



THE NIXON SEMINAR

on Conservative Realism and National Security

The Nixon Seminar on Conservative Realism and National Security

Role of the United States in the Middle East

January 16, 2024

PARTICIPANTS

Secretary Mike Pompeo, Ambassador Robert C. O'Brien, Elbridge Colby, Monica Crowley, Mary Kissel, Nadia Schadlow, Rep. Mike Waltz, Alex Wong

TRANSCRIPT

Mary: That was President Nixon in October 1973 on the prospects for a permanent peace in the Middle East, a peace which today seems ever more elusive. Good evening and welcome to the first Nixon Seminar of 2024. I'm your host, Mary Kissel. Thank you for tuning in. Tonight, we're joined by our co-chairs, Ambassador Robert O'Brien and Secretary Mike Pompeo, and of course, our distinguished seminar members. Our topic, the Gaza War and the prospect of a wider Middle East conflagration. What are the lessons we can take from the Nixon era? So welcome, everyone.

Ambassador O'Brien, Secretary Pompeo, I wanna start tonight with you, but before we jump into the main topic, just a quick sidebar, I would love to hear your thoughts, if you have them, on the Taiwan election results. We were thinking about doing the seminar on that, but we didn't have time to do a full seminar on both. So a few thoughts, please, sir. Ambassador O'Brien, first to you.

Amb. O'Brien: Well, I think we saw a triumph of democracy. And what I've been saying for many years is that one of the most exciting things that we've seen in

recent times is the transition from the Republic of China from an authoritarian regime to a democracy. I think they've done better than South Africa. They've done better than many other countries in Eastern Europe. They've had the peaceful transfer of power between two parties, between the KMT and the DPP on multiple occasions.

And this time, the Chinese got involved in election interference. And just like they've tried to do it, influence and interfere in elections in America, they did it in a big way in China, in the Republic of China and Taiwan. And the Taiwanese people rejected it. They rejected the fear-mongering from Beijing. They rejected the election interference. They rejected the use of TikTok and other social media to try and undermine the democracy in Taiwan. And they elected William Lai, a great Chinese leader, to be the president of Taiwan, and Bi-khim, his vice president, who was ambassador. Many of us know her and spent a lot of time with her.

And so I congratulate the people of Taiwan. It's a great, great victory for democracy and a great victory for freedom in the world, and a great rejection of the totalitarian and authoritarian ways of Beijing.

Mary: Secretary Pompeo, that's such an interesting point by Ambassador O'Brien for contrasting the progress that Taiwan has made since really just the late 1990s when they first enjoyed truly full democratization. Please, sir, your thoughts on the election results.

Sec. Pompeo: Well, Mary, it's great to be with you on this first gathering of the year. It was a great way to start the election. So there are gonna be over half the people in the world vote this year in elections across the globe. It was a great first election. For those of us who believe that individuals can stand up to tyranny in spite of all the propaganda, the Taiwanese people certainly chose that.

It is complicated. The legislature itself will prove very complicated. It's a coalition government. So that will be a challenge for leadership. But I think it was pretty clear that there are very few Taiwanese of this generation and the ones that come behind it who are gonna have anything to think about being part of a mainland China Communist Party. I think they understand that's not the place for them. It's not the best thing for their lives. And I think that's what you saw come through, is the people just simply voted on what was best for them. It wasn't deep geopolitical strategy. It was simply what's gonna make the life of my family, myself, my kids better. And it was a pretty resounding victory in the face of the onslaught of the Chinese Communist Party propaganda efforts.

Mary: I know. When you work in foreign policies, sometimes you tend to overthink it. You think, "Well, there must be some grand strategy here." But as you say, it could be pocketbook issues and the things that are closest to Taiwanese voters.

Seminar members, I just wanna throw it open to you all. Anyone else wanna add to Secretary Pompeo and Ambassador O'Brien's comments? Opening the floor. Congressman Waltz? I think you're on mute, sir. No. Okay. Well, I think he's connecting to audio, a few more audio difficulties. Congressman, can you hear me now? Well, it looks like you're having computer issues and we will come again to you soon.

Let's go back then and start off with the main topic of the day, the conflict in the Middle East. This was actually the topic of our last seminar in 2023, but we return to it today because of the fears of a broader war. Ambassador O'Brien, restraining Soviet influence was a big part of President Nixon's grand strategy in the region. And today, we simply have a different power exerting influence, and that is Iran. How do you read Iran's efforts to broaden this conflict and where do you see their tentacles?

Amb. O'Brien: Well, President Nixon spoke about how difficult it was to have peace in the Middle East. And yet, just three years ago, Secretary Pompeo and Jared Kushner and President Trump and myself and others were involved in bringing peace to the Middle East. And we showed it could be done. And one of the things surprisingly that caused the Abraham Accords to come about was a concern about Iran, but also a concern about China.

And, you know, the Chinese were being shut out through the work of the State Department and the Commerce Department and the NSC from American technology. And they were going to Israel and trying to get technology from Israel. And one of the great byproducts of the Abraham Accords is we started bringing capital in from Bahrain and from the UAE into Israel, into the tech sector in Israel, and pushing the Chinese out.

And so now what you see the Chinese and the Russians doing is supporting Iran, and it really is an entente. It's a triple entente of Russia, Iran, and China. And they're attempting to dominate the Middle East. They're attempting to break the alliances between America and the GCC countries in Israel. The hostility towards Israel now is out in the open. They're supporting Iran, which in turn is supporting Hamas and Hezbollah and the Houthis.

And so the great power competition is back in the Middle East as it was. Unfortunately, we don't have a partner like the former Soviet Union that I never thought I'd call them a partner, but at least was responsible in their statecraft and working with President Nixon to make sure that things didn't escalate in the Middle East. Now we have Russia and China escalating, using Iran as a proxy and as an alliance partner to promote chaos and destruction and threaten our allies in the Middle East.

So it's gonna take some strong American diplomacy. We need to put all the tools of national power back in play when it comes to isolating Iran. When Secretary Pompeo and I left office and Mike was really involved in this on a day-to-day basis, we'd isolated Iran. Iran had \$4 billion in foreign currency reserves in January 2021. They were about to go bankrupt. They couldn't fund the Houthis. They couldn't fund Hezbollah. They couldn't fund Kata'ib Hezbollah, Hamas.

Now, Iran has foreign currency reserves of \$70 billion because we took a road over the last few years of appeasement as opposed to maximum pressure. And appeasement hasn't worked. It never works in history. And so we need to get back to a strong policy on Iran. We need to push our adversaries out of the region. We have to back up our partners and allies there so that they do the heavy lifting with

our backing, and then we can stay focused on the Indo-Pacific and Europe and not get pulled into the Middle East war.

But at the same time, we have to back our allies in a way that we just haven't done for the past few years. And we've gotta give up on this crazy idea of appeasing Iran. What I tell people is Iran's just not that into us. It doesn't matter how much hostage ransom we pay them. It doesn't matter how much sanctions relief you give them. You can't buy their friendship. You can't buy their love. And we've gotta stop doing it.

Mary: Well, Nadia Schadlow, I know you wanna jump in here. Please take the floor. Secretary Pompeo, I'm coming to you next.

Nadia: I just think to highlight, it's a really important point and a difference from the tone of President Nixon's comments, which we saw in the beginning of the program, which was essentially the idea that major powers wanted to avoid confrontation. You don't get that sense today with the way that Iran, Russia, and China in this case, but also remember, North Korea is always lurking in the background, right? We've seen them more active in the conflict in Ukraine, but that doesn't mean they can't be active or troublesome here, too, as well, in terms of their capability to provide ammunition.

So I think that that really is a fundamental difference, this access of disruptors. It's a difference from the time in which many of us on this call worked on the 2017 National Security Strategy where we identified and brought out the problem of great power competition. But one difference from the current period is really the way that these four countries are working together, and three of them in the Middle East now: Russia, Iran, and China. So it presents a set of different problems for us and ones that are really worrisome. And China could be much more proactive in being a force for stability if it wanted to in this particular situation, and it's shown that it has not wanted to. And so I'm sure some of the experts on the call, I'd love to hear their views on why.

Mary: Secretary Pompeo, just to add on to Nadia's comments, this axis of disruption, so to speak, is it feasible to think that they've just come together in the last couple of years? Or was this building when we were also in office? Was there more that we could have done? Sorry, you're on mute.

Sec. Pompeo: You know, Mary, I'm sure that's true. There's always more that one can do. But we had brought friends and allies alongside of us to confront Iran, at least, and had convinced them also that America was a better partner than China, at least in most material respects. There were always leakage around the edges with respect to China. But I think everyone in the Trump administration knew that we had a job to do, was to convince them that we're a much better friend, a much better partner. And when it really hits the fan, it'll be the United States with you, defending you, helping you, not the Chinese Communist Party. No one ever asked the Chinese Communist Party to send a brigade to solve their problems.

You know, what Nadia said is true. We shouldn't forget that the other thing that's different about what President Nixon was observing was that these weren't all nuclear powers at that point. Each of the countries that Nadia has identified is either

a nuclear-capable country or relatively close to it. And so that presents a different and unique set of problems for all of us who always understood that that could make a really bad day for the world if one of those went high and right.

So our efforts were serious because to do those things, to build out nuclear programs, to build weapons and trade them with the Venezuelans or the Ukrainians or whoever it is you decide, you have to have money, and we took that wealth away. And this administration has just chosen a different path. They've chosen a path that says maybe we can buy our way to a good outcome for America. I think the six Americans who are held hostage by the Iranians today in Gaza belie that very point.

Mary: Congressman Waltz, you're back online. I wanna turn to you, Nadia and the Secretary have outlined why the situation is more grave than what the president faced back in the 1970s. Can you tell us a little bit about what you're seeing through the lens of Congress and your briefings? How serious is the situation? How widespread is the violence? What aren't we talking about and focusing on that we should be thinking about in terms of threat?

Congressman Waltz: Yeah, sure. Thanks. You have me okay, Mary?

Mary: I do. Yeah, sure you are.

Congressman Waltz: Don't let the technology defeat you. Well, I just wanna go back to the Taiwan elections that I was trying to talk to earlier. And we know that the CCP are closely watching two political events this year. One was the Taiwan elections. Fortunately, it did not go the CCP's way. That is going to have an effect in terms of their continued pressure campaign. And then two is our elections.

And as I was literally telling the great lowans at caucus sites just last night, that not only was the whole country watching what message that they sent, the whole world was watching what message that they were going to send. And we know the CCP is not just watching how the elections in Taiwan and Taipei go, but then how ours go. And I do think we will be in a period of maximum danger if Taiwan continues to stand strong.

And come this November, we have another four years of weakness in this White House that we could be in a period of maximum danger. And it's no coincidence that Xi Jinping has told his military from a capability standpoint to be ready to go by 2027 within not only our electoral window, but also in a window where I think we'll be in a very difficult period financially in terms of our own balance sheet in this country.

And I think what's so frustrating about it all is that the situation that we're in right now isn't as a result of some type of massive tsunami or natural disaster or the floor falling out from a funding standpoint. It is truly just bad policy. Whether it's the policy shifts on our own border that has led to the crisis that that is, whether it's the policy shifts on Iran, it's simply bad decisions time and time again coming out of this administration that's led us to where we are.

In terms of what we're not talking about is, and I think this will probably be near and dear to Bridge Colby's heart, is the opportunity costs in terms of readiness with the surge that we're seeing in the Middle East. When we have multiple aircraft carriers in

the CENTCOM AOR, they are not in the Indo-Pacific area of responsibility. For example, the Ford class carrier was supposed to be home by Christmas and going into a period of maintenance so that it would be ready when we need it. Those crews were supposed to be home by Christmas. So when their families are making reenlistment decisions, that has an impact on them. And so all of these ripple effects down the line in terms of ship maintenance, aircraft readiness, munitions that we're now expending in Yemen in addition to what we're providing in Ukraine has a ripple effect in the Indo-Pacific.

And then finally, in terms of the '70s and similarities or differences, I think the similarities are probably most stark in terms of our energy policy. From the Keystone XL on and the cancellation of that pipeline, it is bad energy policy that is making our adversaries wealthy, from Russia, to Tehran, to Venezuela, and giving them the capability to fund these efforts. And at the same time, it is driving inflation and driving our economic issues that is making us less capable.

So, again, I could spend the rest of the hour going after bad policy decision after bad policy decision. I mean, case in point, we just got notice that the administration is going to re-designate the Houthis after they undesignated the Houthis right after the Trump administration designated them.

Mary: But not the same designation.

Congressman Waltz: It's mind-blowing. I'll stop because sadly we can go on, as I said, the rest of the night with bad decisions that are leading us to where we are.

Mary: Well, there are a lot of angles here, and you raise a very important one, the economic angle. Secretary Pompeo, I'll ask you this, but if you wanna throw to someone else, please do. We've seen freight rates go through the roof, insurance rates increase a point. People are gonna pay more because of these attacks in the Red Sea and the decision of shipping companies to redirect their ships somewhere else to safety. Are we talking enough about the economic impact in the U.S. national interest in forging a peace in the Middle East, or is that something that deserves more of our attention?

Sec. Pompeo: It will absolutely have an impact in the same way that the early months of the Ukraine conflict had a real impact on the capacity to get the grains across the world, fertilizer across the world as well. That is a real risk. Ships are now going around. It's a lot longer route. Can't go through the Bab-el-Mandeb and then into the Suez Canal. And that'll have an impact, broadly speaking, for people who are trying to move everything from beach balls to blankets to semiconductors. There's no doubt about that.

Congressman Waltz's point about energy was right. When you have these kind of conflicts, the thing you want most is to be capable of producing the energy that you need for your own nation. And we've largely, through a series of bad policy decisions, decided we don't need to do that anymore. A big mistake. And I think maybe, Bridge, you can speak to this as well. This is also connected to what took place in the voting in Taiwan, right? This is deeply connected. There's a huge manufacturing base there in Taiwan that the Chinese Communist Party would dearly

love to get their hands on and be able to restrict from use for American not only commercial interests, but certainly our security and national and our military equipment interests as well.

This is a global economic challenge, and we often get caught up talking about missiles and submarines and carriers. I get it. But we should never remember that trading in the U.S. dollar and the capacity to move goods around the world matter an awful lot to the American people, too. Bridge?

Mary: Bridge, jump in.

Bridge: All right. Well, thank you, sir. Thanks, Mary. Thanks, Congressman and Ambassador. Great to be with you again this new year, although a sobering time. Just on the Taiwan issue, I think building on Congressman Waltz's comments as well as Secretary Pompeo's and Ambassador O'Brien's, I mean, I think it is inspiring and very encouraging to see the election on Taiwan. I think the danger has now intensified. And if you read between the lines in the news reporting, you can see that because I think what's become now translucently clear to me, to us, and therefore you have to assume to the CCP and Beijing is that there's no peaceful solution to unification.

And I was at the Shangri-La conference last summer, and Li Shangfu, the then defense minister, who's since gone somewhere else, but he issued a very specific threat upon the election of Lai Ching-te, William Lai. And that's now come to pass. Obviously, Lai was ahead in the presidential voting. The Legislative Yuan is a different story.

But I think the key thing is the Kuomintang and the DPP, the third party, they are not pro-unification either. I mean, I met with the KMT candidate when he was in Washington and spoke to some of them. And, you know, at least ostensibly, certainly significant factions in the party and the one led by Ho, the actual candidate, were pretty similar in security policy. They were not talking about... I mean, Ma Ying-jeou, the former president, was actually not invited to a campaign rally right before or on the day of the election because he'd said something very flattering about Xi Jinping. And that's all good because, you know, we sympathize and support that. But it's also bad because it makes it increasingly clear to Xi and to the leadership in Beijing. And it's my impression, I mean, I don't think anybody really knows, but the control is pretty centralized.

There may be some factional politics going on in Beijing, but, you know, Xi and his coterie seem to have a lock on him. You know, there's kind of, to forgive the term, like a peace offensive going on right now where "The Wall Street Journal" is reporting, and I've been hearing from this and that, that the Chinese, you know, don't wanna rock the boat. And they're calling it...I mean, it's almost absurd, but they're calling it the spirit of San Francisco.

And the administration has its own reasons, which by their own admission has to do with the fact of Congressman Waltz's point, is that they're distracted, by their own terminology, in Europe, the Middle East, and by free election campaign, which I was a little pretty struck when they admitted that part out loud. But, you know, the

Chinese, you know, to me, I have to be careful to everything doesn't look like a nail and I'm the hammer of, you know, just one sort of lens. But I will have to say that nothing significant has changed as far as I can ascertain in Beijing's policies or behavior.

The military buildup continues. There was a story in "Bloomberg" the other day that looked like it was leaked by the administration deliberately to downplay the Chinese military risk about water and ICBM silos. The reality is the Chinese are shooting missiles and they hit targets. In fact, speaking of the Ford carrier, we just identified that there's a huge mock-up of the Ford carrier out in their targeting range, and they're shooting these type of targets. I don't know if they shot that one yet.

They're continuing the nuclear buildup. They are continuing to, Secretary Pompeo, to your point, and Mary's about economic deterrence, despite the economic headwinds they're facing, they are continuing on their course. Their party work program at the end of last year, it's continuing on that, which is designed to, you know, hold on in the face of sanctions. Politically, they're continuing to condition the population.

And, you know, more broadly, they're working, I mean, as we can see very clearly with the Russians, the Iranians, North Koreans, we've seen more news from the North Korean peninsula. It's very disturbing. I'm sure Alex can talk in more depth about it. But, I mean, this to me, you know, I said on a TV hit the other day, buckle up because, you know, I would never... Anybody who's making predictions about what Xi will or won't do, I don't take that seriously because I don't think Xi confides in his wife or if he has any friends, his best friend. So nobody really knows. But it sure is looking sobering.

And if you look at it, and then you add on this point, another thing to Secretary Pompeo's point, is that the Chinese, and Xi Jinping said this to President Biden himself, that they believe they're being strangled, fairly or not. And that's a very combustible situation. And, of course, things are not going well in the Middle East for us. They're not going well in Europe. So this is, again, I just think it's a really dangerous situation. So there's a euphoria around the Taiwan election, and deservedly, from kind of a democratic point of view, we should celebrate that. But I also think, again, we need to buckle up and they need to really get serious about preparing.

Mary: Monica, I wanna get to you and bring you in here because you worked for President Nixon and talked to him about a lot of these issues such as waging peace. The Middle East was obviously an important arena in his politics and his grand strategy, as was Asia. Now, Bridge has just laid out the brewing danger in Asia-Pacific so very well. Can you bring in the Middle East and give our viewers a sense of just how broad-based the threat is? We probably should have done this at the top, but it isn't just about the war in Gaza or the missiles that are looming at ships in the Red Sea, is it?

Monica: No, and thank you, Mary. Great to see everybody and Happy New Year to everybody. You know, I'm always struck when we begin these seminars with footage of President Nixon giving a major speech or a press conference speaking to these

serious national security issues that were taking place in his time, because I reflect back on that. And I can tell you, having spoken to him in the early and mid 1990s when I was with him, just about every single foreign policy decision that he embraced and then executed as president was driven almost strictly by geopolitical and geostrategic calculations.

And we've started here to talk about the economic aspects of foreign policy in the Middle East and certainly with regard to China and the Pacific Rim. But in Nixon's case, all of these policy decisions were driven strictly by geopolitical calculations that they had to make with regard to Russia, with regard to China, and with regard to the Middle East.

Over the last 40 years since his presidency, we have seen economics match the geopolitical calculations that every American president and his cabinet have had to factor into those decisions. When you take a look at the Middle East right now, what strikes me is the centrality of economic integration. This is such a critical part of the success of the Abraham Accords, which, of course, President Trump, Jared Kushner, and our two major folks on the call today, we have everybody major, but Secretary Pompeo and Ambassador O'Brien and, of course, my former boss, Secretary Mnuchin, led that kind of economic integration that was a critical part of the Abraham Accords, I think, is something perhaps Nixon considered tangentially, but again, was not at the forefront of the decision making, whereas now it really is the leading edge. Whether we're talking regionally in the Middle East or Asia-Pacific or, frankly, any part of the world. Right?

And I keep thinking back philosophically to the democratic peace theory, which has its roots in Immanuel Kant and Thomas Paine, which was embraced from Nixon on, which states that democracies tend not to fight one another because their leaders are accountable to their people. Right? And so they're less willing to take that risk and wage war. The corollary to that is that economically integrated nations also tend not to fight one another because war will imperil their own economic conditions.

So it's not always true that democracies tend not to fight one another, and it's not always true economically integrated nations tend not to fight one another. But in both of those situations, it certainly does give you a greater shot at greater peace and stability and prosperity regionally and also globally.

So I know things are very dark now with Iran and this administration's profound weakness, creating provocations all over the world and having our adversaries advance while the good guys retreat. But I just wanna offer that little glimmer of hope that came out of the Abraham Accords, that economic integration continues in the Middle East between Israel and the signatories to the Abraham Accords. So there is some hope that that sort of has a life of its own and will factor in some stability, even though overall, you know, we are in a very precarious state in Middle East.

Mary: We certainly are, but you're right, we're often too negative on this seminar, so it's good to have a positive note. I do wanna bring in Alex Wong into the conversation. Alex, something that President Nixon always emphasized about his success in Middle East negotiations is that he coupled a very strong support for

Israel with also strong support for Arab nations so that he didn't allow actors like Egypt to feel like he was going to sell them out, that he could be a trustworthy partner to them when they came to the negotiating table. Are there lessons there, too, other positive things that we could take away, a strategy that might work in the future?

Alex: Yeah. No, I think President Nixon was very wise in that, I mean, to have the United States be a dependable partner, not just for our democratic partner in Israel, but for other partners in the region, have allied relationships with countries like Saudi Arabia and others. That's the key to maintaining overall U.S. influence across the Mideast. And just stepping back and look at what has happened over recent years, you know, the Biden approach in the Middle East is very much a continuation of the Obama approach, which is reach some sort of accommodation of Iran, even empowering Iran.

So there is some, you know, not peace, but stasis between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the Gulf partners. And then America can step away and then concentrate on China. The problem with that theory is that if you step away from the Middle East, which is a strategic pivot point for the world economically and security-wise and culturally, you actually multiply your problems and your competition with China, and that's in two ways.

Number one, Iran knows that the Middle East is a strategic pivot point and Iran knows it. So they're gonna, as Nadia was alluding to, use strategic instability to exert its leverage and message its own deterrent ability. Number two, China has been for years building its influence in terms of trade, development, security, and political weight across the Middle East, principally because it's a strategic pivot point, and they wanna put pressure on us and maybe over time able to exert the leverage over the Mideast that we've been able to do for much of the 20th century. So in a situation where we are trying to compete with China across the world to step away from the Middle East, to be an undependable partner as opposed to what President Nixon was advocating for, that creates problems for us and debilitates us in our competition with China.

Mary: Nadia, you wanted to add to Alex's thoughts?

Nadia: Yeah, in the spirit of I always listen to Mary. So to generate a conversation, I actually have some questions for, you know, some of the others. You know, and part of, you know, Alex's point about President Nixon's effort to balance Arab powers in the region, what is the role of Saudi Arabia, do you think, sort of in a postwar or as a stabilizing force? I ask this because all of you know, and I think there's a lot of evidence to show that Iran was really concerned about the potential relationship between the Saudis and the Israelis moving toward recognition and perhaps even, you know, a bigger role in the Abraham Accord framework. How do you think that could... Could that be, you know, a positive stabilizing force going forward? Is that too optimistic? You know, I'm just wondering what some of you might think about that.

Mary: And if you don't speak up, I'll call on you.

Congressman Waltz: No, Nadia, this is Mike Waltz, and I found Jake Sullivan's comments at DAVOS really astounding in that it seemed as though the framework the administration is establishing is geared towards generating pressure on Netanyahu and his government far more so than it is on the Palestinians to reform or Hamas to walk away from its, you know, grotesque terrorist ways or on Iran.

I mean, it was really, you know, essentially presenting a fait accompli or a choice, I would argue, a false choice on you can have Saudi normalization. But the price for that is two-state solution. You can only have one or the other. And the brilliance of the...without sounding too flattering to Robert and to Secretary Pompeo is brilliance of the Abraham Accords is it really sidelined those issues and aligned everyone's interest, key to which was economic one and Iran too, or invite, you know, probably in the opposite order.

But just at the end of the day, we see this administration time and again more focused on pressuring our greatest ally in the Middle East than dealing with the terrorists or dealing with the corruption in the Palestinian authority. And rather than establishing a framework where Jordan, Egypt, Saudi, and others can truly reform, help the next generation of Palestinians step up and lead. You know, anyway, I'll set my frustrations aside. I think you get where I'm going.

And I think, once again, we have bad policy decisions at the core of what's going to be long term issues. And the next administration and I've made my preferences known that it's a Trump administration 2.0 is gonna have to dig out of it once again.

Amb. O'Brien: Mary, this is Robert. Can I jump in?

Mary: Oh, yes, sir.

Amb. O'Brien: So just a quick comment and then a question for the team, for Mike and Secretary Pompeo and Bridge. The first comment I'll make is when we did the Abraham Accords, it's one of the few things that never leaked. We kept it quiet, and Secretary Pompeo will remember this, right up until the time that we had the call between Bibi Netanyahu and Mohammed bin Zayed at BC. And we brought the press in at the end of that call, and it was a real surprise.

With the courting of Saudi Arabia by Jake and Tony Blinken and Jake Sullivan, they were very open about it. They told the world we're gonna get this deal. We're gonna get Saudi Arabia to join the Abraham Accords. We're flying to the region. They were trying to generate positive political press and momentum, I guess. And, look, we all support Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords. They were very close to doing it in the Obama administration, the President Trump's administration. But they negotiated in public. And that led to the concern that the Iranians had, and in part, I'm sure, to the timing of the attack on October 7th.

So, again, I think it's this, public diplomacy is not always the best way to handle these things. Sometimes it's better to do it quietly and to make the announcement once you've got everyone signed on the dotted line.

The question I've got, and this was spurred by Mike's comments, and glad you were in Iowa yesterday, it was pretty cold for the rest of us who were watching on TV. But

obviously, our adversaries would love to see four more years of a very weak America that's focused on appeasement and not on peace through strength. But is there a concern among the panel and Secretary Pompeo and Congressman Waltz and others that our adversaries are looking at the state of things, not knowing American politics, not knowing how close the election is gonna be, no matter what the situation is. And a year from now, it will still be a close election. We've seen that since 2000.

Is there a concern that people are gonna say, "Hey, where we're getting is good," and take adverse action and engage in malign activities over the next year knowing that they've got at least one year left of a Biden administration where there will be very few, if any, consequences for their malicious conduct, and knowing that if President Trump comes back or some other president, although it looks convincingly it'll be another Trump administration, do they take action knowing that they've got a year to take advantage of American weakness? And are we concerned about that?

Mary: Bridge? Oh, Mr. Secretary, I know you have to go in a couple minutes. But Bridge, just a quick comment. Sorry.

Bridge: Please go ahead. No, no, I'll defer.

Mary: Thank you. Secretary?

Sec. Pompeo: I'll be quick, Bridge. First of all, Congressman Waltz, you can't flatter me too much. You're afraid of it. Don't worry. Take that risk always. That said, more seriously, you know, we're talking about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Think about the last three years from their perspective. The United States of America designates you a pariah. Second, you have missiles fired from these same Houthis that are now giving the entire world problems and the United States says, "We think that Secretary Pompeo should have an ethics investigation because he provided Patriot missiles so the Saudis could defend themselves from this very threat."

All right. You no longer recognize the United States of America as someone who, when it really matters, will be there in the crunch. And so you begin to do...you engage in exactly the kind of behavior that Bridge has written about and Nadia talked about in the strategy, you hedge. You go find friends elsewhere. You get a little closer to the Russians. You reopen your diplomatic relationships with Tehran. You take your largest customer, the Chinese Communist Party, and you make even deeper set of relationships and begin to trade those barrels of oil and currencies other than the U.S. dollar.

You begin to respond, at least in part, to send a message to the United States. But second, just out of the fact that you have a set of interests that have now clearly diverged from America's when, in fact, the common threat of Iran is the one that bound us all together.

And, you know, your question, Robert, about will they use this next year as a moment? I think what you're seeing already play out is I don't think they waited till the final year of the Biden administration. I think whether it was what happened in Afghanistan or, you know, I think one person has mentioned Europe to date, maybe

that's a telling thought too. Right? The fact that there's now a war in Europe that rages on, and now the headlines are it looks like Russia may prevail, whatever that ends up meaning.

No. I think, Robert, this point that we're all speaking to, which is that the risk level is high. FBI Director Wray spoke about that. You know, we've got the two senior leaders from America at DAVOS, actually, the three senior miracles. One of them's in the hospital, two of them are in DAVOS or maybe Secretary of Defense got out of the hospital today. Our adversaries see this, too. This isn't a cute talking point. I'm rooting for the Biden administration to figure this out because the deterrence model that is so central, and we all know so temporary, you build deterrence, it lasts for a time, and then you have to continue it. We have lost it for this moment. And with that, I'll stop. Bridge, over to you.

Bridge: Well, thanks very much, Mr. Secretary and Ambassador, to kind of respond to you. Look, I honestly do think this is a really serious consideration, and it worries me a lot. And, I mean, we're all Republicans on here, so people are gonna discount that accordingly. Don't take it from us. I mean, I mentioned this in passing, but during the Xi Jinping summit before the meeting in Northern California, this was from "Politico," I remember this distinctly, three senior administration officials told the press, "Politico," that their goal in the meeting was to, like, stabilize the situation because they couldn't handle anything else other than the war in Ukraine, the European situation, the Middle East situation, which has actually worsened since then, and the re-election campaign.

And then, of course, you have a historically unpopular president. I believe the ABC or NBC News poll indicated 33% approval rating. You know, crisis on the border, can't get through. I mean, you know, a year ago, he was saying that the Ukraine situation was a battle between democracy and autocracy. Now he's saying, "I'll do it as long as I can." I mean, just objectively, rationally, not calling for significant, like, historic increases in defense spending, not calling for... I mean, they just released this national defense and industry strategy that's just a catalog of the problems that everybody's seen for years and years. There has not been dramatic change.

I mean, if you're just looking at this rationally, and you say, "Xi Jinping ain't gonna find a peaceful solution to the Taiwan situation, and he believes they're strangling him." And then, "Oh, by the way, Kim Jong Un apparently just..." And Alex and others can say how significant it is, but sounds significant. They're moving forward on their ICBM program, and they're collaborating more closely with the Russians. And they've said, you know, peaceful reunification or some kind of, like, confraternity with South Korea is now off the table.

And you say to yourself, well, you know, nobody knows how the election is gonna go, as Robert was saying. But, you know, Kellyanne Conway was on TV earlier this week around the Iowa caucus. She says one of President Trump's top priorities is gonna be China. Okay, well, if you're China, you're saying, "I'm not gonna wait around for that," potentially. I mean, so I'm not saying it's gonna happen because maybe the Bloomberg is correct and maybe the U.S. Intelligence Committee is right or elements of it that the PLA just doesn't think it's ready enough. And maybe, you

know, Avril Haines is staring into Xi Jinping's heart when she says that Xi Jinping doesn't want a war. Maybe Xi Jinping is not deceiving us when he's saying, "Oh, I want to be..." Although actually he's not even being that deceptive.

But when you put these factors together and you can clearly see that the American giant is stretched to go back to President Nixon's kind of terminology, I think this is a really, really... And by the way, maybe if you go in this year and then you deal with a different situation, if President Trump and the Republicans are elected in 2025, it's a new reality that's harder to deal with or that you set to use my term, the fait accompli, you have a different reality that you can then negotiate from. I think that's a very, very worrisome situation. And, you know, I mean, we could have a bunch of Democrats on here. I don't know what they would say that would disprove the evidence and the kind of deductive rational analysis that's there for all to see.

Mary: Well, Monica Crowley, to Bridge's point, we probably should have elucidated this earlier, but the war in Gaza continues. The Israelis are still fighting there. They're also fighting on their northern front. We see attacks every day by Hezbollah into Israel. We've seen upheaval in the West Bank. We've seen an overt Iranian attack just in these last hours shooting a missile, killing four, wounding six in Kurdistan and in northern Iraq. The attacks on U.S. forces in Syria continue. We have the attacks on shipping vessels in the Red Sea. So that expansion of the conflict, set Asia aside, certainly seems to be happening in the Middle East.

Monica: Oh, yeah. Oh, absolutely. And given the profound weakness of the current American president and his team, many of whom are frankly incapacitated, starting with the commander-in-chief. You know, it's no wonder that our adversaries are taking full advantage of this moment. They see a window of opportunity and they're gonna take it. And frankly, you can't blame them. Right? I mean, they'd be remiss not serving their own national interests if they didn't take this opportunity. But it's extremely dangerous to American forces in the region, to our allies, and we see the consequences of this.

I wanna go back to Nadia's question about Saudi Arabia and sort of how it is factoring into where we are right now. And I wanna raise an issue that I don't think gets enough attention nationally or even internationally, but certainly here in the United States is something that Secretary Pompeo touched on. And that is the fact that the U.S. dollar has been the world's reserve currency since the end of World War II, because the dollar has always been considered a safe haven, stable, solid, and backed by the power and dominance of the United States government.

But now, you know, our uniparty... Uniparty. You can see where my mind is after Iowa. Our unipolar dominance seems to be getting diluted certainly under this administration. And now, you know, we just surpassed \$34 trillion in national debt. So we are increasingly being perceived as economically weaker and speeding toward an economic brick wall. And our adversaries see this as well as our allies.

One of the big anchors of economic stability and the global economic superstructure since the end of World War II has been the U.S. dollar. And one of the big anchors of that has been that oil has been traded in dollars. Right? So now you've got the BRIC countries led by China and they're beginning to move away from the dollar. I

don't know how quickly or easily that that can be done, but they've certainly expressed that intention. And now you have Saudi Arabia expressing openness to trading oil in a different currency. That obviously would be catastrophic to the U.S. economy and plunge the world into a global depression, not recession.

So this is a very dangerous set of developments here with regard to the dollar, with regard to oil being traded potentially in a different currency. And it's something that we have to watch and stay on top of and add that to the list of messes that the next administration is gonna have to clean up and deal with.

Mary: Well, President Nixon, I believe, called this part of the world the Persian Gulf, the oil jugular of the West to emphasize that energy point, but also how it can choke us off as well. Congressman Waltz, just wanted to come back to you because I know that you see a lot more than we do. You get briefings in Congress about the breadth and the depth of the threats, not just to Israel, but to our forces in the region. Can you shed any light on what you're hearing and how concerned are you?

Congressman Waltz: Well, just to answer Ambassador O'Brien's question, I don't know really who else could be on the march already. The cartels are taking full advantage. We're seeing Venezuela make overtures about a third of its neighbor, Guyana. Obviously, Iran is on the march not only across the region through its proxies, but now for a full breakout in its nuclear program. And Russia is literally re-gearing its entire economy to be a North Korea-style wartime economy to grind away and speak.

And we haven't spoken of North Korea, but without getting into details, the amount of assistance that it's providing is significant and growing to Putin in terms of everything from artillery to missile technology to what have you. So that axis of evil is alive and well. I think the question and Bridge hit on it, is does Xi see this as a period of maximum opportunity and therefore us as a period of maximum danger?

And the big question mark on this, and I'm on both armed services and intel and pounding away on our community, is the issue of PLA readiness. We're very good, and we saw this, you know, a key lesson from Ukraine is our intelligence community is the best of the world at tracking tanks, planes, ships, satellites, seeing them move, understanding capabilities, understanding their modernization.

What we completely missed, and I just don't think there's been a real reckoning here yet, what we completely missed is the issue of Russian army readiness. I mean, you know, with Chairman Milley famously saying they're gonna slice through Kiev in 72 hours, and we missed the levels of corruption, the lack of training, the lack of recruit morale, their inability to do combined arms warfare.

So you transport that over to evaluating, and this isn't too big of it. I mean, this isn't as pejorative on our own intelligence community as it probably sounds. It's very hard to collect on a society, on a military that is incentivized to lie to itself all the way up the chain. But if you transpose that onto the PLA readiness, do they believe they are ready to take Taiwan? Do they believe they have the capability? What does Xi believe about his own readiness? How much of a bill of goods is he being fed up the

chain? And then what does he believe about both Taiwanese and American and coalition quad, so to speak, readiness?

That's a big question mark. And the other big question mark is, does he, because of his own economic problems and because of his view of our readiness and our political dysfunction at times, as they may view it, does he accelerate his plans because of that? Or does he delay them in order to deal with his own internal problems? And those are things that I can just tell you from an oversight perspective, I'll be pounding away on to get the best answers that we can for the next administration.

Mary: Well, we'd love to be a fly on the wall in some of those hearings. We're getting close to the end, so please start thinking about your closing thoughts. But before we do that, Alex Wong, you were personally involved in the North Korean negotiations. Can you shed any more light and add to what the congressman said about North Korea's role in the Middle East conflict, the topic of tonight, and/or its supplying of Russia?

Alex: Yeah. Well, you know, I'm not sure how much they currently are going to be involved in the Middle East. I think they definitely have that capability, as they've shown, to ship arms over to the Ukraine front. But really, strategically, what North Korea is doing here is it's enjoying the great powers competing. It's enjoying the fruits of when Russia needs its artillery, its ammunition, it can get benefits from Russia. And they're doing the same with China.

That's why you see Kim Jong Un kind of feeling his oats right now, launching missiles, making declarations, because he is breaking the sanctions regime with the help of China and Russia. And beyond getting the financial benefits when the great powers are fighting like this, I'm very curious to know what else he is getting from the Russians in exchange for the ammunition he's giving.

Now, the Russians historically have been very jealous of proliferation on, you know, missile technology, on nuclear. But there are other things they could be transferring, whether it's on submarine technology or other technology that North Korea feels that it can use to bolster its own conventional military, where it really does need a lot of help. So it's a very worrying situation when American deterrence fails, when there is great power conflict and tension, because powers or regional powers like North Korea can use that situation to its own benefit.

Mary: Well, before we go to Ambassador O'Brien for his closing thoughts, I just wanted to open it up to the seminar members. Is there anything that we've missed here, any angle that we haven't hit on, whether it's Iran, the economic angle of the conflict, the access of disruptors that Nadia talked about that you'd like to add?

Monica: Mary? Could I just jump in?

Mary: Yes. Please, Monica. Please, please.

Monica: One thing that we haven't spoken about today, which I think is such a critical piece of the Middle East puzzle is the role of Qatar because it's a very complicated situation there. Obviously, we have a major military base there. But the

question is, is Qatar a vital U.S. ally? Is it a tacit terror supporter or is it some combination of both? Right? Like an oil fueled player of the double game. And I think that it's obviously a complicated question and a complicated relationship, but it's something that I think deserves airing out.

Mary: And are we using our influence to code those activities of supporting terror? Lots of questions there, probably enough for an entire other seminar.

Nadia: Another show. Yeah, exactly.

Mary: That's right. Nadia, did you wanna jump in here?

Nadia: No, no, no. I was just saying that's another show. That's another show.

Mary: Bridge, Alex?

Alex: Maybe just one last point. We talked a lot about energy. I mean, one point I wanna make here is I think there's a delusion when...even if we move forward on the energy security policies that I think as Republicans, we generally support of producing energy here in the United States, that doesn't insulate us from the Middle East. That doesn't diminish the importance of the Middle East strategically to us.

Not to get too detailed, but obviously, oil is a world market. So prices are affected if there is a cutoff or a strain on the supply in the Middle East. But beyond that, even if America could produce as much energy as we could use, we'd have no ability to be a swing producer to control prices because of the nature of our oil reserves, to up our production to control prices. Saudi Arabia really is the only country that can do that. That makes them a very strong or important partner for us, and again, enhances the need for us to be present in the Middle East to see it as a strategic pivot point and not step away from it, which is where I really disagree with the Biden administration that they tried to "park" the Middle East to concentrate on other parts of the world. You need to look at the Middle East, have a real strategy there in order to expand and defend your interest across the world, not just in the region.

Mary: And Nixon spent time both not just in Israel, but in Saudi Arabia and the broader Middle East, to your point. We only have a minute left, unfortunately. So seminar members, you've lost your chance to a closing statement. Ambassador O'Brien, our co-chair, over to you for final remarks.

Amb. O'Brien: Well, I was taken by something that Mike Pompeo said, and that is he's rooting for the Biden administration. And I am, too. I've been rooting for him for three years because it's good for America if we're strong, we've got a presence that's respected, and asserting American interests overseas and being a force for good. But unfortunately, they're now three years in. This is no longer a new administration. The old Obama policies that we hope they'd move away from are still in place, and then they're doubling down on it.

So we've gotta return to a peace through strength posture as a country. We've heard that from everybody in the seminar. One of the things that gives me real hope for the country is a sense of optimism by the people on this seminar. I mean, everyone on

this seminar, I think, is gonna play a role in government in a new Republican administration. But I think the American people are gonna have to make a decision. Do they want more weakness? Do they want more appeasement that leads to provocations of allies? Or do they wanna return to a peace through strength policy that we had under Ronald Reagan and that we had under President Trump.

And I think it's gonna be a very stark choice for the American people. I try not to get too political in these conversations. But the Biden administration has shown that they're not gonna return to the Ronald Reagan's peace through strength policies or the successful policies of the Trump administration. It's three years in. They've had their opportunity. They're not gonna do it. And we've seen the results, and it's catastrophic for the country.

So I'm hoping, I'm glad to see that Mike is out in the cold doing the caucusing. And I think the American people are gonna have an important decision to make. I hope they make the right decision and we return to a posture of strength as a country because that's good for America, but it's also good for our democratic partners and allies around the world, and it's good for world peace and freedom.

Mary: Well, a lot to chew on tonight. We've covered a lot of angles. I wanna thank our co-chairs, Ambassador O'Brien and Secretary Pompeo, for their contributions. I'd like to thank our seminar members, the Nixon Foundation, and you for watching. That's it for this month's Nixon Seminar. I'm Mary Kissel. Good night.

[01:00:12]

[silence]