't do it. We're the only ones that can.

But it will take a farsightedness and a -- it will take the best instincts of the American people rather than the worst ones, which seem to be prominent at the moment.

MR. ALTERMAN: We're ending on an optimistic note. (Laughter.)

I want to thank you all for coming. Thank you to our two participants. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

(END)