National security. This term carries the consciousness of the outside world as a potentially dangerous place. How is this nation to stay secure, to stay safe? Where are the threats? What are the best ways to reduce them? These questions don't necessarily come with clear answers. Russia -- is that threat exaggerated? Or Iran? Does getting tougher on Iran make sense? Or NATO as an alliance. Does that alliance itself still make sense? Well, we think these issues are nuanced, and difficult, and therefore eminently debatable. So, let's do it. I'm John Donvan, here with our live audience at Symphony Space in New York City. For this one we are using the format we call "Unresolved," in which five debaters vigorously debate independently. They are not on teams; they're all flying solo, and they're taking on not just one resolution, but a whole series of them. This series, called "Unresolved: U.S. National Security." First, please, let's meet our debaters. First, welcome Derek Chollet.
Defied Washington and Re-Defined America's Role in the World." You had a number of posts -- senior posts -- in the Obama administration, including Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Co-editor of a foreign policy blog called Shadow Government, written by members of a group who would describe themselves as "the loyal opposition." What exactly do we mean by loyal opposition?

Derek Chollet:
Well, it's not the deep state. But it's approaching problems, wanting, of course, what's good for the country -- but doing so, not being reflexively partisan. Being brave enough to not pull punches and say when the administration's getting it wrong, but also having the courage to say when it's getting it right.

00:02:06

That's been courage I've had to use rarely recently, but that's very important, that --

John Donvan:

That answered my next question, so thanks very much. Ladies and gentleman, once again, Derek Chollet. Our next debater, please welcome Steve Cohen.

[applause]

Stephen, welcome to Intelligence Squared U.S. You're contributing editor at the nation, professor emeritus of Russian studies at NYU and at Princeton, author of a lot of books, including one that's about to come out called, "The War with Russia," a dissenting narrative from Putin and Ukraine to Trump and Russia Gate. You have been really, really interested in Russia since your college days. Where did that all start?

Stephen Cohen:
I think it was an accident. My Russian friends say it was fate. When I was young, before most of you were born, I was in Birmingham, England, finishing a year of study. I had left 30 days and 300 books.

00:03:03

I intended, because I read Hemingway, to go to Spain and watch the bulls run, but I was walking in the working-class district of Birmingham, and I saw a sign, "30 days in the Soviet Union for $300."

[laughter]

I was no dummy. I got on the ship. I saw five Soviet cities awakening from Stalin's terror and still isolated behind the Iron Curtain. I was enthralled, and that became my fate.
John Donvan:
No bulls?

Stephen Cohen:
I never made it to the bulls, no.

John Donvan:
Sorry to hear that. Ladies and gentlemen, once again, Stephen Cohen.

[applause]

Our next debater, please welcome Kori Schake.

[applause]

Kori, welcome back to Intelligence Squared. You are deputy director general of the international institute for strategic studies. You served on the National Security Council under President George W. Bush.

00:04:00

You helped create NATO's allied command transformation and the NATO response force. You have been critical of President Trump, but you've called on your friends in the administration, "Please don't resign." Why not?

Kori Schake:
Because I think, especially now with democracy in America under pressure, it's really important for people of integrity to serve in our government.

John Donvan:
Thank you, Kori Schake. Very simple and to the point. Ladies and gentlemen, Kori Schake.

[applause]

Our next debater, please welcome John Mearsheimer.

[applause]

John, welcome back to Intelligence Squared. You are a professor at the University of Chicago. You are one of the nation's most influential political scientists. You are also a best-selling author. Your newest book, "The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities," comes out next week. We're on the upper west side of New York, so tell us, what's this liberal delusion you're talking about?
[laughter]

00:04:59

John Mearsheimer:
That's very clever, John. It's a book that attempts to explain why liberal hegemony, which is the very militaristic foreign policy that the United States has pursued since the end of the Cold War has failed miserably and helped Donald Trump in the White House.

John Donvan:
Thank you, John Mearsheimer.

[applause]

And please welcome Reuel Marc Gerecht.

[applause]

Reuel, welcome back to Intelligence Squared. You're a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Before that, you were a case officer at the CIA. You've written three books, including, "Know Thine Enemy: A Spy's Journey into Revolutionary Iran." What is that book about?

Reuel Gerecht:
Well, I had studied Iran my entire life, yet I had not been there.

00:06:02

When I was in the CIA, of course they wouldn't let me go in, though I had sent agents into Iran. When I left, I tried to get a pilgrimage Visa, but the Iranians saw through that cheap trick, so I decided to take a little clandestine truck trip into Iran. And, you know, when you're young, you do stupid things, and if you're lucky, you overcome them.

John Donvan:
And here you are, so it must have worked out?

Reuel Gerecht:
And here I am.

John Donvan:
Okay, once again everybody, ladies and gentlemen, the teams -- the debaters arguing tonight's series of resolutions. For each resolution, the debaters will declare in the moment that I ask them what their position is on this yes or no to the statement that I give them. They will then
have 90 seconds to tell you why they take the position that they are taking. If they hit the 90-second limit -- and there’s going to be a clock behind them -- but if they hit the 90 seconds, you’re going to hear a tone that sounds like this. Beep, beep.

[laughter]

John Donvan:
Okay, that’s not really how it’s going to be. I was improvising. But there really is -- well, maybe I should do that.

00:07:02

But there really is going to be a tone, and that -- at that point, when you hear that tone, you have to stop talking. So, we’re going to go in random speaking order as we begin the first round, and the way we’re going to do that is I have these nifty playing cards with all of your faces on them.

Kori Schake:
[inaudible].

John Donvan:
Sorry?

Kori Schake:
Baseball cards.

John Donvan:
Yeah, I’ve got your batting average on the back

Male Speaker:
Stats.

John Donvan:
-- on the back and everything like that. I would love to have somebody pick one of these randomly for me. Could you just come up and -- our first speaker is Kori Schake.

So, let’s move on to our first resolution. NATO; Nato, the alliance born of a great war with the aim of protecting Western Europe against a Soviet threat. But the Soviets are gone, and NATO has gone to war in places as far distanced from the North Atlantic, for which it’s named, as Afghanistan and Libya. Does this arrangement still make sense? Let’s find out. On the resolution NATO Is No Longer Fit for Purpose, Kori Schake, do you declare yes or no?

00:08:01
Kori Schake:
I believe NATO is still fit for purpose.

John Donvan:
So, that means you’re taking the position no.

Kori Schake:
I disagree with the statement that it is not fit for purpose.

John Donvan:
And you have 90 seconds to make your point.

Kori Schake:
So, the people who put together the NATO alliance weren’t, you know, starry-eyed college professors arguing in a faculty lounge. They were the people who had fought World War II and were really worried that unless the countries of Europe and the United States banded together, we would not be able to anticipate threats as they arose, and the cost for each of us of defending our societies could be overwhelming. And so, the cost-sharing of the NATO allies, and the burden-sharing of the NATO allies, both helped us prevent the Soviet Union and Russia and other countries from becoming threats to us, but it also created the basis for the historic rapprochement between France and Germany, which I think would not have happened if the United States, a stronger, broader-shoulder power than Britain, France, or Germany, hadn’t been a stabilizer in the equation.

00:09:15
The argument that the United States spends too much on NATO? That’s true if you look at the entirety of the defense budget, but we don’t use the entirety of the defense budget for the defense of Europe. What we contribute to the defense of Europe is proportional compared to what Europeans contribute for their own defense.

John Donvan:
Thank you, Kori Schake.

[applause]

John Donvan:
Let’s move to our next debater, John Mearsheimer. John Mearsheimer, on the resolution NATO Is No Longer Fit for Purpose, do you declare yes or no?

John Mearsheimer:
John, I’m a yes, and I respectfully disagree almost completely with Kori. I think that when NATO was set up, the deal with the Soviet threat — it made eminently good sense to create that institution. I think that institution did a fine job as long as the Soviet Union was there.
The Soviet Union, however, disappeared. There’s no longer any meaningful threat in Europe, and therefore, I think it’s time for the United States to go home for two really important reasons to draw down our forces in Europe and leave security in Europe to the Europeans.

The first is China. The United States should be pivoting to Asia, because to the extent that we have a threat in the international system we have to deal with, it is China. It’s not Russia; it’s not Germany; it’s not any European country, so there’s no good security imperative for being there. And there is a good security imperative for pivoting to Asia. But furthermore, we ought to spend some of that money we spend on Europe in fixing the subways here in New York. Your subway system is absolutely terrible.

[applause]

Your schools are in terrible shape. So, there’s all sorts of reasons for the United States not to spend money defending other people who are perfectly capable of defending themselves.

Now, you might say the Europeans are not capable of defending themselves against the Russians. I think you’re wrong. The Europeans without the Americans have a gross national product that's 10 times the size of Russia, a population that's almost four times as big.

And they spend five times as much money on defense.

John Donvan:
Thank you, John Mearsheimer.

[applause]

So, our next speaker on the resolution "NATO is no longer fit for purpose," Reuel Marc Gerecht. Do you declare yes or no? No.

Reuel Gerecht:
Yeah. I mean, I think NATO obviously -- it should be obvious; it still serves a purpose. If you go around and you travel to Europe, you talk to the foreign policy crowds in all the European countries -- whether it be in the west or the east; you don't even have to go to the Baltic Republics -- you won't find anyone saying, "Oh, I wish NATO were dead." They believe that Russia is a threat, and I think they have the grounds to know. I would also suggest that it's rather important for the United States just to stay in Europe for the Europeans.
I mean, there's a wonderful book out there -- Luigi Barzini's [spelled phonetically] "Europeans."

And if -- those of you who can remember him -- the last chapter in that book is "The Americans." I think we should know enough from history that Europe is much -- in much, much better shape. The likelihood of turmoil, tumult, and carnage is vastly left -- less if the Americans stay. In fact, I would say it's non-existent if the Americans stay. And I think it's delusional to believe that the Europeans couldn't misfire again. I don't think, yet, the welfare state has enfeebled their passions, creativity, and dynamism. In the past, that has led to bloodshed. We shouldn't want to tempt fate. And I don't think that, really, the amount of money that we spend in Europe on NATO is going to make a hoot's worth on difference on the subway system in this city.

00:13:08

[laughter]

[applause]

We're talking, really, about small potatoes here.

John Donvan:
Thank you. Reuel Marc Gerecht.

[applause]

Next to argue this resolution -- NATO is no longer fit for purpose -- Derek Chollet. Derek, do you declare yes or no?

Derek Chollet:
John, I declare no. NATO is fit for purpose. NATO is one of America's greatest assets. Consider our two strategic rivals: Russia and China. And ask yourselves, how many willing partners do they have -- countries that they haven't bought off or strong-armed in some way? Countries that actually want to work with them, want their militaries to develop together, to train together, to cooperate and defend one another? Countries that believe that an attack on one is an attack against all. The answer is no. Yet, for seven decades, the United States has enjoyed the partnership of an alliance that today is 29 countries strong.

00:14:00

Some of these countries are large, some are small. They've helped keep the peace in Europe. They're working with American soldiers today on the ground in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, and they're working with the U.S. military on confronting the challenges of the future. Now, can working with partners prove time-consuming and frustrating? Absolutely.
NATO has always had its share of its challenges -- adapting and responding to new threats. Today's no different, which is why the alliance needs reforms to make itself faster and more agile, and why the Europeans do need to spend more on their defense. But that's a far cry from saying that NATO is no longer fit for purpose and needs to be retired. Ask yourselves: would the U.S. be better able to protect its interest and help solve the challenges of the future without willing and capable allies standing by its side? Think about it: if NATO did not exist today, we would be racing to invent it.

[applause]

John Donvan:
Thank you, Derek Chollet.

[applause]

00:15:01

Our final opening statement on the resolution -- NATO is no longer fit for purpose -- please welcome Stephen Cohen.

[applause]

Stephen Cohen:
Well, I live on the Upper East -- West Side, around the corner.

But I hail from Kentucky, so I don't have any liberal illusions. And I may be the only person who up here who actually rides the New York subway every day. But the question is different. Looming over this debate is something that hasn't yet been mentioned -- the disintegration of what, for some reason, has been called for a generation the U.S.-led post-Cold War "liberal world order." What a misnomer. It's not post-Cold War; we're in a new Cold War. It's been only variously liberal. It hasn't been worldwide. Russia has been excluded. And the order that's been brought has meant a lot of wars. So, NATO -- NATO lost its status purpose [spelled phonetically] with the Soviet Union. It very quickly found another -- expanding from Germany all the way to -- literally on Russia's borders.

00:16:03

What's the result, then? They tell us it brought security. Where's the security? What's it's brought instead is a new and more dangerous cold war because this cold war has its epicenter not in faraway Berlin, but right on Russia's borders.

Along the way, it's generated three American-Russian proxy wars, Georgia, Ukraine, Syria with another one brewing in the Baltic area. I don't know what the real purpose of NATO should be.
Maybe I could be convinced it should become an anti-terrorist organization, because I think that's the number one threat to all of us.

John Donvan:
Your time is up, Stephen. And Stephen, I wanted to ask you --

Stephen Cohen:
But I --

John Donvan:
-- if you -- Stephen, your time is up, and I wanted to ask you if you could show us the -- your flag, which side you're arguing. Yes. Okay, and Kori, can you restore yours to -- so that -- because I would get confused. All right, let's have some discussion. We have three no's on this resolution, and these no's are actually reverse negative, in this case. Those no's are actually supportive of NATO, and we have two yes's, which are very skeptical of NATO.

00:17:05

What I heard in these conversations so far was a lot of focus on Russia, before that, the Soviet Union, and the security of Europe. But I want to point out that NATO is also operating in Afghanistan and Cocebo [spelled phonetically], and in the Mediterranean. It's taken a leading training mission in Iraq. It's supporting the African Union. These are -- these things have nothing to do with Europe. This is -- I don't know if you would call this mission creep or what else, but Kori, I want you to take on that aspect of NATO's being fit for purpose. What is its purpose, according to your no argument here, if it's not limited to the security of Europe?

Kori Schake:
So, the one thing all of those military operations you named have in common is that it was the United States who dragged our European allies into participating in them. So, one reason that NATO is fit for purpose is because it is the way we organize the most capable countries most willing to help us do what we want to do in the world.

00:18:03

And I would just remind people that the only time that NATO's mutual defense pledge was called in was after September 11th in defense of us, not us in defense of them.

John Donvan:
Derek Chollet, can you also pick up on that point of NATO being in these non-European places?

Derek Chollet:
Well, NATO's primary mission is to help secure the piece in Europe, and that was a success of the Cold War, and I would argue it's -- has been a sustained success in the post-Cold War era. However, when I worked in the Pentagon, we saw Europeans, and therefore NATO, as our
foundational partners militarily. Whenever the United States was faced with a problem in the world, the first folks we would call would be our NATO allies. And NATO, as an organization -- it's like a set of muscles, ready and able and capable of acting with the United States in partnership on some of the world's toughest problems. And no other country in the world, none of our chief rivals, certainly, enjoys that capability.

00:19:02

John Donvan:
John Mearsheimer, take this on as well, please.

John Mearsheimer:
Yeah, I just want to make two points. One is that when you talk about NATO from a favorable point of view, it's all part of a story where the United States has a responsibility to keep piece in virtually every area of the world. And, furthermore, it's important to have these European allies, because they can help us in all these crazy escapades that we engage in where we get our nose bloody. Libya -- look at Libya. The Europeans were really wonderful in helping us destabilize Libya and create all sorts of problems not only in Libya, but with regard to refugees inside of Europe. Furthermore, NATO expansion, as Steve was alluding to. NATO expansion, which was all designed just to keep NATO alive, has failed miserably. It's turned Eastern Europe into a real mess, and we're more -- now more deeply involved in Eastern Europe than ever when we should be either pivoting to Asia or spending the money here in the United States.

00:20:04

John Donvan:
On the question of the pivot to Asia, Reuel, you made the point that you think that Europe is -- we can't take Europe's security and relative passivity for -- that's the wrong word -- passivism -- pacificness -- peacefulness for granted. But John Mearsheimer was saying we have limited resources and there are more dangerous places that we should be pivoting to and paying attention to, for example, China. We can't do both. What about that?

Reuel Gerecht:
Well, one, I think we can do both. We historically have done both. Whether we choose to bear the burden is a different issue. I mean, the United States is a unique country. It has born an unusual burden since World War II. I would argue it's born -- the fruit is enormous. Now, I mean, China is a huge issue coming at us. The growing militarization of Chinese politics is a big problem. Their muscle is growing every single day. We need to maintain the alliances in Asia. I think you can check the Chinese, but it's going to be a risky process. We're going to have to stand firm on Taiwan.

00:21:05

John Donvan:
But it does -- so the point of NATO -- you’re saying that in no way would you say that the need to deal with China --

Male Speaker:
No.

John Donvan:
-- cancels out --

Male Speaker:
I mean, again, we’re not talking [unintelligible] -- if you add all this money up, it’s comparatively -- to what we spend on domestic affairs, it’s peanuts.

John Donvan:
Stephen Cohen, Reuel said in his opening statement that it’s tempting fate to pull out of Europe, meaning -- I think what he’s saying fate actually is, is Russia. Take that on.

Reuel Gerecht:
Well, we’ve got to do that when we get to the Russia threat, and I don’t think there’s any. But I’d like to quarrel a little with what I read in the paper every day, though I -- John Mearsheimer can probably do better. I read every day that NATO is “the greatest military alliance in the history of the world.” You all have seen this, right? Well, first of all, NATO hasn’t fought a war as an alliance yet, so we’re really not sure about that. Secondly, when NATO does fight wars, it’s a handful of willing partners with the United States; the coalition; the willing.

00:22:04

But look at the wars; John mentioned them. What have we got? Serbia ended up to be a disaster. Everybody in this room, not just those with liberal illusions, would agree Iraq was a disaster. Libya; we’ve been in Afghanistan longer than any other war. Where is this greatest military alliance in the world? Where’s the security it’s brought? This is the essential question. We have a history. Doesn’t matter what our ideologies are, or our political affiliations are. The only thing that’s admissible is historical evidence, and we have 25 years of historical evidence, and what we have to show for it is one of the worst crises in the history of the world before us today.

John Donvan:
Okay, I’d like to have Kori respond to that, but one other thing I want to say --

Kori Schake:
Sure. Well, two things. Having friends to fight alongside you doesn’t guarantee that you’re going to fight the right wars or have the right strategies.

00:23:00
It means you don’t have to do it all by yourself. And so, the -- part of the answer to the China rising is it’s going to be a lot easier to manage a rising China if, as is now already happening, Britain and France are helping us police freedom of navigation. The Japanese are helping us do that. The Dutch are helping us do that. So, it matters to have allied forces than on our own. On the question of Russia and wars that provoked, it seems to be likelier that we would have more wars, skirmishes with Russia in places like Georgia, if you didn’t have the NATO alliances to rule Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries out of bounds.

[applause]

Stephen Cohen:
I want to be clear on one thing you said, because it flabbergasts me. I think you probably didn’t really mean it. If friends get us into wars, they’re really friends?

00:24:00

Kori Schake:
I didn’t say friends --

Stephen Cohen:
I thought that was --

Kori Schake:
[unintelligible] listen to words.

Stephen Cohen:
What did you say?

Kori Schake:
What I said was friends fighting alongside you doesn’t prevent you either making bad choices about war or picking bad strategies for wars.

Stephen Cohen:

Reuel Gerecht:
Yeah, I’m just saying I’m actually sort of astonished, and I’m proud, I mean, the Europeans have lasted as long as they have in Afghanistan. I have to give them credit.

Kori Schake:
[unintelligible] not affect [unintelligible] that way in --

Reuel Gerecht:
Let’s be frank. I mean, the welfare states in Europe have enfeebled the militaries in Europe. The welfare state ate the Royal Navy. That they were able, actually, to come out and deploy the forces they did I think is quite commendable. I wish they’d stayed longer; I wish they’d spend more money. But I would just repeat a little story that was told me to by the British deputy commander of ICEF [spelled phonetically] when I was Afghanistan one time, and I asked him about the various European contributions. And he said, you know, “Some of them are terribly impressive on the battlefield, but then again, you know, those like the French, and the French commander comes to me once every two weeks, and he says the thing that makes the American and the British commanders just start to go pitty-patter, and that is, ‘Who do you want us to kill?’”

00:25:16

[laughter]

Reuel Gerecht:
That is the sign of a good ally.

John Donvan:
John Mearsheimer.

John Mearsheimer:
I just want to pick up on Reuel’s point that the European militaries are feeble militaries. These are tiny militaries, and the reason they want us to be in Europe to protect them is so that they don’t have to pay money for defense, and Uncle Sucker [spelled phonetically] pays the money to protect them. And the idea that the Europeans are going to help us contain China going to help us contain China is not a serious argument.

These countries have no power projection capability. They're, in fact, going to trade with the Chinese. And they'll be -- if anything -- a thorn in our side. If we weren't in Europe protecting them, they'd have to spend more money on themselves, and we'd be free to pivot to Asia, and we'd be free to fix the New York subways.

00:26:07

[laughter]

Derek Chollet:
Well, look, I --

John Donvan:
Derek Chollet.

Male Speaker:
I'll take that back.

Derek Chollet:
We are certainly in Europe to help protect Europe, but the Europeans are our partners as we project our power in the world. Now, we can have a debate of the right or wrong way to project U.S. power, and whether the right decisions have been made. But the U.S. has never gotten into a fight because the NATO allies have dragged us into that fight.

Male Speaker:
Libya?

Derek Chollet:
And I want to pick up something else that Reuel mentioned which was that when you go to Europe, when you go to the Baltics, when you go throughout western Europe -- France, Germany -- you hear this demand for the United States. I mean, think of the drama we had over the summer when President Trump went to the NATO summit and talked about whether or not the U.S. would stay in the alliance.

And there's panic throughout the European continent. They're worried that the United States is going to go away; that U.S. leadership is going to be diminished. And think of the reason for that.

00:27:02

They're asking for us. They want our help. They want us to be there with them. And that's a very, very unique position for a country to be in. Russia and China do not have those kinds of problems. And this is an asset for us that we can squander with the wrong decisions and the wrong kind of leadership.

John Donvan:
So, Stephen Cohen, take that on –

[applause].

I'll -- the argument that there's -- first of all, there's a commonality of values, but also bonds that tie us to these nations. That's a good thing, that's an asset, that's precious -- and you don't want to squander it.

Stephen Cohen:
Well, historically, that's been true. I mean, most of us or many of us in this room had ancestors who came from the European continent. So, that's undeniable. On the other hand, President Trump seems to have so unnerved them that a lot of Europeans -- including European leaders -- are talking about going their own way.
So, I'm not sure how tied to us they feel.

00:28:00

I find it flabbergasting and almost -- and I don't mean to be rude to anybody -- but fairytale, cartoon-like to say that Europe needs us to defend them from some threat. This ancient civilization, richer than we are -- capable politically of not doing absolutely ludicrous things as we have done. Can't manage and safeguard its own -- same -- its own fortunes without Derek worrying every day about he's going to protect them. To me, it's this old American arrogance, the indispensable nation. I mean, can it really be so today? And by the way -- we'll come to it later -- what's the threat to Europe? Please don't tell me Russia's a threat to Europe.

John Donvan:
Reuel, last word. And if you can do it in 30 seconds, please.

Reuel Gerecht:
Yeah. I just have to say -- I mean, whatever you think of America's various adventures since World War II, there's simply no comparison with the ludicrous, bloody adventures of Europe in the 20th century.

00:29:05

And the notion that somehow the Europeans are all cured and all adults now, and will behave, and do the right thing -- I just beg to differ with that. I think that is a historical mistake. And for what it costs us to stay in Europe, it is a cheap endeavor.

John Donvan:
And that concludes discussion of the resolution: NATO is no longer fit for purpose.

[applause]

We're moving on to our next resolution. It deals with Russia, yes. Russia makes trouble for the U.S., interfering in elections, meddling in the Middle East. But just how potentially dangerous is Moscow to the U.S., really? It has nukes, but an unimpressive economy. It has Putin, but a plethora of domestic problems. Might we be over-worrying the Russia factor or are we not worried enough? Let's find out. Our resolution for this round -- the Russia threat is overblown. Making his first -- making the opening statement in regard to this question, Stephen Cohen, on the resolution "the Russian threat is overblown." Do you declare yes or no?

00:30:06

Stephen Cohen:
Yeah. And you could write a book about it. And in fact, I just have.
But let me just wrap it up, and I don't need 90 seconds. It's what they used to call a no-brainer. Putin's Russia represents absolutely no threat to the United States except those threats we ourselves have provoked, mainly through NATO expansion. Second, Putin himself, contrary to the newspapers, has not been mainly an aggressive leader -- you would think that's his middle name -- but a reactive leader, and that's where he's seen mainly in Russia's wealth. Third, Russia today, like it or not, is again a very great world power, certainly militarily and diplomatically. Herein lies the tragedy, and on this I'll stop.

Putin's Russia, anyone's Russia, should be America's number one national security partner in the world. Washington squandered that opportunity after 1991, and it's continued to squander it today by inventing or provoking threats residing in Russia which do not exist.

To speak next on the resolution, "The Russia Threat is Overblown," Kori Schake. Do you declare yes or no?

I agree that the Russia threat is overblown, but not because the Russians pose no threat to us or desire to pose no threat to us. I think Russia is largely a threat to us through its weakness, rather than through its strength, and through its own choices, rather than through our choices.

The Russian government under Vladimir Putin defines its security has having its neighbors be insecure: the invasion of Ukraine, the invasion of Crimea, the invasion of Georgia. They have frozen conflicts in Akazia, Nagona Carabagh [spelled phonetically]

-- the military exercises that they are holding, simulating nuclear weapons use in the Baltic States. What Russia as a state appears to want is other countries to fail, and that will make it feel safe. That's why I think Russia is a threat to us. Second, they're a threat to us because they are still a large nuclear weapons armed state, and the likelihood of miscalculation or war breaking out and escalating to nuclear use, I think we are not worried enough about that as a general problem in international relations.
And the third reason I think Russia is a threat to us is because they want to be seen that way, right? John McCain always used to say that Russia wasn't -- didn't have an economy. It was just a gas station.

And they actually don't have much of an economy outside of oil, and yet they are intervening in Syria --

John Donvan:
Kori Schake, I have to cut you off. Thank you very much. Your time is up.

[applause]

On the resolution, "The Russia Threat is Overblown," our next speaker John Mearsheimer. John, do you declare yes or no?

John Mearsheimer:
I vote yes. I think that the Russian threat is completely overblown. I think the Russophobia in this country is off the charts. It's almost hard to believe how much Russophobia there is in the United States. Now, I do think that the Russians are a low-level threat in social media, but who really cares?

00:33:00

The question is whether or not they're a strategic threat to the United States, a military threat in Europe? And the answer there is almost certainly, "No."

First of all, they don't have the capability to conquer any meaningful territory in Eastern Europe.

The idea that this is the second coming of the Wehrmacht, or the second coming of the Soviet Union is a laughable argument. And not only do they not have the capability, they have no interest because they understand full well what happens when you try and conquer other countries. They occupied Eastern Europe for a long time, and they were just glad to get out of town. They don't want to go back in there. You say, "What about Ukraine?" I agree completely with Steve, and I've written about this. The Ukraine crisis is a result of our making. It's the result of NATO expansion. It's the result of the fact that we tried to make Ukraine part of the west, and the Russians found that intolerable, which is completely understandable, from their point of view. To the extent that they are a threat, it's because they have thousands of nuclear weapons, and that should scare the living bejesus out of all of us, but the fact that we're provoking them in Eastern Europe and in other places just makes it possible that those nuclear weapons will be used, and that's will be used, and that's something we want to avoid at all costs.

00:35:15
John Donvan:
Thank you, John Mearsheimer.

[applause]

John Donvan:
The Russia threat is overblown. Reuel Marc Gerecht, do you declare yes or no?

Reuel Gerecht:
No. I mean, I have a bit of a split decision on this one. First, I mean, I think the threat is easily manageable, particularly if we maintain NATO. I notice that a few individuals up here probably don’t want to maintain NATO, and they’re oddly the ones who believe that Russia isn’t a threat. I think if NATO goes down, then Russia’s problems loom large. I will just say this: I mean, if you have an individual, a dictator, who is sending military intelligence agents out into small cities in Great Britain and letting loose nerve agents, that’s a problem. If you have a Russian --

[applause]

00:36:01

If you have a Russian dictator that is helping in the slaughter of tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of Syrians, that is a problem.

[applause]

00:38:02

And I want to dwell on that just a little bit more. I mean, I think people tend to make light of what’s going on in Syria. It is a vast humanitarian tragedy. Vladimir Putin helped save Assad, and he has unleashed there what he unleashed against the Chechens, and it is a very, very ugly engagement, and I think he is making a play for power. And I think it is worthy to note that the Russians still only have offensive strategies in the military; they’re not concerned about a NATO invasion. Now, on the other side, I’d agree with John. I think the whole notion of the Russian electoral interference in the United States is vastly overblown. I find it very boring.

John Donvan:
Reuel, thanks very much.

00:37:00

Your time is up.

[applause]
Finally, to speak in an opening round on this resolution, The Russia Threat Is Overblown, Derek Chollet. Do you declare yes or no?

Derek Chollet:
No, and that’s because Vladimir Putin’s Russia has a clear set of strategic goals; to divide the U.S. from Europe; to undermine NATO; to weaken the European Union; to project Russian power in the Middle East; to support liberal and nationalist politics; and to weaken the United States and our democratic partners around the world, undermining the very foundations of our democracies by spreading disinformation and fomenting dissent. Now, in some of these goals Russia is succeeding.

On others, it’s not, but it would be strategic malpractice for us not to take this seriously and simply dismiss this threat as overblown. And although the U.S.-Russia relationship is not inevitably one of confrontation, and there have been recent examples where the two sides were able to come together and achieve common aims, we do need to be clear-eyed about the Russian threat.

00:38:02

That said, I agree with some of my colleagues here. I do not believe that Russia is the greatest challenge to the United States in the 21st century. Russia is not 10 feet tall. Its economic and demographic woes are profound, and many of its actions around the world have boomeranged back against it.

But Russia’s weakness doesn’t diminish the threat. In many ways, Russia’s weakness makes the threat worse, causing Moscow to take greater risks and seek new nefarious ways that it can achieve its aims. So, we can’t put our heads in the sand and dismiss Russia’s intentions as benign. We need to take this threat seriously.

John Donvan:
Thank you, Derek Chollet, and that concludes the opening statements on the resolution The Russian Threat Is Overblown, and let’s look at the flags now. We have two no’s and three yes’s on the resolution The Russian Threat Is Overblown, and from what I heard in the discussion, there were basically two lines of arguments.

00:39:00

One is that Russia is not really that powerful and capable nor motivated to be truly threatening. Actually, there are three lines. The second one is that the aggravation between the Russians and us is at least partly our fault, that they are provoked by us; and the third line of argument is actually Russia’s doing really, really bad stuff in the world.
It's really dangerous, it's really corrosive, and it should be contained and should not be allowed to get away with it. I want to take this third question about whether Russia really stands 10 feet tall or not, as Derek Chollet just put it, and I want to put it to John Mearsheimer. The -- what I want to just throw into the mix here is the fact that right now Russia is dallying with China, certainly to tweak us; maneuvers in the Mediterranean together very recently and other contacts between them. China's certainly got to be taken seriously. Why not worry about Russia's playing -- dalliance with China as a threat to us?

00:40:01

John Mearsheimer:
The fact is the United States foolishly pushed the Russians into the arms of the Chinese. The United States has a deep-seated interest in getting Russia to help the United States contain China in Asia.

The Russians are perfectly willing to do that because China is a greater to them to the United -- than the United States is, because of geographic proximity. But because of our foolish policies, as a result of the Ukraine crisis, we've pushed the Russians into the arms of the Chinese. If these American policymakers today had been running foreign policy in the late 30s and early 40s, instead of allying with the Soviet Union to fight Nazi Germany, they would have had the Americans declare war against both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. That shows you what dunderheads they are.

John Donvan:
For the sake of nuance, I'd like to ask Kori Schake, who is arguing yes as well -- but for very different reasons -- what you make of John Mearsheimer's argument, that it's -- that Russia's aggressive seeming posture is our fault.

00:41:03

Kori Schake:
I don't see a whole lot of evidence for that, to be honest, because we have tried very, very hard -- the United States government -- to bring Russia into cooperation, to include them in things -- the NATO-Russia Council -- to create opportunities.

I mean, Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin working together on all sorts of things. The problem is that that's actually not what the Russians want. What the Russians want is a confrontation with us that solidifies Putin's sense of domestic control and that makes Russia feel powerful in the world, when they cannot, by dint of a foreign policy that doesn't include the invasion of Ukraine or bombing hospitals in Syria -- to feel powerful. They don't want to be powerful on Western terms. They want to be powerful as an antagonist to us.

00:42:01
John Donvan:
Stephen Cohen? Looking at the list of aggressions that Kori just mentioned and that Reuel went into in more detail, let's talk about the slaughter in Syria. Let's talk about the campaign -- whether you think it's successful or not -- to undermine Western democracies' confidence in themselves as democracies.

Again, going back to the dalliance with China. How is this not -- whether you think we provoked it -- we the U.S. provoked it or not -- how is this not a threat at this point?

Stephen Cohen:
Well, it depends on how you formulate it. I mean, for historical and political reasons, it's not entirely due to bad American policy. Unique alliances are emerging in the world today. Russia-China-Iran. It's a new reality. To call that a dalliance is kind of to disregard decades of history. China's moment in the sun is coming. Russia has to decide where it's going to be in this order. The old order is falling apart; a new one is emerging, whether we like it or not.

00:43:00

We don't dismiss it as a kind of capricious anti-American move on Russia. It's driven by powerful factors. Crimea is usually given as Putin's original sin, the invasion of Crimea.

The advantage -- and I don't mean to be rude -- that I have over people who wave this Russian aggression flag is I've actually studied Putin for almost 20 years. And I don't think you can find the word Crimea in any of his talks, or interests, or foreign policy priorities until the United States abetted the overthrow of the legitimately elected -- whatever a [unintelligible] it might have been -- president of Ukraine in February 2014. John wrote about this Foreign Affairs back in 2014, I think, John. And then Putin had to make a choice. Crimea is what it is, vital to Russia. It was part of Ukraine accidentally -- territory. Russia didn't care until what happened in Kiev.

00:44:01

John Donvan:
Well, let me --

Stephen Cohen:
So, there's a history to these provocations. A lot of the stuff that's been said here that Russia -- please, let's don't do John McCain's gas station. I mean, you know better than that. If you don't, Russia is either the seventh or eighth largest economy in the world today.

The IMF and the World Bank think that Russia is really doing well -- they issued reports two days ago. Despite the American sanctions. We can't get to space without American rockets.

John Donvan:
Okay. Okay. Let me bring in Reuel.
Stephen Cohen:
So, let's don't go to this nonsense about a gas station. This is –

John Donvan:
Reuel, the first part of –

Stephen Cohen:
-- [inaudible].

[applause]

John Donvan:
The first part of what -- of Stephen's argument that -- you know, talking about Crimea, that, again, we pushed Putin into a position where he had to act. Whether you concede that or not, the fact is that Putin grabbed Crimea. Does that strengthen your argument, or do you find Stephen's argument persuasive, that it's not that big -- it doesn't represent a threat to us?

Reuel Gerecht:
No. I don't find it persuasive. I mean, I do think there -- just on the issue of why dictatorships hang together.

00:45:03

There is a reason why China, and Russia, and Iran have made an alliance. They run oppressive societies and they have the common denominator that they all really don't like the United States terribly much.

So, the notion that somehow the Americans are going to anesthetize their democratic identity or their democratic mission is just preposterous. We're not going to do it. They know we're not going to do it. And what is striking to me is when I listen to Putin, I mean, I understand why the supreme leader of Iran likes him. He sounds like him. It's the same type of lexicon that they use to describe the common enemy. So, the -- I think it's just misplaced to talk about this realist potential of somehow we're going to build an alliance with the Russians. It's not going to happen because they don't want it to happen. If you were to actually have a thriving democratic society develop -- I know that seems like a million miles off -- in Ukraine, it could kill Putin.

00:46:05

I mean, they have to squash it, grind it into the dust. They have to have a subservient society in Ukraine because, if they have an independent one, it's the most lethal dagger aimed at the political system that Putin has built up since the -- since he came into power.
John Donvan:
Derek, should I --

Kori Schake:
But does it also matter --

John Donvan:
Oh, go ahead, Kori.

Kori Schake:
-- what the Ukrainian's want?

Derek Chollet:
Yeah, the -- I mean, that's -- what's striking to me is how it becomes America's fault that the people of Central and Eastern Europe want the United States closer to them and want to be protected from Russia. I don't understand how that becomes America's fault.

When we would sit in meetings with counterparts from the Baltics or the Pols, they would talk about their great concerns about Russia and be thankful for everything the United States is doing, but then also go out of their way to remind us that the several thousand troops the U.S. may be rotating through the Baltics is just a small fraction of the Russian divisions that are lined up on their border.

00:47:04

And after Ukraine, what they all thought is, "This could be coming to a theater near us soon," because what Putin wants around his border are countries that essentially can exist under his thumb. And the Ukraine crisis did not start because of NATO.

That -- NATO was not about that at all. The people were in the Maidan [spelled phonetically]. Thousands of Ukrainians are in the Maidan because they wanted to be closer to Europe. They wanted to be closer to the European Union, and that went against Putin's objective, which was to create his own sort of rival institution closer to himself. The Ukrainian undemocratic president wanted to go that way. Unfortunately, the people of Ukraine wanted to go a different way.

John Donvan:
John Mearsheimer.

John Mearsheimer:
Yeah, I just want to say that the United States has the Monroe Doctrine, and the Monroe Doctrine says that no distant great power, i.e. a great power from Europe or East Asia, is
allowed to move military forces into the Western Hemisphere and form a military alliance with a country in our hemisphere.

00:48:04

It makes eminently good sense for the United States. Russia, being a great power, has its own version of the Monroe Doctrine. The Russians recoil at the idea that NATO is going to march up to their border.

They recoil at the idea that Ukraine and Georgia are going to be part of NATO. The Russians opposed NATO expansion vigorously from the mid-1990s forward because they viewed it much the way we think about the Monroe Doctrine, and it was our moving of NATO to the border, and saying that Ukraine and Georgia would become part of NATO, that led to the Georgia war in 2008 and led to the war over Ukraine in 2014.

Derek Chollet:
That's why thousands of Ukrainians are in the Maidan in Kiev in 2014.

John Donvan:
Let's bring in Reuel.

Reuel Gerecht:
Yeah, I just want to say, I mean, the -- I give the KGB some credit here, and their success of the SVR. I mean, for god's sakes, they penetrated the entire western security establishment.

00:49:01

They are well aware that NATO has no offensive doctrine against Russia or the Soviet Union. They know it backwards and forwards. That's why they don't waste any time planning to have a defensive strategy with their units, because we -- they know we're not going anywhere. This pity the poor Russians, their scared of big bad America, it just makes no sense.

John Donvan:
Kori Schake, we heard earlier --

[applause]

-- in this discussion the charge of Russophobia, that Russophobia is out of -- is off the charts, and this attitude that with -- would be sympathetic to your argument is problematic in itself. What about that?

Kori Schake:
Well, I think -- I agree that we are more worried about the Russians and building them into a bigger threat than they actually are. But that is a natural reaction to Russia's bad behavior.
There's a reason, as Derek said, that people are worried about Russia, because they -- making countries feel incredibly anxious.

Derek Chollet: More than two.

John Donvan: Why is that a threat to the U.S. security?

Kori Schake: Because, if they will do it in Britain, would they not do it here, given the -- what the Russians are doing, it looks to me, is that they know -- I agree with John that the Russians couldn't win a conventional war in Europe. The Polish military, the German military, the French military are strong enough to banded together with our help and defend themselves against Russia. What the Russians are doing is fighting a symmetric strategies, picking away at areas of unprotected western dominance. Social media; poisonings; the kinds of things that make them feel intimidating, and that's why there's this strong Russophobia building, because people rightly assess that Vladimir Putin's Russia is a malign actor in the world.

John Donvan: And that concludes discussion of this resolution, The Russian Threat Is Overblown.

And now Iran, always high on the list of U.S. security concerns, an aspiring to nuclear power, the backer of terrorism, with the perpetual question: isolate Iran, squeeze it, or try to coax this radical nation in to more moderate behavior? It's the choice that's at the heart of our final resolution, It Is Time to Take A Hard Line on Iran. Derek Chollet, on that resolution, It's Time to Take A Hard Line on Iran, do you declare yes or no?

Derek Chollet: I'm a yes, but I am a “yes, but,” and I'll explain.

Iran provides material and political support to those who are trying to destabilize the Middle East. Iran supports terrorists. Iran’s forces have been responsible for the deaths of thousands in places like Syria. Iran's proxies have killed American civilians and our troops.

Iran represses its people at home while impoverishing them to achieve its aims abroad, and Iran wants to develop nuclear weapons. So, of course it's time to take a hard line against Iran. To me, the challenge is how best to do so. That begins by forging the strongest possible
international consensus against Iran's behavior, not just among our partners in the Middle East but in Europe, Russia, and increasingly in Asia. Iran must know that its actions have consequences, whether in form of economic pressure, political isolation, or even military response.

In other words, the best way to take a hard line is to present a united front, and that's what the Iran nuclear deal did. It was a smart, hardline policy in which the United States built leverage and brought the world together to bring unprecedented pressure on the Iranian regime to get concessions. The Iran nuclear deal did not solve all of our problems with Iran, but it did put the brakes on the most urgent and serious ones.

00:53:04

So, taking a hard line needs to be more than a slogan. It needs to be a means to an end. It's not just about talking tough and beating your chest; it's about pursuing smart policies that get you closer to your goals.

John Donvan:
Thank you, Derek Chollet.

[applause]

The resolution, It's Time To Take A Hard Line On Iran; Stephen Cohen, on this resolution, do you declare yes or no?

Stephen Cohen:
That's a no. You know, Derek, I mean, I kind of give him the credit that he's made at least a semi-persuasive case. I mean, I don't think it's off the charts like some of the things that have been said about Russia.

Derek Chollet:
I'll take it. I'll take it!

[laughter]

Stephen Cohen:
No, you should. But my feeling is that the United States -- or Trump, as we like to call the United States today -- having left the nuclear agreement and reimposed sanctions, I ask myself what would a harder line result in? And I think it would result in results that we wouldn’t like, and that's why I think no.

00:54:03
These results -- it's likely to create instability inside Iran because there's political conflict there. That is likely to spread to Iraq and Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, and I don't see that is good for anybody. Secondly, it certainly would, at least theoretically, risk war, depending on how hard this hard line is.

And that could involve the United States, Israel, and possibly Russia. Thirdly, given their financial profitable urges, it's probably going to continue to alienate our European allies, who are vested economically -- rather than ideologically -- in Iraq. It will then increase -- and you may think this is a good or bad thing -- Russia's military and energy producing role in the world, because --

John Donvan:
Stephen Cohen, I'm sorry. Your time is up. Thank you very much.

[applause]

Going now to Kori Schake, on the resolution -- It's time to take a hard line on Iran -- please tell us how you declare.

00:55:07

Kori Schake:
It is time to take a harder line on Iran. They are the top state sponsor of terrorism in the world. They are destabilizing neighboring governments. They're arming Hezbollah and Hamas. They are keeping Bashar Al-Assad in power and doing a lot of the murderous work of that horrible war.

And they are occasionally interdicting shipping in the Straits of Hormuz, through which an enormous amount of the world's oil transits. So, yes. We should take a harder line. I agree with both Stephen and Derek that withdrawing from the Iranian nuclear agreement made that harder because it makes it harder for us to get the support of countries that we need to take a harder line. The basic problem in American policy for the last two administrations toward Iran has been that both the Trump administration and the Obama administration had an unbelievable policy.

00:56:11

Namely, "Either you stop your nuclear weapons program, or we will destroy it."

And I don't think that's credible out of either of the two governments. We need a wider range of tools to manage the Iran problem.
At its core, the Iran problem is that the domestic legitimacy and the foreign policy of Iran have the same root, which is they view themselves as a revolutionary power. So, taking a soft line on Iran doesn’t result on Iran stopping doing these things.

John Donvan:
Thank you, Kori Schake.

[applause]

It's time to take a hard line on Iran. John Mearsheimer, do you declare yes or no?

John Mearsheimer:
I say no. I take this resolution as a question dealing with President Trump's decision in May of this year to withdraw from the nuclear agreement with Iran.

00:57:05

And I think that that was a fundamental mistake. Look, the question is, if you have a country –

[applause]

-- you have a country like Iran that is thinking about getting nuclear weapons, what's the best way to prevent that from happening? And there are basically two ways you can do it or at least think about doing it. One is you can threaten that country.

Or two, you can try to cooperate with it as much as possible -- work out some sort of rapprochement -- and remove the incentive for that country to get nuclear weapons. The question you want to ask yourselves is "Why do countries want nuclear weapons?" They want nuclear weapons because they understand they are the ultimate deterrent. And if you are threatened, you really want to have nuclear weapons. Why does Israel have nuclear weapons? Because its leaders think they live in a dangerous neighborhood where they want to have the ultimate deterrent in their back pocket. Well, what's good for the goose is good for the gander.

00:58:00

So, there's going to be a very powerful incentive for the Iranians to think the same way. Now, the hawks believe that you can get really tough with the Iranians, and you can beat them into giving up nuclear weapons forever. I don't think that's going to happen. First of all, it's just going to reinforce the hardliners inside Iran. And second of all, nationalism is a very powerful force. And the idea that you could push the Iranians around -- I think -- is a misguided thought.

John Donvan:
Thank you, John Mearsheimer.
It's time to take a hard line on Iran. Last in the line-up of panelists to declare yes or no, Marc -- Reuel Marc Gerecht. Are you a yes or no?

[RC]
Yes. I have to say, I mean, this is one of those issues that I think the Trump administration has actually done the right thing. I have to commend it; it has stopped the surreal situation where the United States was feeding tens of billions of dollars into the Islamic Republic, into its Shiite imperialism throughout the region for a short respite --

-- to the production of centrifuges. It makes no strategic or moral sense, why we would want to give money to a regime that has engaged in mass slaughter in Syria, a regime that has deployed a Shiite legion -- the first time, actually, in modern history, that we have an Islamic state that can deploy, not as nationals, but a foreign legion abroad into combat, why we would want to give money to a state that is building Hezbollahs throughout the Shiite regions of the Middle East.

I just think this is -- not particularly since the JCPOA was such a very, very bad deal. It's as leaky -- it's got as many holes as Swiss cheese in it. The -- I think the best thing that on can say about that deal is that it allowed us to pretend that we're not going to have a problem down the road. We are going to have a problem down the road.

I would also add, the demonstrations that have been going on in Iran since December ought to tell you they're not shouting out, "Down with America. Down with Donald Trump." They're shouting, "Down with the regime. Down with the revolutionary guard corps."

[applause]

John Donvan:
Thank you, Reuel Marc Gerecht. And that concludes opening statements with the resolution, "It's Time to Take a Hard Line on Iran, and now our debaters will respond to one another directly.

Starting with some questions from me. So, looking at the opening round, we have three yes's and two no's.
I want to go to Kori Schake with some points made by people on the no side, which seem to all come down to the question of dangerous unintended consequences of taking a harder line on Iran. On the one hand, Stephen Cohen's saying you would risk war. Number one, is that true? Is the risk worth it? And John Mearsheimer's saying that the kind of pressure that all of you who support the yes side are talking about is the very reason that Iran covets nuclear weapons in the first place: dangerous unintended consequences.

01:01:02

What about that?

Kori Schake:
Yes, I think there are dangerous unintended consequences for confronting Iran's destabilizing and dangerous behavior, but there are also dangerous unintended consequences of not confronting it. It's not -- it's not a 90/10 decision that you're making, allowing Iran to continue to destabilize regional governments, to interdict the free commerce through the straights of [unintelligible], to be -- to continue to be a state sponsor of terror. Recall that the Iranian government tried to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington, D.C. So not confronting those things --

Male Speaker:
At a bad restaurant.

Male Speaker:
Yeah.

Kori Schake:
-- also has the potential to encourage and incentivize continued Iranian maligned behavior. So yes, there are potentially dangerous consequences of doing it. There are also dangerous consequences of not doing it.

01:02:03

John Donvan:
Derek Chollet.

Derek Chollet:
Well, look. This is the land of no good options, right? When I was at the Pentagon during the negotiations of the Iran Nuclear Deal, I had nothing to do with the negotiations. What the Pentagon's role in this was, "What do we do when the negotiations or if the negotiations fail?" and all we're left with is the military option. Now, we have options. The United States military has shown over the years that it can do all sorts of things: overthrow governments, put a lot of firepower on particular targets, but those are not particularly palatable options. So, when we
look at the Iran Nuclear Program as a challenge, we have to think, "All right, how do we try to solve this problem?"

We have a series of tools we could use. We have military tools. We have diplomatic tools. We have economic [spelled phonetically] tools. How do we try to change their behavior? So, I would argue we were in a better position where we had isolated the nuclear problem -- Reuel's right, temporarily, 10-15 years -- so we could work on the other aspects of Iran's behavior that pose such a threat to the United States. The problem now, that we pulled out of the nuclear deal -- when you go to Europe, when you go out to the Middle East, what they're talking about is American policy, not Iran's policy.

01:03:06

And I don't believe that Iran has actually benefited that much from the nuclear deal. I mean, the Iranian people were on the streets, and they actually thought the nuclear deal was a bad deal for them. So, the idea that now we're going to engage in some sort of negotiation to get a better deal from our perspective, a worse deal for Iran, to me, is fantasy.

John Donvan:
John Mearsheimer.

John Mearsheimer:
Yeah, I want to respond to a point that Kori made and tie that into a point that Reuel made. You're critical of the Iranians for destabilizing regimes in the region.

Is there any country that's destabilized more regimes than the United States of America?

[applause]

I mean, the hypocrisy here is really, with all due respect, stunning. We make a business of destabilizing regimes. And this brings us to the matter of Syria. I’m sorry, it was not the Russians and the Iranians who started that humanitarian disaster.

01:04:02

It was, in good part, the United States, the Turks, the Qatars, and the Saudis who funded and trained the insurgents and tried to bring down Assad and failed and created a humanitarian disaster of the first order. The United States has blood all over its hands in Syria. And it was the Russians and the Iranians who came in later who were trying to put Assad back in power, and as distasteful as that outcome is, it’s the only possible way we’re going to stop the bloodshed in Syria.

John Donvan:
So, John, I want to relate what you’re saying to the to the resolution; more directly, to take a
question to Reuel. Are you actually arguing that Iran, in a way, is showing wisdom and is a force for stability in the region?

John Mearsheimer:
It is in the case of Syria.

John Donvan:
Okay, let me take that to Reuel.

John Mearsheimer:
It’s the United States and its friends in the Middle East who caused the catastrophe.

John Donvan:
Reuel, that assessment of Iran’s role in Syria -- I don’t want to get into -- John has made his point, but we’re not debating right now, strictly speaking, the U.S. role.

01:05:07

We are debating Iran. So, what about the role -- the argument that Iran -- you’ve made the case that Iran has been a destabilizing force in Syria. He says, “No, actually, it’s been a force trying to figure things out in the right direction.”

Reuel Gerecht:
No, I mean, the destabilizing force in Syria was the Ba’athist dictatorship of the Assad family, and the Syrians attempted an [unintelligible] to try to get rid of it. I mean, people tend to now somehow scorn the Arab Spring. I prefer to call it the great Arab revolt.

But you tend to forget that they were trying to overthrow just hideous regimes, and that hideous regime decided that the only way they could control the situation -- because they represented the [unintelligible], which are less than 10 percent of the population -- was just start slaughtering the Sunnis. And of course, we stood by and watched it, and I don’t think that was the high watermark of the Obama administration.

01:06:01

So -- and the Iranians are out there; they’re out to recast the Middle East, and what they know and a lot of people tend to forget is that the classical Middle East -- that is, from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan -- it’s basically a 50-50 split between Shiites and Sunnis. And so, the Iranians have learned that they can adopt a very aggressive sectarian approach and that they can get a lot of traction.

John Donvan:
Stephen Cohen, I don’t have a direct question for you. I’d like you to respond to what you’re hearing if you would like the opportunity, because it’s rare that I haven’t heard from you in a
while. So, go for it.

Stephen Cohen:
You haven’t called on me in a while.

John Donvan:
Okay, go for it.

Stephen Cohen:
I mean, there’s a problem. Not only Reuel, but many Americans feel that they know which are hideous regimes, and which aren’t, and hideous regimes are the ones we don’t support, and the others are hideous. This thing with Syria to me has always been both bafflement and involved a key question, because we have an empirical moment when a decision was made by President Obama. In 2015, President Putin of Russia said to Obama, “We need to form an alliance in Syria against the Islamic State,” and Obama was much inclined to do so.

And in fact, my reading is he did agree, and then he walked away from it, and Putin then intervened on his own, I think in September. But what Putin said to Obama -- and you know, you could run down Putin all you want, but first you need to read him.

He doesn’t talk about the United States the way Khomeini does. You just haven’t read Putin; you’re just making that up. I mean, it seems right to you, but it’s not true. Here’s the point. What Putin said to Obama, and Obama thought about it and decided against, is we have a choice; 2015. It’s either going to be the Islamic State in Damascus -- and remember, the Islamic State then was whack, whack, whack, whack -- or it’s going to be Assad.

There’s no alternative. Give me an alternative. So, either we keep Assad in Damascus, or we let the Islamic State take it. Obama decided [unintelligible]; Israel agreed with Putin.

John Donvan:
I want to --

Stephen Cohen:
[unintelligible] has been a tacit alliance --

John Donvan:
Stephen, I --

Stephen Cohen:
-- between Putin and Israel.
John Donvan:
I want to intervene, because I want to --

Stephen Cohen:
So, decide for yourself.

John Donvan:
I want to bring the topic back -- the focus back to Iran at the moment --

Stephen Cohen:
[unintelligible].

John Donvan:
-- and -- no, I understand, but I want to bring another dimension that we haven’t discussed yet, which is this notion that’s been out there since the Islamic Republic came to be -- that there's a moderate element; there’s a group there to go to who want to be moderate.

And we should be playing to them. Now, your positions on this -- yes or no -- I'll go to you first, Kori Schake. How does that play -- would taking a hardline -- do you believe there’s a moderate element to play to, to engage with? Would taking a hardline work to enhance that or would it work to --

01:09:04

Kori Schake:
I believe there are moderate --

John Donvan:
-- silence it?

Kori Schake:
-- Iranians. I do not believe there are any moderate Iranians in the government.

John Donvan:
[affirmative]. Derek Chollet?

[applause]

Derek Chollet:
Yeah. I agree with that. I think that the government -- well, what counts for moderate in the Iranian government is not very moderate. So, the current Iranian president only looks moderate when you compare him to the previous Iranian president, Ahmadinejad. It's sort of like --
John Donvan:
So, taking a hard-line plays -- how -- in that dimension? The [inaudible] –

Derek Chollet:
Well, yeah, I think there are plenty of Iranian people -- as we have seen -- as evidenced in the demonstrations over the last eight months -- that have huge problems with that regime.

So, I think that -- showing that the regime will suffer consequences for its behavior, I think, can have an effect.

John Donvan:
John?

John Mearsheimer:
John -- I just want to make a very quick point that's relevant –

John Donvan:
Yes.

John Mearsheimer:
-- to this question. I was in Iran in December. And I talked to all sorts of leaders up and down the chain of command across the political spectrum.

01:10:01

And almost everybody says that they're in actually quite good strategic situation in the region now. But it's not because of purposeful behavior on their part -- the kind of story you're hearing from the people who disagree with me up here. It's largely as a result of the foolish policies of the United States. Just take Iraq, for example. You know they fought a war, along war -- eight years -- in the 1980s with Iraq. And now they have tremendous influence in Iraq. Why? Because the United States toppled Saddam Hussein and left Iraq wide open for them.

They make the same argument with regard to Syria.

John Donvan:
Let me –

John Mearsheimer:
They are in the cat-bird seat in Syria. But it's not because of anything they did; it's because of the foolishness of the United States which dropped this big apple into their lap.
So, the U.S. -- as you pointed out -- pursued regime change in Iraq. Reuel, would you support regime change -- as part of taking a hard line -- against Iran?

01:11:02

Reuel Gerecht:
Well, sure. I'm not sure -- the administration is obviously not there. But I think you definitely want to take a containment approach towards the Islamic Republic. A containment strategy is effectively a regime change strategy. I think you do want to ally the United States with the demonstrators in the streets. I think you do want to ally them to the massive eruption in the Green Movement of 2009, 2010. And I'll say this on the moderate issue. I mean, you know, the problem is that the moderates in Iran keep getting stuffed. And there's one thing we know, certainly, is that Hassan Rouhani, the president of Iran, is not a moderate -- that he's a founding father of the security state. He's a founding father of the intelligence ministry.

And I must just say that some of the commentary that came out of the Obama administration about him was just historically absurd and had no basis in primary material.

John Donvan:
Derek Chollet?

Reuel Gerecht:
Sorry about that, Derek.

John Donvan:
Derek Chollet -- the regime change question, as well, for you. Does taking a hardline mean working deliberately towards regime change in Iran?

01:12:03

Derek Chollet:
It is hard to see how the United States is going to have a Middle East that is congruent with our interests with the current regime in Iran. That doesn't mean that regime change equals military invasion --

Reuel Gerecht:
Right.

Derek Chollet:
-- like we saw in Iraq. But I think the U.S. presidents from both political parties have made this clear. Even Donald Trump, I think, agrees with this -- that it's hard to see how the United States can serve its interests with the Islamic regime in Iran.

John Donvan:
So, what are the implications of that, Kori Schake?

Kori Schake:
Well, it depends on whether you’re actively going to do anything about it.

To -- I agree with Reuel that aligning ourselves with people who peacefully protest for political change in their own countries is almost always where the United States ought to seek to be. But whether you take action to overthrow the Iranian government or whether you do something -- use our tools at hand to draw attention -- to create friction between the government and their people -- for example, by drawing attention to the fact that the Iranian government struck 10,000 names off the electoral rolls for Parliament because these people had political views that the Iranian government wouldn’t support; to draw attention to the human rights violations, to the torture of prisoners arrested in 2009.

We can do those kinds of things and help force accountability on the Iranian government. But doing more than that, I worry would be -- would open us up to a John Mearsheimer in the future.

John Donvan:
John Mearsheimer?

John Mearsheimer:
Just two quick points. You know how ballistic we go when countries like Russia interfere in our domestic politics? Again, the hypocrisy here is just stunning. Talking about doing a regime change here, there, and everywhere.

Don’t you folks believe in sovereignty? We believe in sovereignty when it comes to the United States. Why should we believe in sovereignty when it comes to other countries? The second point I would make is, "When you look at our track record, Reuel, on regime change, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, it's one failure after another. Why are you confident that we can make regime change work in Iran and have a happy ending when we failed so many times?"

Reuel Gerecht:
It's not -- well, one, I'd just say, one, it's not us that would be making it. It would be the Iranian people. We aren't doing anything that they don't want.
What we can do is we can stop enriching the regime. We can put the sanctions back up, which we are doing, and they are going to come back up in force -- real force come November. There's no sense on, in fact, giving that regime further money so it can continue its aims abroad. I just find that absurd. And I would just say this -- I don't want to get into an Iraq discussion here, though I'm quite willing at any time, I will --

01:15:03

John Donvan:
I can give you 10 seconds to do this.

Reuel Gerecht:
-- I will just make note this, you know, that as bad and corrupt as it is, you know, the Iraqi democracy still exists. It is still struggling. And guess what? Much of that democracy is not terribly cracked up about the imperial hand of Iran in its own countries.

John Donvan:
And with that --

Reuel Gerecht:
We should [inaudible] --

John Donvan:
-- and with that mention of Iraq, we conclude discussion of our -- of our resolution about Iran, "It is Time to Take a Hard Line on Iran." Thank you. Thank you, everybody.

[applause]

And ladies and gentlemen, we'd like you to go vote a second time now. The resolutions again, to remind you, "NATO Is no Longer Fit for Purpose." Do you vote yes or no? Secondly, "The Russia Threat Is Overblown," yes or no? And as we just heard, "It's Time to Take a Hard Line on Iran," yes or no?

01:16:00

And what we're interested in seeing is where the swings went tonight. We're not -- this is not a structure where we announce a winner. What we really want to see is where the ideas are flowing tonight.

So, in a few minutes we'll tabulate the results, and we'll share with you the change we saw between the vote that you did previously to the debate, and the vote you're doing right now, to see where the change came. While that's happening, first of all, our goal is to get people to find a space where they can disagree. We're not working towards a Kumbaya moment here.
It's meant to be competitive, but it's meant to be competitive in a way that has rules and respect and dignity, and I think all of you delivered 100 percent on that tonight, so I want to thank you all for that.

[applause]

And I have a question for you. We -- the team on Intelligence Squared that helped put this debate together -- we were chatting about -- with the midterm elections coming up, we were curious to know, you know, we're not in election right now where national security is what everybody's talking about in terms of the midterms, but if they were, what should -- what should Americans be thinking about in terms of national security [unintelligible] selection?

What's at stake? Kori Schake, I'll go to you first.

Kori Schake:
I think Americans should be worried about the size of the national debt. And as a national security issue, we will crowd out discretionary spending, which is everything the government does besides retirement and medical care, unless we actually stop spending money we don't have.

We are engaged in intergenerational theft against our grandchildren, and we ought to stop doing it.

John Donvan:
And you put that under the category of national security.

[applause]

Okay, John Mearsheimer, how about you?

John Mearsheimer:
I think the principle problem in the United States is that we have a highly militarized foreign policy that we're running all over the world, interfering in other countries' business, fighting wars that we lose, and creating all sorts of problems for civil liberties at home, and furthermore, spending huge amounts of money in the process.

And it would be really nice if we got some political leaders who were in favor of a more restrained and sane foreign policy.

[applause]
John Donvan:
John -- and John, why do you think that that's -- that that's -- that that's not aggressively part of the -- robustly part of the conversation now, politically?

John Mearsheimer:
I think if you look at the public and what the public thinks, there’s a lot of support for what I said.

It’s why Barack Obama got elected; it’s why Donald Trump got elected. But the elites in this country who form the foreign policy establishment are deeply committed to running the world. They believe we are the indispensable nation -- “we stand taller; we see further” -- and no evidence to the contrary can convince them otherwise.

[applause]

John Donvan:
Stephen Cohen?

Stephen Cohen:
I work and think as a historian, and therefore, I’m rather specific. We’re back to the midterm election, correct?

01:19:02

John Donvan:
Yeah.

Stephen Cohen:
I didn’t vote for Trump, don’t really care what becomes of him, but I fear the beginning of a Democratic-controlled House impeachment process for the sake of our national security, and here’s why. We have a new Cold War that’s fraught with new Cuban missile-type crises. What we learned from President Kennedy in 1962 is that to avoid nuclear war in such a crisis we have to trust our president fully.

Trump can’t have a phone call with Putin today without John Brennan, the former director of the CIA, yelling that it’s treason and three New York Times columnist echoing. So, if there’s a new Cuban missile crisis type situation -- we almost had one last week in Syria; maybe it’s going to be that, or in Ukraine, or -- I mean, add it up; in the north Baltics, where NATO is building up.

01:20:03
And suddenly, we’re at this moment, and we have to trust Trump as we have every president since Eisenhower to avoid a nuclear war with Moscow. He can’t do it. This Russia-gate thing, which I do not believe, by the way, has crippled him. And I’m afraid that if the Democrats take the House that they will go all out on this impeachment, and if there’s a Cuban type of crisis, we will be in such grave danger, not because of Trump, but because he won’t be free to do what every president since Eisenhower has done.

[applause]

John Donvan:
How about you, Reuel?

Reuel Gerecht:
I mean, in theory, I agree with Kori. I think the national debt is going to eat everything and -- but I also am quite pessimistic, because the only way you can really take a grip -- get a handle on that is cut back on entitlement programs, and I don’t think we have the political will to do that. So, I’m at a loss, I have to confess, on how we handle that issue.

01:21:02

You’re not going to tax your way out of the $21 trillion debt. You’re going to have to cut your way out of it. I just don’t think it’s happening.

Male Speaker:
Pull forces out of NATO.

Reuel Gerecht:
Yeah, yeah, that’s peanuts. That’s peanuts.

Male Speaker:
[unintelligible] do it.

Reuel Gerecht:
The military is just peanuts compared to domestic spending. I would actually have to add -- I mean, I think it’s delusional to believe that, you know, dictatorships are not vibrant, that we’re at the end of the history and liberal democracy is safe. I think dictatorships can come back with a vengeance.

History is radical, and it is violent, and the United States has to be prepared to fight abroad. It is the only way that you are going to keep the peace. You are sometimes going to get involved in wars that may be distasteful, frustrating, and all the rest. That is part of the process. I don’t know whether the Americans want to, you know, bear that burden, but I would suggest that it’s the burden we should want to bear. It’s -- the world is a better place; it is a safer place.
However, it is -- it does cost money. It doesn’t cost as much money as John would want us to believe.

01:22:06

John Donvan:
Thanks, Reuel. And Derek Chollet?

Derek Chollet:
Well, I think when you do foreign policy as a profession, you spend your waking hours worrying, and I agree with all the worries that my colleagues have expressed. But let me pick up something that Stephen -- actually, that you said, which -- I think regardless of the outcome of the midterm election -- I hate to end the night on such pessimism -- we’re still in a world of trouble, because one of two outcomes is going to happen.

Either the Republicans will hold the House and the Senate, and President Trump’s going to feel bulletproof -- he’s going to feel like he’s -- he can do nothing wrong. And if the Democrats win, I think whether it’s impeachment or just simple oversight of the administration through investigations and turning over the rocks of corruption that are clearly there, we’re going to have an extended domestic crisis in this country politically, and that’s going to be preoccupying for all of us.

01:23:06

And this links to Stephen’s point of the Cuban missile crisis; it seems preposterous to say this, but if you think back over the last several years, the U.S. actually has not had a crisis. I mean, Kori was in the Bush administration during 9/11; I was in the Obama administration during the Arab Spring or Arab revolt and Ukraine, when it felt like inboxes were overflowing and events were spinning out of control. We actually have not had that sort of global event yet.

But it’s coming. And how is this administration going to handle it?

John Donvan:
All right. Well, that's very cheery. [laughs].

[applause]

But I want to announce our results. We have the results in. We went through three different debates, three resolutions. We had you vote before you heard the arguments and we had -- heard you -- and we had you vote again after you heard the arguments. And we want to look at the change between the first and the second vote. So, let's look at the first resolution. NATO is no longer fit for purpose. In the -- in that resolution, the first vote -- 20 percent voted yes and 80 percent voted no.

01:24:05
In the second vote on that resolution, 25 percent voted “yes”, and 75 percent voted no. That represents a swing of 5 percent towards the yes side.

[applause]

The double negatives really confuse this. Yeah.

Stephen Cohen:
I have no idea what the question meant in the first place, but I'm glad I won.

Male Speaker:
[unintelligible] take it. Yeah.

Stephen Cohen:
I'll take it, though.

[laughter]

It's the Upper West Side. Give it to me.

John Donvan:
The second resolution -- the Russia threat is overblown -- in the first vote, 31 percent voted yes. And 69 percent voted no. In the post-debate vote, 44 percent voted yes, 56 percent voted no. That represents a swing of 13 percent towards the yes side.

01:25:01

-- Iran in the first vote, 38 percent voted yes, 62 percent voted no. In the second vote, 48 percent voted yes, 52 percent no. A swing of 10 percent, again, towards the yes side. It's an evening when yes won three times in a row. I want to thank our debaters.

I want to thank all of the audience here in New York at Symphony Space. It's been a pleasure. Thank you from me, John Donvan. And we'll see you next time.

[applause]

[music playing]

[end of transcript]

This is a rough transcript. Please excuse any errors.