

Event Transcript:

Panel One:

New Security Challenges in the Gulf

Featuring:

The Honorable John McLaughlin

The Honorable Christine Wormuth

February 24th, 2020

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Jon Alterman:

Good morning. Welcome to CSIS. I am Jon Alterman, senior vice president, the Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and the director of the Middle East Program. I am really delighted to welcome you to what I think will be a fascinating program on U.S. policy and strategy in the Gulf, after the Soleimani strike.

I want to thank the embassy of the UAE, which has supported today's activity. They've done it in a way which I think is exemplary for the way that governments that want to support a policy discussion Washington should do so, which is they've said, "We're interested in the Gulf. Set up a conference. It's all up to you." And so they

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bear no responsibility for what any of us say, and they bear no responsibility for the people who are speaking today, but I think it is an issue of significant broad interest and we are grateful to them for their support.

As we look at what is happening in the Gulf, it seems to me that there is a broader national debate on whether the U.S. should be digging in or pulling out. Iran is perceived to be a threat,

but there are differences, even within the Trump administration, as to how the United States should deal with that threat. The United States has increasingly been confronting asymmetrical threats in the Gulf, and often responding with conventional tools. That ends up being both expensive, and it also has limited effectiveness. The Soleimani strike on January 3rd has given us a sort of punctuation mark to look at what U.S. strategy is in the Gulf, and what U.S. policy is in the Gulf. Is this a sign of increased commitment? Is it a sign of the United States trying to handle this from afar? Is this the beginning of the end of the U.S. presence in Iraq?

Amidst it all of course, is the question of great power conflict and whether a more energy self-sufficient United States should care about great power competition in the Gulf. China still imports most of its energy from the Gulf, but so do U.S. allies in Asia. So how should we think about that? General Votel will be speaking to us at 11:15 on that topic.

How should we think about U.S. strategy in the Gulf going forward? I'm really delighted that to help kick this off are two people I have tremendous affection, but more importantly, respect for. John McLaughlin to your left is a distinguished practitioner in residence at Johns Hopkins SAIS. Previously, he served as the acting director of central intelligence, as the deputy director of central intelligence, as director of analysis at the CIA, as vice chairman for estimates and acting chairman of the National Intelligence Council. He helped found the Sherman Kent School. He had a career at the CIA that lasted three decades focused mostly on European, Russia and Eurasian issues. What I value is when I'm really trying to figure out "How should we categorize things? What's the useful way to think about it?" There's nobody I've come to rely on more in Washington than John McLaughlin.

To your right is Christine Wormuth, who's the director of the RAND International Security and Defense Policy Center. Prior to joining RAND, she was the under secretary of defense for policy at the U.S. Department of Defense. She served as the deputy under secretary of defense for strategy plans and force development, and was special assistant to the president and senior director for defense at the National Security Council. Before entering the Obama administration, she was my colleague here at CSIS.

These are two terrific people to help us think conceptually. What are we trying to do? What should we be trying to do? And then we'll have a discussion with some really experienced diplomats and experts in the next panel about the policy implications of this. John, why don't you start by helping us frame the issue?

John McLaughlin:

As usual, Jon has set the bar very high for us, asking a series of questions, and we will get to them. But in looking at any region, any event, any particular timeframe, I always think the most important thing to do is to establish a sense of context. What is the larger picture in which this is unfolding? We're going to be looking, as Jon said, also at the aftermath of the killing of Major General Qasem Soleimani.

But in thinking about this, the first question I ask myself is, "What's different in the Gulf today compared to say, five years ago?" And I'm going to say there are at least three things, maybe more, but I'm going to pick out the three that seem most important to me.

First, I think U.S. influence is markedly diminished compared to where we were five years ago. Many things got us to this point, but among them was a kind of erratic policy towards Syria, spanning two administrations, but particularly so in the last couple of years. Also, what I would call a wobbly policy toward the Gulf, which we'll talk about, and finally an

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unbalanced approach toward Israeli–Palestinian issues, or sometimes simply neglect. You package all those things together and add some other things into it, and I think our influence is markedly

less than it was five years ago.

Second, U.S. strategy toward Iran in particular, which is at the heart of this debate, I think has lacked coherence since Trump came to office. Yes, we know that he and his key aids deplore Iranian behavior, that's clear. No ambiguity about that, but it's never been clear how they intend to deal with it, and what their ultimate goal is, and how they intend to get there.

Third, compared to five years ago, today we have to pay attention to, and perhaps be concerned with, great power competition in the

Gulf at a measure that is greater than five years ago, certainly 10 years ago. Those three things are the big strategic contextual issues that frame the problem.

Let's look now at how we got here. And then look second at what our competition is. And third, let's think a little bit about where this could go over the next 10 to 20 years.

First, how did we get here? Just about every Middle East problem you encounter always has a chicken and egg phase, meaning, "How did we get in this mess? Which came first? The chicken or the egg?" In the case of the current problems in the Gulf, I'm afraid that the United States, this is my view, is both the chicken and the egg.

What do I mean by that? To be sure, we didn't create the historic animosity between Persians and Arabs. That's clear. That's not our responsibility or our fault, but by pulling out of the Iran nuclear agreement, we added fuel to a

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fire that was always on simmer or approaching boil. We set off a chain reaction that we haven't been able to really control, shape or direct.

We've been through this Iran nuclear agreement dozens of times. Most of you have talked about it as endlessly as I have, so I don't want to flog the horse again, but let me just make a basic point. It was not at all a perfect agreement, but it did two important things. First, it bought some precious temporal and a substantive space in which to work on other aspects of Iran's behavior with some assurance that the nuclear issue would be at least under control for a fixed, predictable period of time. Second, it was a rare instance of something on which a coalition of U.S. allies and adversaries could agree—everyone from our European partners to China and Russia—and it was a platform from which the United States could

plausibly bring multilateral leverage to bear on other Gulf issues. That's all gone now.

In fact, I would argue that our unilateral action started a sequence of events: the re-imposition of American sanctions, Iran's gradual return to nuclear activity over the past year, its response to the U.S. maximum pressure campaign, and the actions that led ultimately to the targeting of General Soleimani. Now that Iran has lifted the restrictions it had agreed to under the nuclear agreement, we could in a matter of months, certainly within a year, face the conditions in Iran that last decade led the United States and Israel to actually consider military action, before we reached the agreement that I just referred to.

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But think about it now. Here's where I was leading us. Trump doesn't want a Mideast war. That's pretty clear. And if it's regime change he wants in Iran, there's no clear path to that either. I see U.S. strategy on this issue stuck in a cul-de-sac, which I think is evident to everyone in the Gulf, and that in turn, affects how they think about us.

This came through for me pretty vividly in comments by the Omani foreign minister Yusuf bin Abdullah at the Munich Security Conference, where I was a week ago. And you know what that is? It's this gathering of people from all over the world, for the last 50 years, to debate every issue imaginable.

There was a session on Gulf security, and I attended that. At the end of a discussion among himself and foreign ministers from Kuwait, Qatar, Turkey and the UAE on efforts to bridge the gulf between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Omani said bluntly that any progress will have to await the U.S. presidential election in November.

This doesn't mean the Omanis and others are not quietly building bridges that they're not telling us about between Iran and Saudi Arabia. But it seems to say there's no crossing them for another nine months.

And by the way, the optics of that session that I referred to in Munich—sometimes optics tell you everything. Both the Iranian foreign minister Zarif and the Saudi foreign minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud were scheduled to speak. But they would not appear together, and they insisted that their appearances be separated by this panel of other foreign ministers, which also included U.S. Senator Chris Murphy. So with robed delegations marching in and out, it all seemed absurd, proving the old adage that the route between two points in the Middle East is seldom a straight line.

Second, what's our competition? In the Gulf, our competition comes from many countries—Europeans, the Russians, the Chinese—but primarily we need to think about China. The best way to describe China's expansion and strategy is that it's driven by three things: Its need for energy, its growing Belt and Road Initiative—this plan they have to connect China with basically the Middle East and Europe, literally from Xinjiang province right up to the English Channel, and certainly deeper into the Gulf with infrastructure and so forth—and a determination

not to get caught up in any of these Gulf disputes. At this point, they are primarily a commercial economic financial actor.

But over the last dozen years, China's investment in all of the Gulf countries has grown to about \$83 billion. I think it started if

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you went back five years at around \$20, \$25 billion. The bulk of that, \$63 billion, is in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and focused as you would imagine on primarily energy-related issues. Every Gulf country has signed a partnership now of some sort with China. And China has not neglected Iran. Iran is part of this, even though it's not in the GCC. Eleven percent of China's oil imports come from Iran, in the recent five-year period. And I've mentioned the Belt and Road Initiative. I won't go into that in more detail, but that includes Iran as well as the Gulf countries.

Russia is not operating on this scale, but its dependence on the global oil market means that it burrows pretty deeply into the diplomacy of the region, and the Middle East generally.

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Again, just to summarize Russia quickly, one anecdote that's revealing: I went to a meeting of Gulf oil officials at Columbia University about a year ago, and in talking to them they mentioned that Russia, now not a member of

OPEC, does sit in on OPEC meetings as an observer and has tended to start chairing the meetings. I just came back from Russia in January and I can tell you, Russians know how to run a meeting, maybe better than some of the Gulf leaders do. That's just an interesting window on there.

Russia's focus has been mostly on Saudi and the UAE, where it's signed agreements in the range of \$1 to \$2 billion in energy, advanced technology, and health sectors, and it's always trolling for arms markets. The Saudis are apparently interested in the S-400 system.

I'm going to wrap up now. You want us to talk about Soleimani. You pose the question of whether this panel would have made the same decision about Soleimani. Maybe, if there was unassailable evidence of an imminent attack on Americans. That case though has not been made yet publicly, in my judgment. We haven't [made that case], not persuasively. And even in that case it would have been important to consider whether the same result could have been obtained by attacking his operatives or hardening vulnerable targets. I would have started off skeptical, but I'm not sure where I would have come out.

And let me just say a word about imminence. In talking about an imminent attack, we tend to think that means time, target, and place. Sometimes an attack can be judged rightly to be imminent, even though you don't know those things. In a sense, that's what 9/11 was. If you went back to that period, the CIA was saying, "We are going to have an imminent attack," but we did not know time, target, or place. Had we been able to find Bin Laden at that point, it might have made a difference. This is a hard call, but fundamentally I would've started off skeptical about this.

Now I've talked to my Israeli friends, some of them in the conference in Munich, and they all think that this was an important thing to do, and that it has had a deterrent effect on the Iranians. And to be fair, the IRGC Republican Guards seem to be off balance and losing some public support. We just have to watch this one.

Jon asks, "Where are we going to be in 20 years?" If you believe our former Treasury Secretary, Larry Summers, in 20 years, I guess he would say 30 years, but in that time range, in all likelihood, China's economy will be twice the

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pattern of naval port reserve visits and for economic investments to weigh much more heavily in Middle Eastern calculations.

Let's see what the next panel says, but I think diplomacy, soft power, and alliances is our force-multiplying formula for decades ahead in this part of the world. I'll stop there.

Jon Alterman:

Thank you very much.

Christine Wormuth:

Okay, good morning everybody. I largely agree with John's assessment of the region and how we got here, and where we are. I'll just try to add a few observations on top of that.

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with China. And I think to be able to do that effectively, we have to make adjustments in terms of the level of emphasis that we're placing on the Middle East as a region. And I believe our interests in the region are changing. Among other things, as John mentioned, we

size of ours--unless there is some major discontinuity in China that we're not anticipating. But if you project forward in a linear way, that's what you get. I think in 20 years, expect Beijing to have gone beyond the

I've spent most of my time in the Defense Department, and I'm firmly in the camp of those who believe that we really need to be at the grand strategy level focusing on the competition

don't have the same kind of energy dependence that we did 20, 30 years ago.

We certainly still have interests there, but for 20 years the region has really been our focal point and I think we need to really take some clear steps to change that if we're going to be able to compete successfully with China.

And I think that competition with China will have a military dimension, but I think it's the diplomatic, economic soft power dimensions that are much

more important. I don't want to suggest that this is as simple as "The competition is all military; we need to de-invest militarily in the Middle East so that we can invest militarily in Asia." I'm not suggesting that. But certainly there's going to be

a military dimension of the competition, and we have been so heavily invested in the Middle East for so many years that I think if we're going to be successful in the next 20 years at the grand strategy level, we have to make some changes.

The thing I really worry about right now is that because of the strategic cul-de-sac we're in, it's very hard to make those shifts. To be able to really rebalance the portfolio across the globe, we have to be able to find some places where we can have some economies, if you will, in the Middle East. And I don't think we can do that safely in terms of our own national security if we don't figure out a more coherent strategic approach to the region.

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It feels to me like the maximum pressure strategy has become a strategy where you really have a misalignment between the ends, which are very maximalist under the current administration, and the ways and means, which don't seem to me to be in alignment with what this administration is trying to do. My sense is that we as a country need to figure out how can we deescalate tensions broadly in the region. And it feels to me—and our next panel with the diplomats will be much better positioned to have good ideas about this—that we have to find a way to articulate to Iran what do we think a reasonable deal would be. You have different voices in the administration saying slightly different things about what the policy is. But certainly, Secretary Pompeo has laid out a set of conditions that to my ears would basically

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require Iran to fundamentally change as a regime, and I don't see that happening. The conditions that we've laid out to me don't seem to be realistic.

I think we have to find a way of saying “What do we really

want as a country? What do we think we need? Can we build a coalition once again as the previous administration did with other friends in the region, with countries in Europe, and can we work out a deal?” Whether that is trying to reenter the deal and broaden it, or craft the outlines of a brand new deal. To be successful, we have to really revisit the fundamentals of our current Iran policy, which I don't see happening. And ideally revisit that in a structured, deliberate set of discussions where we would review the policy and think about second- and third-order effects. I don't see that kind of deliberate discussion necessarily taking place right now.

But I think a core piece would be revisiting the Iran policy and figuring out what can we

realistically do to try to bring greater security, and to get Iran back into a position where they are not restarting their nuclear program essentially. I also think we need to look at other ways to try to deescalate tensions in the region. I think it was an important step that the UAE has basically revised its approach in Yemen. I think we would be wise to be continuing to really encourage the Saudis to bring that conflict to an end. I think we really need to be working carefully with the government of Iraq. There is a lot of diplomacy that needs to be done there. It is in the United States' interests to have Iraq be stable and secure.

I worry quite a bit about the Soleimani strike implications for where we are with the government of Iraq. I am hopeful that there are conversations going on right now with the government of Iraq to try to keep the U.S. presence, and the coalition presence in Iraq, so that we can continue to work with the Iraqi security forces. But I think the Soleimani strike made that complicated set of discussions even more complicated, and it continues to put the government in Iraq in a position where they have to choose between Iran and the United States. How to manage that puts them in a very difficult position.

I think we need to find ways to rebuild our relationship with the government of Iraq, do some confidence-building measures there, try to again deescalate the conflicts—whether it is Yemen, whether it's the dispute with Qatar. Those are all, I think, steps that would help the United States be in a better position to start reallocating its military presence in the region. And I think Secretary Esper, as I understand it, has called for all of the regional combatant commands to do a zero-based review of our military presence in the major theaters, with one of the goals at least presumably being trying to identify places where we may be able to make some changes to enable the military to put more emphasis on the Indo-Pacific theater.

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This is a good opportunity to be able to look at what kinds of adjustments could we prudently and wisely make in our posture, in Central Command. And I think there are some changes that we could make there. People here, Melissa Dalton here at CSIS, and Mara Karlin over at SAIS have, I think, done some good

thinking about how we might be able to change our posture.

And I remember when I was in the Department as early as 2014 during the Quadrennial Defense Review, we were looking at “Could we thin out our headquarters structure in CENTCOM? What kinds of capabilities do we need in that region, 10 years out, 20 years out?” It feels to me that we need missile defenses. We need naval maritime capabilities, ISR, special operations. And if you believe those are the kinds of capabilities we're going to need to be able to deal with the security challenges in the region, looking at what we currently have and where we have relationships with countries that are strong enough that we might be able to transition to more of a “warm basing” approach. That feels to me like a very smart set of steps to be taking.

And I think the zero-based review process that's going on right now is an opportunity for DoD to at least do that thinking. The concern that I have is there's so much instability in the region because of the strategic incoherence that you may not have a time where even if you can identify in a blue-sky kind of way, how we might be able to make some reallocations. Our strategic incoherence may not allow us to move forward on making those kinds of changes at this time.

The first step we need to do is to really look carefully at the grand strategy level of our approach to the Middle East, and ideally make some adjustments. But again, that may not happen, certainly until, I think, we're on the other side of this election. But then perhaps DoD would be able to come to if there is a change in administrations, which is I think very much a question now. DoD might be able to at least bring some ideas to the table about what an adjusted posture might look like. I think I'll just stop there.

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Jon Alterman:

Thank you. There's a lot of richness there. Before we start talking about the 20-year perspective, which I do want to get to, you both identified Iran as a place where the United States has pretty ambitious goals and pretty limited tools that it's been willing to deploy. And to me the difficult moment was the aftermath of the strike on the Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais September 14, which presumably were executed by some combination of Iranian forces, and to which there was a quite limited response. That reportedly prompted the Saudis to send signals to the Iranians that they want to reduce tensions.

That followed an effort by the Emiratis in June after the attack on some ships in the Gulf that they wanted to reduce tensions.

How should the United States have thought about the response to Iran? Was that an opportunity to say, “In the longer term we're going toward trying to have something that's more sustainable? We understand that Iran's ability for mischief is persistent, we have to lower the temperature.” Was it an opportunity for the United States to reassert its deterrence against Iran? Was this a time when the United

States had to move closer to the Gulf States to get them to support the maximum pressure campaign and reassure them the United States was there? That was clearly an opportunity for something. That was clearly a time that focused Gulf governments' thinking about what the future would look like. Given where you think we're going, what should we have done at that moment to try to move things in a constructive direction?

John McLaughlin:

That's a tough question. I think the problem is in that moment, a bit of what Christine alluded to, the absence of tools. In other words, I don't think that we had a mechanism, or a forum, for reaching out to both the Saudis and the Iranians simultaneously at that time, because of the situation that we had gotten ourselves into with Iran after withdrawing from the agreement and beginning the maximum pressure campaign. For us to perform, this is a major problem.

We typically, in this part of the world, the Middle East, more broadly, if you went back 20 years, we could function as a sort of honest

If you went back 20 years, we could function as a sort of honest broker in most parts of this region.

broker in most parts of this region. We could come into a room and say, "All right, everyone in the room sit down, let's have a talk." Not so easily with the Iranians publicly and so forth, but we could reach out to everyone and we were not perceived in quite the way we are now. And I think we

didn't have that capacity at the time of the Abqaiq strike. Remember if you went back to May of 2018, Secretary Pompeo had made a speech in which he laid out 12 demands of what we wanted from Iran. I think as Christine was suggesting, if you looked at those demands, it meant fundamentally regime change. It meant, change everything about the way you operate in the world. And instantly it was apparent that

none of that was going to happen, that it was an unrealistic set of demands.

And so, in that atmosphere, I think the administration is left in the case of something like Abqaiq with very little other than the military option. And there you run up against President Trump's

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understandable desire not to get sucked into a military confrontation in the Middle East. Reading his mind a little bit, I think that's why he held back. If you go back and look at that period, one day it would be we're going to do something, the next day not so sure, the next day we're going to do something. So there was a kind of wobbly approach to it.

So I guess what I've said is there are things we should ideally do but we're not equipped to do in that instance. And again, I saw a bit of this, the separation that's grown up between the Saudis and the Iranians in Munich, not just optically, but at one point Minister Zarif from Iran said that after the Soleimani killing, the Saudis had sent a message to Iran. He didn't say what it said, but presumably one of if not sympathy, at least one of acknowledgement and concern that this was a serious and a painful thing for them. And he said that "We immediately responded to Saudi Arabia, but we never heard back." And then he said, "I think we didn't hear back because the United States probably persuaded the Saudis not to respond." I don't know whether that's true, but that's the way they think about the two of us now. And so I'd stop there. I think we were just didn't know what to do after the case, didn't have the tools.

Jon Alterman:

So let me ask Christine the really hard question, which is this: If you want to reassert the honest broker role, you want to reassert the influence, but in the intermediate and longer term you say "We're going to have a lighter footprint. We're

not going to sustain the dominant role.” How do you build credibility and confidence with partners in the Gulf if it's part of a longer-term effort that you've described of, “We can't remain preoccupied with the Middle East, we have other things to do?” We're trying to negotiate from a position of strength, while we are, in the mind of many, on our way out the door. How do we handle that?

Christine Wormuth:

Yeah, I think that's a good question, and I think it was certainly something the previous administration struggled with quite a bit.

There's a difference between being an honest broker and being the power player in the region.

Obviously, the Obama administration was trying to pivot, rebalance, whatever you want to call it, to Asia and was viewed by many as disengaging from the region and hence, having difficult relations with some of the countries in the region. In my mind,

there's a difference between being an honest broker and being the power player in the region, if you will. I think where the United States needs to go for its own interests, and maybe is going to go anyway because of some of the things John pointed to with the fact that our influence in the region is declining over time.

I think we're moving to more of--we're at a moment in time where the international order that was developed in the wake of World War II with all of the institutions and the norms and the United States playing a very important role in that, we're in a position of flux and change. And that order I think is evolving into something that is not quite as U.S.-centric as it has been for the last two decades. And I would argue that the United States can still be, and I think can usefully be, an important player in the Middle East, but does not have to be the sole security guarantor, sort of main player that we have

been over the last two decades. So I don't see that. And again, there's a difference between being an honest broker, which is I think more about trying to look a little bit more dispassionately and evenly at the set of challenges we have in the region.

To me it feels right now, the United States has shifted to a place where we are all-in with Saudi Arabia, and all-in

with Israel in a way that we haven't been for the last 10 years.

And that I think is one of the reasons we're not seen as much as an honest broker as we used to be. I think we're also not seen as much as an honest broker because we're quite unpredictable. And going to, Jon, your question about the kind of cycle of provocations and escalations we've been in, part of

deterrence is continuity and being consistent. And I think it's harder to deter credibly and harder to avoid miscalculation and miscommunication when you are not being consistent in what is important to you and what your interests are. And that's something I think that we've really been quite inconsistent about.

We're not going to be able to shift both our strategic center of gravity, and much less our footprint in the region, we're not going to be able to shift to Asia and still be the center in the Middle East the way that we have been. I think you can't necessarily have your cake and eat it too, but I also don't think that making adjustments means that the United States will have nothing to say and no useful role to play in the region. I think this is something we have to try to do gradually over time. I think under the previous administration there was a sense that

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we were on embarking on something, a gradual shift, but the current administration has come in and taken, I think, a very different approach.

John McLaughlin:

Jon rightly identifies the Abqaiq strike on the Saudi oil facilities as a big deal. And I don't recall the exact percentage of the field it took out.

Jon Alterman:

50% of production.

John McLaughlin:

50% of production. It was not a small event. And I think you asked the question because it was strikingly large in that part of the world, and for the international energy market. I think the reason we, if you had to boil it down to its essence, the reason we didn't respond more

strongly is that, you have to always go back to the moment, we didn't know what we know now and I think we're still confused about this, but at that moment I think we were concerned

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about the escalatory cycle that could follow. In other words, had we done something militarily to punish Iran, where would that have gone? In that moment I would have said, "You're on an escalatory cycle here that could get really rough given the capabilities of the Iranian military in the Gulf, elsewhere, and their ability to deploy proxies like Hezbollah. Okay?" I think that would have been the discussion had one taken place, if one took place at that time.

Jump ahead to the Soleimani killing. Most of us thought that would provoke a more immediate retaliatory response than it has, and we may not be seeing it yet. Because Iran may respond quietly, covertly, gradually over time, we don't know where that's going yet. But the instant

analysis from a lot of people is, not much happened. So I think we are left uncertain about how the escalatory cycle really works with Iran in the circumstances that have emerged over the last two years. And I think that's going to continue to make it hard for us to make decisions about how to interact with Iran when they do something that is dramatically offensive to us.

Jon Alterman:

We just have a few minutes left. I still wanted to go to the audience for a few questions. But there's something that keeps bothering me and I hope that one or both of you will put my mind at rest. We keep responding in fundamentally conventional ways to fundamentally asymmetrical threats. We keep fighting forces that are infinitely weaker than we are, and the perception is we're not winning. What do we need to think about differently so we get out of the trap of flailing with overwhelming conventional force and showing that we still remain vulnerable to unconventional force, in part because we're afraid of precisely the kind of escalatory things you've talked about?

John McLaughlin:

Boy, you really ask tough questions, but I think to me the answer to that is orchestrating all of the instruments of U.S. power simultaneously, not just thinking of the military instrument, which is not all that useful to you in some of these situations. Our diplomacy is not particularly vigorous at the moment. Diplomacy practiced heroically can be

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enormously powerful for a country like the United States, and we aren't orchestrating that arm of our U.S. government with force standing behind it in the way that we normally do. That's one way to think about and deal with asymmetric threats.

Another comment I have to make is, we don't really know what we may be doing asymmetrically against asymmetric threats. I'm no longer in the government but, we too engage in hybrid warfare of a sort, seeking to influence countries overseas through means that aren't always visible, including cyber. Again, I'm not revealing anything here, I'm just saying the United States has capabilities and we may not be seeing how we're using all of these capabilities to counter the asymmetric threats. But I think the fundamental problem is, particularly in this administration, we aren't orchestrating all of the aspects of U.S. power to head off these problems and, when they occur, to dampen them, deal with them, deter them. I think our understanding of deterrence is all mixed up right now.

Christine Wormuth:

I would just completely agree on that and double down and ask, "What has historically been our strength?" It has been our soft power; it has been our diplomacy. And, just at the moment where we should be leaning into that, we are decreasing the size, for example, of our staff in the embassy in Baghdad. We have cut the funds for reconstruction in places like Syria, and things like that. We're backing away from development assistance, security cooperation assistance.

And also, another huge strength for the United States, across the board globally, is our relationships with allies and partners, our network of alliances. And that is a strength we can bring to bear against these asymmetric challenges.

But again, it feels to me that you can't, at a time when you're punching the Europeans in the face about Huawei and 5G for example—and I do very much think, frankly, we need to be

concerned about Huawei and 5G from a security perspective—but it is not a surprise to me that we are having a hard time finding places of agreement with our European allies and friends to deal with these problems, when we have so much friction in our relationships with them. So, I think that's something also that we could be handling in a very different way. We shouldn't kid ourselves. The Middle East is an incredibly complex region and there are many of you in the audience that know far more about those complexities than I do. But, we are leaving some of our useful tools on the table right now.

John McLaughlin:

Yeah, I hate to keep harping on the Iran Nuclear Agreement, but it's worth it. In that situation, if you could have orchestrated a combined response, first off, that might not have happened if we were still in that agreement. But if we were and something comparable happened, you could have had the tools to orchestrate a response that would have

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involved Russia, China, and frankly all of our European partners, given that the EU was involved, along with the British and the French and the Germans. The Chinese, in their dealings with Iran, at one point even conditioned what they were preparing to do with Iran on its compliance with the Iran Nuclear Agreement. So, even though in current circumstances we can probably worry that the Chinese and Russians may be helping Iran circumvent sanctions, prior to that, by and large they were assisting in pressuring Iran in line with that agreement.

So I really think, and this is enormously controversial, anytime you talk about it in any audience, someone will stand up and make a case that it was a terrible agreement. That case must lurk in the audience here somewhere. But it's my view that it was a realistic, pragmatic approach to a difficult problem that gave us leverage we threw away. And that plays in every one of these things we're now talking about.

Jon Alterman:

I'd like to take two very quick questions from the audience, and we'll ask them together. Barbara, it's going to be a question about Iran, I know that. Is there a second question as well? Yeah. Okay. Wait for the microphone if you would. If you would identify yourself?

John McLaughlin:

We could ask Barbara questions about Iran.

Jon Alterman:

Yes, we could.

Barbara Slavin:

Barbara Slavin from the Atlantic Council, and I heartily agree with your analysis. I'm wondering if the accidental shootdown of the Ukrainian airliner was not what basically put a stop to the escalatory cycle at that point because Iran had to deal with the shock of that and the protests that emerged in society after that. And it's one

of those what-ifs, but I'm just curious about that.

Jon Alterman:

Okay. So, that's one question, and the second question right here.

Andrew Gilmour:

Andrew Gilmour of the Center for the Study of Statesmanship at Catholic University. John, I guess as my old boss, I'm going to ask you this question. Looking at the systemic architecture of the region, you have lots of regional powers asserting themselves in ways that we're not used to. Is it possible that the way for the U.S. to conceive of its strategy before any great power strategy is necessary, is to start working in that multipolar environment with these different regional powers and starting to leverage the fact that we can do things in the system that is characterized by lots of opposing regional powers; that we can, on the outside, begin to balance some of that and assert our interests by managing a more multipolar environment of competing regional powers?

John McLaughlin:

Yep. I'm happy to do a quick take on both of these. Barbara's question is really interesting because I've had the same feeling that, when the IRGC shot down that Ukrainian airliner, I think it was on the 8th of January, I'm losing track of it, that's what I remember, but it was the same day or

within a 24-hour cycle that they had rocketed the American base in Iraq. My suspicion is, having hung around wars, this was a fog of war issue. In other words, they were expecting retaliation. They stupidly made a mistake and hit this plane, and that by all

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accounts has really diminished their prestige in Iran. I think the Iranian public is torn between objecting to the Soleimani killing and being appalled at the incompetence of the IRGC. And that's the first time I can remember anything like that with regard to that institution in Iran.

So, I think you're right. I believe it did interrupt the escalatory cycle. The question is for how long? Will all of this sort itself out? I've followed, as you have, Iranian protest movements over many years. They're always put down. And I have wondered, because of the willingness of the regime to be brutal, I've wondered if this is a different cycle and I don't know the answer to that. It's different in some way because of that factor and because, strikingly to me, the striking thing was that members of the Iranian Broadcast Network resigned. Never seen that before, the state network, because they didn't want to be putting out false information. Well that's a big deal. So, I don't think it's going to turn out to be different.

Most Iranian experts who followed this even more closely say, "No, it'll normalize again, and we'll be right back to where we were." Put a 10% doubt in that. Let's just see.

On Andrew's point, I think that's kind of what I was driving at that, and we'll see what the next panel says on that, because we have historic relationships with these other countries. You're talking about other major powers in the region.

When you've talked to people from the Gulf,

None of these countries are seeking to be allies of China. They are quite willing to negotiate with China over economic and energy issues.

they don't just talk about the Gulf. In fact, again going back to my discussions in Munich, that panel of foreign ministers was discussing Libya. They think outside of their Gulf region. So, we have historic

relationships with all of these countries. This is

our power in that region. None of these countries are seeking to be allies of China. They are quite willing to negotiate with China over economic and energy issues. Twenty years from now, China may be a softer power than it is today. Right now, it isn't. Its soft power is not great. That's a whole other issue, whether it could develop an alternative model that will be appealing to people.

But yes, if we could properly staff our embassies with the very best professionals. You know my friend Ryan Crocker, one of the great ambassadors, always uses the word "engagement," which seems like just a simple idea. But engagement means being in their face all the time with relationship-building. We're good at that. So, I think we can checkmate China's influence in that way, backed by the kind of military deployments that Christine has talked about.

I think we have currently 13,000 troops in Kuwait and Qatar, and 3,000 to 5,000 scattered elsewhere. We don't need a lot of troops in that area. We just need a presence.

It's hard to underestimate the effect of American presence. Just presence.

It's hard to underestimate the effect of American presence. Just presence. When I was in Latvia before we sent battalions there, there was one company of American infantry there in camouflage uniforms. As I was coming out of the defense ministry, one of their officials looked over at this young troop and said, "Tripwire." In other words, just the presence of American forces—they don't have to be enormous—just their presence and their engagement with the country makes a big difference.

Jon Alterman:

Thank you to both John and Christine for I think a very lively and thought-provoking start. Please join me in thanking John and Christine.