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Intelligence Squared U.S.

Obama's Foreign Policy Is a Failure

For the Motion: Eliot Cohen, Kristen Silverberg
Against the Motion: Derek Chollet, Vikram Singh

Moderator: John Donovan

AUDIENCE RESULTS

Before the debate:

19% FOR

38% AGAINST

43% UNDECIDED

After the debate:

42% FOR

49% AGAINST

9% UNDECIDED

Start Time (00:00:00)

John Donovan:

Please welcome to the stage, Bob Rosenkranz.

[applause]

John Donovan:

Hi, Bob.

Robert Rosenkranz:

Hi, John.

John Donovan:

So, this one, well, we're doing it in a sense because we are at the end of an eight-year period. And back in 2008, we did a debate on George Bush's presidency in a similar fashion. But we have the word "failure" in tonight's debate, and I'm anticipating that to some degree, each of the sides is going to have to define what it is what we mean by failure.

Robert Rosenkranz:

Well, that true. And I don't want to sort of step on their toes by giving our sense or my sense of what "failure" is. But I think I could help maybe put it in perspective if I talk about what I think a success looks like.

00:01:00

And in my lifetime, I'd say there were two absolutely major foreign policy successes; one was -- that at least come to mind for me. One is at the beginning of the Cold War, and one is at the end of the Cold War. And at the beginning of the Cold War, you had Harry Truman as president. You -- he initiated the Marshall Plan, which led to the reconstruction of Europe. He initiated aid to Greece and Turkey which, at the time, were in danger of falling under the yoke of the Soviet Union. And those were things that were not forced on him by events. In fact, they kind of went against the current of events because America was obviously weary after World War II and Soviet Union had been our ally in the second World War. So, I think that's a superb example of successful foreign policy leadership.

00:02:00

At the end of the Cold War, which is pretty much Reagan/Bush era, you had a series of policies, all of which put the Soviet Union under pressure from Star Wars, the antimissile defense shield which had a huge strategic and financial implications; the denial of Russia access to the technology they needed to export gas from Siberia which was their basic source of foreign earnings -- hard currency earnings; to the pressure we put on them in Afghanistan, to relations with the Pope and the solidarity movement in Poland. So, there was this whole, across the board set of policies, all of which made life so difficult for the Soviet Union that ultimately resulted in winning the Cold War without a -- without a shot being fired.

John Donovan:

And -- go ahead. Sorry. In focusing on those successes, how does focusing on success at that level help us tonight when we're talking about failure?

00:03:04

Robert Rosenkranz:

Well, because I think tonight's debate should be viewed from a historic perspective. I think when we ask, is Obama's foreign policy a failure, what we're really asking is how is history going to judge this 50 years from now? And the stuff of history is these large-scale events that give greater importance and greater focus on those things that are most important strategically, the most important alliances, the most important adversarial relationships, the most important geopolitical changes that an administration or a government has to adapt to.

John Donovan:

So, our audience here tonight will get to judge history on very short notice.

Robert Rosenkranz:

Yes. This is a first draft of history.

John Donovan:

All right. Thanks very much, Bob. And thanks, everybody. Now let's welcome our debaters to the stage.

[applause]

00:04:06

Once upon a time in another political era known as 2008, we at Intelligence Squared held a debate on a just then concluding presidency with a very, very toughly worded proposition which was, "George W. Bush is the worst president of the last 50 years."

And after robust debate, that motion was actually defeated. Well, now it is Barack Obama's turn with an eight-year record of his own in which we're going to judge his decisions on a number of international issues; Iran and Russia and Cuba and climate change and Syria and China and the when's and how's of using military force. And the question is, how did he do -- overall? Well, that sounds like a makings of a debate, so we're going to have it. Another toughly worded resolution: Obama's foreign policy is a failure, a debate from Intelligence Squared U.S. I'm John Donovan. We are at the Kaufman Music Center in New York City with four superbly qualified debaters who will argue for and against that motion.

00:05:09

As always, we go in three rounds, and then our live audience here in New York votes to choose the winner, and only one sides wins. Before we meet our debaters, we want to meet you in a certain sense. We want to ask you your view on this motion as you come in off the street. You all have a keypad attached to your chairs. And if you can go to those key pads now and pay attention to keys number one, two, and three only. Push number one, please, if you agree with the motion that Obama's foreign policy is a failure. This is the motion that this team will be arguing. Push number two if you disagree with this motion. This team will be arguing that. Push number three if you are undecided, which is a perfectly respectable position to come in with.

00:05:50

The motion again, Obama's foreign policy is a failure. First let's welcome the team arguing for the motion. Hello to Eliot Cohen.

[applause]

Eliot, welcome back to Intelligence Squared for your -- the second time. You are a professor at Hopkins, you were a former counselor at the Department of State. You've written a lot of books, the most recent one coming out, "The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force." And for those of us who don't remember, "Big Stick" refers to what?

Eliot Cohen:

That refers to a speech that was given by Theodore Roosevelt in 1901 and in which he very famously said, "Speak softly but carry a big stick."

00:06:36

And, of course, the big stick was military power.

John Donovan:

Okay. Thank you, Eliot. And who is your partner?

Eliot Cohen:

My partner is a friend and former colleague, Ambassador Kristen Silverberg.

John Donovan:

Ladies and gentlemen, Kristen Silverberg. Welcome.

[applause]

Kristen, you had a lot of diplomatic jobs in the Bush administration, including U.S. Ambassador to the European Union during the final months of the Bush administration. You were quoted as -- talking about continuity, you said, "That much of U.S. foreign policy is constant from administration to administration." But, in light of our recent election results, do you expect that still to be the case?

Kristen Silverberg:

Eliot and both signed a number of "Never Trump letters," and so we have not been invited to Trump Tower to hear our views. But I expect a lot of changes.

John Donovan:

A lot of changes. All right. Thank you. So, this makes a turning point that we're at tonight it sounds like. Ladies and gentlemen, the team arguing for the motion.

[applause]

00:07:35

And again, that motion is Obama's foreign policy is a failure. And two debaters to argue against that motion, please first welcome Derek Chollet.

[applause]

Hi, Derek. And you are a senior adviser right now at the German Marshal Fund, but also held several positions at the State Department in the Obama administration, also the author of a

book called "The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World," in which you describe President Obama as "the foreign policy version of Warren Buffett." What does that mean?

Derek Chollet:

Well, first, truth in advertising, I grew up in Nebraska, so I'm obliged to make as many Warren Buffett comparisons as I can. But my argument is that, like Warren Buffett, Obama is fundamentally an optimist about the United States, and he also believes in putting the United States on a course to win the long game. He's a value investor.

John Donovan:

All right. Thank you. And tell us who your partner is.

00:08:35

Derek Chollet:

The ever popular former colleague of mine at Defense Department and State Department, Vikram Singh.

John Donovan:

Ladies and gentlemen, Vikram Singh.

[applause]

Hi, Vikram. Welcome to Intelligence Squared. Vikram, right now you're at the Center for American Progress here, where you're a vice president for national security and international policy. But again, experience in the Department of State and at the Pentagon. You were Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia. Obviously, foreign policy touches on a lot of global territory. But where do you think we're going to be talking a lot about tonight in particular?

Vikram Singh:

Oh, I think we're going to be debating opportunities in Asia, and connectivity with Latin America, and investment in Africa -- except it's 2016, so I think we're going to be talking about the Middle East.

[laughter]

John Donovan:

All right. And the team arguing against the motion: Obama's Foreign Policy is a Failure.

[applause]

Now, this is a debate, and I want to explain how we determine victory.

00:09:37

We've had you vote before you've heard the arguments. After we've -- you've heard the arguments, we have you vote a second time. And we determine victory as going to the team whose numbers have moved up the most from the first to the second vote in percentage points. So, just to be clear, it's the difference between the first vote and the second vote. So, let's move on to Round 1. Round 1, opening statements by each debater in turn. They are uninterrupted. The motion, again, Obama's Foreign Policy is a Failure. And here to make her opening statement in support of the motion, Kristen Silverberg, who served as U.S. Ambassador to the European Union and as Assistant Secretary of State for International Affairs. Please welcome Kristen Silverberg.

[applause]

Kristen Silverberg:

The resolution we have all agreed to debate tonight asks you to consider whether President Obama's foreign policy failed. Failure in our view means one of two things.

00:10:37

First, did President Obama fail to achieve the objectives he set out for himself? For example, did he fail to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a goal that featured heavily in virtually every major foreign policy address. Did he fail to take effective action to stop mass atrocities, which he called, "A core national security interest?" Alternatively, did President Obama fail according to the standard of any reasonable person? For example, no president intends to undermine the credibility of the United States. At the end of President Obama's tenure, do our words mean more or less? Every president intends to secure lasting and sustainable foreign policy achievements. Will President Obama's major initiatives stand the test of time? It's important to keep in mind that failure does not equate to blame. You can conclude that President Obama's foreign policy failed even if you believe that he was well-intentioned, which of course he was.

00:11:38

You can conclude that President Obama failed, even if you ultimately blame the failure on the Republican Congress, on unpredictable political events, even the winds of fate. Eliot and I will outline a number of critical administration failures. But before we begin, two final words about the motion. First, this is a debate about President Obama's policy. This is not a debate about his predecessors. And it's possible to conclude that President Obama failed, even if you believe that some of his predecessors' policies were worse. Indeed, even if you believe that his successor's policies will be worse.

[laughter]

Second, this is a debate about foreign policy. It is not a debate about the broader legacy of the Obama administration, and it is possible to conclude that President Obama's foreign policy

failed even if you approve of his presidency overall. As you heard earlier, Derek recently published a book on the precise topic under discussion tonight: the Obama foreign policy legacy.

00:12:36

And although the book is a thoughtful defense of the administration, and I recommend it to all of you -- and although Derek is our friend -- Eliot and I are prepared to use the book against him.

[laughter]

We may even enjoy it.

[laughter]

So, with apologies to Derek, I'd like to begin with what I suspect were the hardest chapters to write: the defense of the administration's record in Syria, which Derek acknowledges has become a regional inferno. Close to half a million people have been killed and 13 million Syrians have left their homes. Children as young as 4 have arrived at the Syrian border alone. Syria is not only the worst humanitarian crisis since World War 2, it's a strategic disaster. Historic refugee flows have destabilized the region. Derek describes it as a disintegration of a regional order that the world will be grappling with for at least a generation. Refugee flows have plunged Europe into political crisis. Jihadies holding passports from 100 different countries have joined the caliphate, which now stretches over 40,000 square miles.

00:13:42

This will have profound long-term implications for the spread of terrorism globally. Iran has expanded its influence throughout the region and Russia now holds a position of prominence in the Middle East it hasn't enjoyed since the 1970s. American credibility suffered immense damage since President Obama failed to enforce his own redline against Bashar Assad's use of chemical weapons in 2013, in 2014, in 2015, and again this year. Assad remains in power notwithstanding numerous statements from the president since 2011 that he must go. And we've demonstrated our willingness to tolerate any degree of brutality against the Syrian people. I don't expect you'll hear Derek and Vikram argue that Syria is a success. Indeed, it's remarkable how many former Obama administration officials have criticized the administration's Syria policies.

Fred Huff and Ambassador Ford, Secretary Panetta, General Allen, not to mention -- to say nothing of the strong written protests from 51 current foreign service officers. From an administration that called the prevention of mass atrocities a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility, Syria is a colossal failure with consequences that weigh with us for generations to come. One addition failure to keep in mind, President Obama ran on, and

reiterated numerous times, his desire to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons. He called the Nonproliferation Treaty, which sets international rules for the use of nuclear technology, a centerpiece of his foreign policy. Rather than strengthen the treaty and encourage countries to comply with its terms, the administration rewarded its principle violator, increasing the risk that other countries will follow suit. Under the terms of the deal the administration negotiated, Iran is allowed to keep a substantial nuclear enrichment program, is allowed to continue building out its missile program in violation of numerous security council resolutions, and was provided close to \$2 billion in cash from the U.S. Treasury.

00:15:48

Bizarrely, Iran is allowed to do self-inspection at a key site. Nothing in the deal restrains Iran's violent activities in Syria and Iraq. Most egregiously, key terms of the deal expire in 10 and 15 years, at which point Iran could have a breakout time of weeks or even days. As a nuclear arms control deal, it's inexplicable. We urge you to vote for the motion.

John Donovan:

Thank you, Kristen Silverberg.

[applause]

And the motion again is Obama's Foreign Policy is a Failure, and here to make his opening statement against the motion, Derek Chollet, former assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs and author of "The Long Game." Derek Chollet.

Derek Chollet:

Well, --

John Donovan:

You get a round of applause for that.

[applause]

00:16:38

Derek Chollet:

I want to thank everyone for coming out tonight and I want to say it's an honor to share the stage with Eliot and Kristen. They're two people I admire. I consider them friends. We're all members of the Washington Swamp, so I look forward --

[laughter]

-- to the conversation tonight. And how should we judge whether a president's foreign policy is a success or a failure? Obama has compared being president to being a relay racer, in which you get elected and you inherit a situation that you can do nothing about, and all you can do as president is make the best with the time that you've got, make as much progress as you can, set your successor up for success, and then you execute a clean handoff with the next president taking the baton for his leg of the race. So, foreign policy success should be measured in a simple way. Did the president improve on what he inherited? Did he do as much as possible to set the next president up for success, positioning the U.S. to win the long game?

00:17:38

For Barack Obama's foreign policy, we believe without any doubt the answer is yes. Obama has restored America's strength and repositioned America to lead in the world. To make our case against this resolution, I will talk about what Obama inherited and what he said he would do about it. Vikram will talk about what Obama has achieved. Now, think back to eight years ago, if you were sitting on November 29, 2008. By almost every measure at home and abroad, the United States was a declining power. Now, America can't be strong in the world unless it's strong at home and what Obama inherited eight years ago, was pretty grim. Eight hundred thousand Americans were losing their jobs every month. Millions of Americans were thrown out of their homes. The U.S. economy was on the verge of complete collapse with major financial institutions that had already gone under, and the U.S. auto industry was about ready to go belly up. It didn't get much better when we looked abroad with nearly 200,000 American troops in harm's way in the Middle East and Afghanistan, nearly breaking the back of the military, with many of these forces on their third or fourth deployments, and thousands of Americans grievously wounded.

Countries like China and Iran were on the rise. And in too many places around the world in 2008, the United States was not identified with hope and opportunity and optimism and making people's lives better, but with torture and militarism in Guantanamo Bay, and climate change denial. Now, when President Obama was elected, in sharp contrast to his predecessor, George W. Bush, who campaigned in 2000 to implement a more humble foreign policy, but instead presided over years characterized by overreach and arrogance, Obama has followed through on what he promised to do in 2008. He promised to restore and revitalize core alliances like NATO. He promised to restore America's power at home by focusing on the economy. He said he would pursue tough engagement with adversaries like Iran. He expressed the willingness to undo outdated policies like the embargo on Cuba.

00:19:41

He said he would reduce the U.S. role in Iraq and Afghanistan while not getting overwhelmed by massive new military engagements. He said he would modernize the military while

deemphasizing military force as the primary instrument of American power, elevating diplomacy and development. He said he would rebalance American statecraft to the Asian Pacific. He said he would try to involve Congress more meaningfully in decisions about the use of force. He said he would execute a more lethal fight against terrorists while ending excesses like torture. And he said he would pursue bold policy initiatives on issues like trade, climate change, and nuclear disarmament. This is what Obama was elected to do eight years ago, and that's what he did, and that's success. Now, looking out at the world, we'll be talking a lot tonight about how complicated it is, and we'll hear from our opponents about how things have been mishandled and could have been done better. We're going to hear a lot about weakness. We're going to hear a lot about leading from behind.

The world has its share of challenges. But let's try to have a little bit of historical humility here. If we were sitting here in November 1968, we'd be talking about 500,000 Americans in south Vietnam, Soviet tanks in Prague, an American political system ripping itself apart on the streets. If we were sitting here in November 1980, we'd be talking about American hostages in Iran, Soviets in Afghanistan, and a worldwide energy crisis that was leading to gas lines. And of course, eight years ago, November 2008, we'd be talking about the great recession and the aftermath of the post 9/11 years in foreign policy. So, we judge a president's success not on whether the world is complicated or not or whether there are threats, but what position is the U.S. in to do something about it? What is the state of our economic, diplomatic, and military power around the world? What is the health of our alliances? What is the state of our global leadership? Now, to judge Obama, think of it this way. In terms of America's power in the world, would you rather be Barack Obama taking the baton from George W. Bush and what he left behind, or would you rather be Donald Trump taking the baton from Barack Obama and what he has left behind?

00:21:48

Well, ask yourselves, why is it that America's allies are so worried about what is to come with Donald Trump as president? Why have America's adversaries -- why are they cheering? Why did Russia work so hard to undermine the candidacy of Barack Obama's chosen successor, Hillary Clinton? Is it because Obama was failing? Now, the stakes for our future could not be higher, and the right choice for tonight's question could not be clearer. I ask for your support against the resolution.

John Donovan:

Thank you, Derek Chollet.

[applause]

And a reminder of what's going on, we have halfway through the opening round of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate. I'm John Donvan. We have four debaters, two teams of two, fighting it out over this motion: Obama's foreign policy is a failure. You've heard from the first two opening statements, and now onto the third. Making his way to the lectern on his side and debating for the motion, Eliot Cohen, the Robert E. Osgood professor at John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, where he directs the Philip Merrill Center for Strategic Studies.

Eliot Cohen.

Eliot Cohen:
Thank you.

[applause]

Well, that was a very interesting set of remarks by Derek Chollet, who is genuinely a friend of mine. A lot of really questionable propositions and some -- a lot of rhetorical questions. And I'll just start with one. Why do our allies around the world worry about Trump? It's not because Obama is a success. It's because they're afraid Trump is nuts.

[laughter & applause]

As Kristen Silverberg foretold, our opponents are going to talk a lot about George W. Bush, they're going to talk a lot about the economy. There'll be a lot of adjectives. Let me turn to some nouns. Russia.

00:23:00

In July of 2009, the president launched the so-called Russia reset in a speech in Moscow in which he said -- and I quote -- "There's a 19th century view that we are destined to vie for spheres of influence and that great powers must forge competing blocks to balance one another. These assumptions are wrong." Well, it is little wonder that in 2014, when Russia invaded and seized Crimea, and then invaded eastern Ukraine, both places it still is -- a country whose borders it had guaranteed. All his Secretary of State could do was to splutter, "It's a 19th century act in the 21st century." When Russia fostered civil war in eastern Ukraine itself and then sent soldiers there, the Obama administration was chagrined. And today, as Russian air power smashes Syrian cities, slaughtering civilians, the administration is appropriately appalled.

And when the Russian government attempts and perhaps succeeded in disrupting our political system by all kinds of things, including hacks into the Democratic National Committee's computers, the administration is embarrassingly silent. The Russian reset was a failure, thoroughly and unambiguously. There can be no doubt that our relations with Russia are worse today than they have been at any time since the end of the Cold War. Another failure,

President Obama's -- came in, promising to end the wars upon which we had been engaged. He told us in 2011 that that tide of wars is receding and every war must end. He declared, in May of 2013, that he had indeed ended the war in Iraq. He came in, of course, promising in his campaign in 2008, the twin objectives of "finishing the fight against al-Qaeda," a direct quote, and ending the war in Iraq.

00:25:45

How has he done? Again, the facts. He has launched us on our third war in Iraq against an outgrowth of al-Qaeda, which he once dismissed at the JV team, but, of course, we know today as the Islamic State. His administration has actually spent as much as, and by some counts more, on war than did that of President Bush. He has presided over a vast campaign of drone strikes around the world. He launched a war in Libya without -- and this is interesting, based on what Derek was just saying about his attitude towards Congress -- without an authorization of the use of military force from Congress. I would remind you that President Bush actually did get an authorization for the use of military force in Iraq from Congress. The results of that war, by the way, include thousands of migrants fleeing to Europe from that wretched country, often drowning or dying of exposure along the way.

His record in Iraq, one that in 2010, Vice President Biden hailed as one of the great achievements of this administration, has been shattered beyond all hopes of putting back together. Rather than finishing, as he promised he would, the war with al-Qaeda by killing Osama Bin Laden, that organization and its affiliates have taken new and in some ways more menacing forms. He said that the Syrian war must end and Bashar al-Assad must go. But the war continues and Assad is not going. The Obama administration claimed to have disposed of the Syrian arsenal of chemical weapons. But, according to the United Nations, the fact is the Syrian government continues to use chemical weapons to this day. He has not even been able to deliver on what was an unambiguous, admittedly symbolic, but very important goal for him.

00:27:41

You remember how many times he promised he would shut the prison at Guantanamo Bay. He failed to end the wars he said he would end. And whether or not we excuse these failures -- and we may very well excuse them. We may blame them on all kinds of things other than the fault of Barack Obama. The fact is, he failed to do the things he said he would do. And what of the future? Kristen talked about nuclear weapons. In Prague, in 2009, President Obama promised a world without nuclear weapons. Kristen's talked about Iran. Remember, the Russian government today routinely invokes nuclear threats against Western Europe. Most nuclear powers other than the United States are modernizing their nuclear arsenals. Four out of five North Korean nuclear tests have occurred on the watch of this administration. And in fact, North Korea is building an intercontinental ballistic missile which will be able to reach the United States.

And it has detonated bombs roughly the size of the Hiroshima or Nagasaki bombs. Ladies and gentlemen, in foreign policy, there are no prizes for effort, for good intentions, for noble aspirations, for bad luck. There are only results. That is how administrations are judged, must be judged. And by that standard, the Obama foreign policy has failed.

John Donvan:

Thank you, Eliot Cohen.

[applause]

And that's the motion: Obama's Foreign Policy is a Failure. And now, to make his opening statement against the motion, Vikram Singh, Vice President for National Security And International Policy at the Center for American Progress and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia. Vikram Singh.

[applause]

Vikram Singh:

Thank you. Thank you, John, and Eliot, Kristen, Derek. It's great to be here with all of you and to have what I think is really a very important debate. To listen to our opponents, really, nothing has gone right for the United States on the world stage for the past eight years.

00:29:46

Barack Obama has emboldened enemies. He has left allies uncertain. He has let bad behavior go unpunished. But these claims do not stand up to scrutiny, and most of you know that these claims do not hold up. Like every president before him, Barack Obama's foreign policy has had missteps. It has not been perfect. But a failure? Like Nixon in Vietnam? Like George W. Bush and the Iraq War that we still cannot escape? As Derek demonstrated, Obama left the country not weaker, but stronger, and he did so despite the most difficult circumstances to confront any president since World War II. Those of you who view President Obama's foreign policy as a failure are either scoring some cheap political points or they're making two critical mistakes. First, they view the challenges Obama has been unable to overcome as catastrophic, when in fact, they are the drama and tragedy that always is world events.

Again, as Derek alluded to, if you look back over the decades. They suggest that there are easy solutions, if Obama would just leave. But the prescription of the commentariat is generally a return to the same mistakes of reckless over-commitment that brought us to the catastrophe -- to catastrophe by 2008. In that year alone, 469 Americans died in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we spent hundreds of billions of dollars. We were spending 10 to \$12 billion a month for results that don't look a lot better than what we are having -- what we're managing to do today with far less commitment. Obama was elected precisely on his promise to avoid these kinds of

grievous mistakes. Second, the absolutist critics of Obama ignore or distort the successes of the Obama administration to fit their narrative of failure.

00:31:36

The -- this is -- this does a great disservice to Obama and to America's national security by expanding fissures that will lead to wild and dangerous swings at how America relates to the world. Will we support our allies or abandon them? Will we stand by our agreements or tear them up? Will we lead or will we turn inward? I want to spend some time running through some successes and challenges that actually make it clear, despite what our opponents say, that Obama's foreign policy is not a failure. In 2009, an Iranian nuclear bomb seemed inevitable. The Bush administration had tried and failed to get negotiations going. Observers, including Eliot, noted with real concern that Iran had massive stockpiles of uranium, including enough highly enriched uranium for at least one bomb -- at that time. And a plutonium pathway to the heavy water reactor at Iraq. Without any inspectors, the world was blind to all Iranian nuclear activities. The Obama administration took the threat seriously.

Our intelligence services worked to slow Iran's enrichment, including with offensive cyber operations to destroy their centrifuges. American military planners prepared for targeted attacks, keeping every option on the table for the president. American diplomats, led by Hillary Clinton, secured the most restrictive and effective sanctions in history -- sanctions that could only work with cooperation from Moscow, Beijing, and Europe. And in secret, the administration kept open the door to talks and worked with other UN Security Council members and Germany to secure a deal. Today, Iran has no highly-enriched uranium. It has insufficient uranium of any kind to make even one bomb. Iran has no plutonium pathway, and highly intrusive inspections help verify compliance. Could they cheat? Possibly. But our military option would still be on the table and with much more information for planners. Are Iranians still supporting terror and brutality at home and in the region? They are.

00:33:40

But they are now 10 to 15 years away from a nuclear bomb instead of weeks or months, which makes every other security challenge more manageable. That is a foreign policy success. What about climate? We know that climate change threatens humanity and will increase instability, violence, and population displacement. In October of 2015, it looked like the Paris round of talks were going to fail, but the Obama administration was not going to take no for an answer. They pulled together, developed in developing countries that were most impacted by climate, rising sea levels to drive talks forward. They worked over years with China to develop a relationship so that they could come up with a pact whereby the two biggest emitters would lead the world to make Paris a success. Unless a new American president tears up the Paris agreement, the world will actually be on the path, for the first time, to start reducing carbon emissions. That is a foreign policy success. One of the failures that was just noted was

Crimea. Vladimir Putin's invasion of Crimea was no more the fault of Barack Obama than his invasion of Georgia in 2008 was the fault of President Bush.

We should judge these presidents by how they responded. President Bush flew troops -- Georgian troops back from Iraq to Russia -- to Georgia. They were routed by the Russians. He did some limited sanctions. They did nothing. Sanctions that Obama created with Europe are actually punishing Russia. There will be a cost. It shows that countries will stand together for principles even when their own interests are challenged. The fact is, today, majorities of the world view America and Barack Obama favorably. According to Pew Data from June, people are starting to again view America as the world's leading economic power and they trust Obama to do the right thing. As he ends his term, he has a 60 percent approval rating. We believe that you will think as we do that Obama's theme song upon exiting this administration will be "You're Going to Miss Me When I'm Gone."

[laughter]

So, I am hopeful you will join us in opposing the motion.

00:35:44

John Donvan:

Thank you. Vikram Singh and again, the motion is Obama's Foreign Policy Is a Failure. And that concludes round one.

[applause]

Now we move on to round two and in round two the debaters address one another directly and they take questions from me and from you, our live audience here in New York. We have this motion: Obama's Foreign Policy is a Failure. Two debaters arguing in favor of this motion, Kristen Silverberg and Eliot Cohen. They define failure for Obama in a couple of ways. One is just the regular common sense -- a reasonable person's way, they say, and also in terms of what the president set out as his goals. On both counts, they say, the president has failed miserably. They called forth a parade of disasters, Syria, which they described as a regional inferno, Iran, still dangerous, Russia, disrespecting the United States, and their overall argument is that President Obama has left the United States less powerful and less secure.

The team arguing against the motion, Derek Chollet and Vikram Singh, they're doing a sort of a hold on there, cowboy kind of argument. They're saying yes indeed the president encountered bad outcomes, not everything he wanted, but they say he had a number of clear foreign policy wins, climate change. They see the Iran nuclear deal as an example of an enhancement of global security because Iran is no longer days or months away from being able to develop a nuclear bomb. They say that the president has restored America's strength and its position in the world and its reputation by restoring alliances, by pursuing bad guys, by modernizing the

military. So, as we move forward in this debate, I want to point out that over the last several years we at Intelligence Squared have debated a number of the issues that have come up already in very specific terms. We've debated the Iran nuclear deal. We've debated the influence of China. We've debated the relationship with Russia. We have debated Syria. We have more or less taken very deep dives into all of these topics before, and in tonight's debate we can't revisit all of these in that sort of debate level.

0:38:43

What I think we want to try to do is to step back and look at the fact, knowing that these two teams interpret each of these events in different ways, we want to look at what's the lasting impact on America's influence in the world, on its reputation in the world, on its ability to get its will in certain ways and to protect its citizens. So, and in the course of that I think we will revisit the specifics. So, we won't be going case by case through every single issue in the world until it comes up in relation to these other issues. But when you ask questions, of course you can bring up the specifics. So, I want to go to the team arguing for the motion that Obama's Foreign Policy Is a Failure and just ask you to reflect -- I'll start with you, Eliot Cohen, on your opponent's argument that reputationally, President Obama leaves the United States in an enhanced position to the one he found it in when he took office in the first place.

Eliot Cohen:

You know, the question is, do people like President Obama. The answer is yes. I like President Obama, and I'm sure most of you do as well. The more important question is, do they respect him? And I would say reputationally, there is nothing that compares with the hit that occurs when the president says, "Here is a red line. You cross that red line, and bad things happen," and you don't follow through. And so, what I -- the way I think about our reputation in the world, do I want to be liked? Do I want to be admired? Of course, but do I want people to believe that when a President of the United States says, "You cross that red line, serious things happen," I want them to believe it. And that's more important. And in that respect, President Obama failed.

John Donvan:

Let me take that to Vikram Singh. So, your opponent is saying two ways to look at respect. Respect is, "I really like that guy." Respect is, "I'm not going to -- I'm not going to cross that guy." And he's saying, in the second category, Obama has failed.

Vikram Singh:

I think it's -- respect is, can I rely on that guy?

0:39:43

Can I rely on the United States? The challenge on the Syria red line question is, should the president have ended up taking a worse option than what ended up unfolding when --

John Donvan:

Why don't we take 30 seconds for you to remind people what happened in August of 2013? 30 seconds. We'll make sure your opponent's agree with the details and then move forward.

Vikram Singh:

Okay. So -- actually, I should let Derek do that since Derek, he wrote the book on it.

John Donovan:

Okay, okay.

Vikram Singh:

And was in the situation room for the -- for the discussion.

Derek Chollet:

So, in August 2013, Bashar al-Assad uses chemical weapons against his own people which crosses the red line that president had set. He launches on an effort to prepare for the use of military force against Assad. Then to our surprise, an opportunity arose to do something we had never imagined possible, which was get rid of most of Syria's chemical weapons through diplomacy, something that the use of force would not have achieved.

John Donovan:

And do your opponents agree basically that's what happened?

Kristen Silverberg:

Basically, although I'll just reiterate that Bashar al-Assad didn't just cross the red line in 2013.

0:40:42

He continued to cross the red line in 2014, 2015 and also in August this year.

Eliot Cohen:

Using things that were not covered by the chemical weapons --

Kristen Silverberg:

No. This year using things that were --

Eliot Cohen:

-- using chemical weapons.

Chlorine.

Eliot Cohen:

Chlorine gas. I'm a military historian.

John Donovan:

Let's not --

Eliot Cohen:

Chlorine gas was one of the weapons of choice in World War I.

Kristen Silverberg:

And according to the August UN report, this year, using things that were covered by the agreement with the Obama administration.

John Donovan:

Okay. Let me just bring it back to the other side, and you can speak uninterrupted, Derek.

Derek Chollet:

Put this in big context. In Iraq, we used force to deal with the WMD threat that did not exist, and we are still dealing with the strategic consequences of that decision. In Syria -- in Syria, we did not use force, and ended up dealing with the WMD threat that did exist and was in fact far worse than the CIA wrongly estimated the Iraq threat was. And that's criticized as a bad decision.

John Donovan:

All right. Derek or Vikram, you can take this. But an essential part of the criticism about President Obama, in August of 2013 in relation to the red line is, he drew a line in the sand.

0:41:44

He said that if the Syrians were to use chemical weapons there would be a military response, and then they did, and then there was no response. Now, you said that there was a diplomatic solution. We get that. But the argument is that by having blustered and then not done it, that he hurt America's credibility. What's your response to that?

Vikram Singh:

Well, I don't think there's any world in which President Obama wouldn't prefer that he hadn't set or read that red line in the way he did in that press conference. But the fact is that his credible military threat ended up resulting in something that eliminated something far more -- the estimate was that we would get 25 to 50 percent of Syria's military chemical weapons from the military planners through a military operation. We got maybe not a hundred percent, but damn near close to it --

John Donovan:

Do you --

Vikram Singh:

-- something like 12,000 tons of chemical weapons peacefully removed from Syria.

John Donovan:

Do you concede the point --

Vikram Singh:

Chemical weapons in the hand of -- hand of ISIS today which would have been more likely --

0:42:41

Eliot Cohen:

ISIS has used chemical weapons by the way.

Vikram Singh:

-- in the alternative -- in the alternative scenario would have been a far greater problem and something that for which President Obama would bear some responsibility.

John Donovan:

Do you concede to your opponents' point, though, on the optics of the situation, that it was very -- that it was damaging to his reputation to have made the threat and not followed through militarily? Derek Chollet.

Derek Chollet:

I think we actually achieved a better outcome by not using force. And moreover, on the optics, it always gets cherry-picked, the red line, because, of course, no one talks about the optics of a threat he did follow through on militarily, which was taking out Osama Bin Laden.

John Donovan:

Okay. Let's let the other side respond.

Eliot Cohen:

Look. Any president who had Osama Bin Laden in his gun sights and didn't take him out would have been impeached and deservedly so.

Derek Chollet:

That's not true.

Eliot Cohen:

And I don't think he got a lot of credit for that.

Derek Chollet:

That is not true.

Eliot Cohen:

But more importantly, I mean, how you can paint this as a success. Half a million people dead, 13 million refugees, something that is destabilizing Europe, and the regime is still using chemical weapons. By the way, the Islamic State has used chemical weapons.

0:43:41

This is not me talking. This is the United Nations talking. This is not -- this is not success. And it is, I think, as the Soviets used to say, no coincidence that Vladimir Putin felt that it was okay to do what he did in Ukraine, a state he had guaranteed. Georgia is a much more remote place. This was very different. And to get involved in disrupting our politics. Think about that. Think about what we've just been through. And the administration has not reacted. You know, did he get some things right? I'm sure he did. The question is whether he got the important things right. And the question is, did he do the things that he said he would do and that any reasonable person would say a president should do? One of which should be to stand up to the Russians when they try to deform our political process.

John Donovan:
Vikram Singh.

[applause]

Vikram Singh:
I don't want to talk over Eliot's applause lines there, okay? The question cannot -- a president's record -- the motion is, is Obama's foreign policy a failure?

0:44:44

That's the motion. It cannot be on the each's. It has to be on the overall record. It has to be on, are we better off in our foreign policy than we were eight years ago? It is unassailably true that we are better off in every way. Had Russia or China or any other contingency come about in 2008 or 2009, our capacity -- our military capacity to actually deal with another threat was tremendously limited with 180,000 troops deployed in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that were not really going to be resolved with that much American commitment. And where we're making similar levels of progress, there's a much lower level of commitment.

John Donovan:
Let's bring in Kristen Silverberg.

Kristen Silverberg:
It's November 29th, 2016, and it's still impossible to have a conversation with an Obama administration official without immediately hearing the words "George W. Bush." That's a concession of failure.

If they had a successful record --

[applause]

-- to run on, if they had successes to tell, they would cite them. I recently watched a video, actually, of Eliot's -- an interview that Eliot did with Derek over his book. And it's a -- you can go to the website and look at yourself. What was the website, Eliot?

Eliot Cohen:

It's the Johns Hopkins website. It's about his eloquent, but not convincing book.

[laughter]

Kristen Silverberg:

And Eliot -- and Eliot asked Derek, "Are we better off in the Middle East today than when President Obama took office?" And Derek said, "No, of course we're not." And he asked, "Are we better off in Europe?" And Derek said, "No." And the fact is, if he'd asked, Are we better off in Asia? Derek would have had to say no to that as well. So even by that standard, President Obama has failed.

John Donovan:

Derek, do you remember this interview?

[laughter]

Derek Chollet:

Of course. I mean, those regions are all going through historic changes, none of which really has much about -- to do with the United States, right, whether you're looking at the migration challenges in Europe or the changing power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific or the meltdown that's occurring in the Middle East.

0:46:49

The question in my mind is what position is the U.S. in to do something about it? We could be wrapped around the axle in Syria for the next decade. Believe me, I think leaders in Beijing would like nothing more than for us to spend the next 10 years worried only about Syria. And in terms of successes, I think the Iran deal is a success. We can debate that. I think the climate change agreement is a success. I think the end of a failed policy towards Cuba is a success. And I think the state of our alliance relationships around the world are stronger today than they were eight years ago.

John Donovan:

What about that, Eliot Cohen, the question of alliances being stronger now than they were eight years ago?

Eliot Cohen:

I think anybody who looks at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization realizes it's going through a major crisis right now. Now, that is because of Russian reaction -- because of Russian action. But I would also say it is because the Obama administration was extremely hesitant in how they reacted to the Russians very early on.

For example, pulling ballistic missile defenses that we had promised to the Poles and the Czechs at the very outset of the administration. But if I could, I'd like to ask, in a way, a question back. So, our colleagues have talked about the long game. But in that case, if you look at the Iran deal, for example, 10 years from now, the Iranians have the legal cover -- they certainly have the technology, because they have thousands of centrifuges. They have the ballistic missiles. They have self-inspection on their weapons facility. They'll be able to develop nuclear weapons. And there's not a whole lot that we can legally do --

John Donovan:

Just to make clear, the deal -- the deal allows for that.

Eliot Cohen:

Yes, the deal does allow for that.

John Donovan:

Okay.

Eliot Cohen:

Similar with climate change, yes, you have an agreement, but if the next president, as he promises to do, tears it up -- which I think is likely, then how can you claim it as a success? And, in fact, part of the problem is the Obama administration, by failing to conduct proper treaties with Congressional consent -- set itself up for that.

0:48:45

Same thing with the TPP, the Trans-Pacific Partnership. So, these are not going to be long-term successes.

John Donovan:

Vikram Singh.

Vikram Singh:

I think that the fact is that the Obama administration shifted America from simply being in a morass in the Middle East and Afghanistan to being able to do much more on the world stage on a whole host of issues, including in Asia, where the rebalance ensured that we had more connectivity, more involvement with all of our Asian partners, where we were able to start shaping events in a part of the world that is 65 percent of economic activity, and where our future is actually going to depend -- much more than it's going to depend on the Middle East. After all, we have energy independence. The United States has shifted to a model of working with others. Right now, Iraq is fighting ISIS. We are doing it -- we are supporting them to fight ISIS. We are not re-invading to do it for them. We really got off-track by thinking, one, that

everything was our responsibility, and two, that we were somehow omnipotent and we could actually simply turn on the switch of American charm and American military might, and fix far-away problems in faraway cultures by –

John Donovan:

Okay.

Vikram Singh:-- leaving 150,000 troops somewhere indefinitely.

John Donovan:

So, Kristen Silverberg, I think your opponents are saying that it was a mark of the president's success that he was able to back out of certain ditches that foreign policy was in when he came into office, that we're today quagmire free -- that term is to evoke something like Vietnam or Iraq 15 years ago -- 13 years ago -- and that in itself, that constitutes a kind of success, which is different from saying that he's done better than George Bush. They're saying that he, given where he started, he moved things forward. What's your response?

Kristen Silverberg:

They're suggesting that he's cleanly wrapped up the challenge in Iraq, which is, of course, not true. We have thousands of troops on the ground today, trying to -- instead of having prevented ISIS from taking Mosul in the first place, we're now trying the very violent and bloody and difficult task of working with the Iraqis to try to take it back.

0:50:49

I actually think of Iraq as fundamentally three failures: the withdrawal from Iraq. There was the original failure -- they failed to get the Iraqi agreement -- the Iraqi government to agree to a status of forces agreement that would have allowed us to keep troops in with appropriate legal protections. After he failed to do it, he failed to understand that he needed to keep some troop levels there anyway. And then he failed to understand his mistake on withdrawing troops prematurely until 2014, after ISIS had already run Mosul. So, it's not that he has kept us out of a quagmire, it's that he's ignored the obvious facts on the ground that would prevent -- allowed us to prevent some of these events from taking place in the first place.

John Donovan:

Would you like to respond? Because I have another question to move on to. But please respond

--

Derek Chollet:

Yeah. Well, I –

John Donovan:

-- Derek Chollet.

Derek Chollet:

-- yeah. I think -- just one broad point, and then specifically on Iraq. I mean, our opponents are trying to deny that there's alternatives, right?

And Joe Biden's got a great line, which is, "Don't compare me to the Almighty. Just compare me to the alternative."

[laughter]

And in some ways -- I mean, you have to think of -- Barack Obama inherited a situation that was a very difficult situation. And this gets back to my relay racer analogy, which is the best he could do is use this time in office to make as much progress as he can and turn a more sustainable situation over to his successor. And this gets to the Iraq point -- which is sustainability.

Kristen Silverberg:

But he didn't say, "more sustainable." He said sovereign, safe, stable Iraq.

Derek Chollet:

It --

Kristen Silverberg:

He celebrated it through the 2012 campaign.

Derek Chollet:

And Iraq has been a huge --

Kristen Silverberg:

He said --

Derek Chollet:

-- setback. Absolutely.

Kristen Silverberg:

He said, "Responsibly ended the war in Iraq."

Derek Chollet:

Yeah. Iraq has been -- was a huge challenge for the previous president and this president. But in terms of sustainability --

Vikram Singh:

And the presidents before that.

Derek Chollet:

And -- absolutely. In terms of sustainability, the first war against ISIL, which was then known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq -- cost -- which was from 2007 to 2009 -- Eliot and Kristen knew about this very well -- cost the American taxpayer \$10 to \$12 billion a month.

0:52:41

Hundreds were killed, thousands wounded. The current fight against ISIL, where we're working by, with, and through our partners on the ground -- American airstrikes -- has cost the American taxpayer total, in two years -- since 2014 -- 10 to \$12 billion --

Kristen Silverberg:

But there are options between 150,000 troops on the ground and between what we have now. For example, there was the 20,000 troops that General Austin recommended, or there was the 10,000 troops that both Secretary Gates and Secretary Panetta recommended. Instead, the reason we're in this mess is because President Obama rejected the advice of both his military commander and his Secretaries of Defense.

John Donovan:

Okay. I'm going to move things a little bit into a different direction now. We -- I started that question with a question about the president's reputation, and I moved off that, and that's fine -- I think that's inevitable that that's going to happen. But I now want to also focus on a different category, which -- where is the United States left in terms of its influence on events in the world? Different from the reputation question. Starting with you, Eliot Cohen. And maybe you want to put it in the -- to get specific, talk about Russia.

Eliot Cohen:

Our influence in Russia is minimal. I think that's -- that is abundantly clear. I mean, for all the talk of sanctions --

John Donovan:

But is that -- are we to expect otherwise?

Eliot Cohen:

Well, I think it's pretty clear that the Russians are not particularly apprehensive about any reaction to us, which is why they've been willing to do the things that they've done in -- not only in Ukraine, which is really right up against the borders of NATO, but in the United States. I don't think I can stress that strongly enough. If I could use a different example as well, the so-called pivot to Asia. So, at the heart of that was something called the Transpacific Partnership, a large trade treaty which was also very much a strategy -- strategic deal that was really going to cement the block that would balance China. The president was unable to persuade Congress to go along with that. That thing has fallen apart. The Chinese have already started something called the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and our allies, the Australians, just signed up for it.

0:54:46

Now, can you say it's not his fault? Can you say it's the fault of the Republicans? Can you say it's the fault of Congress? Can you say -- if you want to blame Bush, go ahead.

John Donovan:

Where does it sit down on the question of --

Eliot Cohen:

It's a failure.

John Donovan:

-- of influence?

Eliot Cohen:

It is -- we have less influence in Asia.

John Donovan:

Okay. Let's take it to the other side. Vikram Singh.

Vikram Singh:

We have less influence in Asia today than we did at the beginning of President Obama's term whether or not the Transpacific Partnership can go forward. At least he tried. We do not have a president coming in that plans to do anything but tear up such agreements and not stand by allies. The fact is, President Obama spent considerable time, as did every other leader of his cabinet, in the Asia Pacific. He stood by the prime minister of Japan and he made an iron clad commitment to the Article V mutual defense commitment of the United States to Japan. He went into building a relationship with China where we can actually both find ways to be constructive, for example, on climate change.

We can hopefully succeed at dealing with some serious challenges where we have major disagreements and conflicts. We made progress on cyber. Let's see how that goes. And then we're going to have issues where China acting as an independent nation is going to do things that really irritate us and those -- the question is, how do we respond to those? Do we have the capacity -- does the next president have tools at his or her disposal that he can use to deal with these sorts of challenges? In 2009, those tools were very limited. Our engagement in the Asia Pacific was, to be frank, pathetic in the Bush area.

John Donovan:

Kristen Silverbeg.

Kristen Silverberg:

Except that the TPP began under President Bush. The Korea Free Trade Agreement was negotiated and signed under President Bush. The landmark India Nuclear Deal was negotiated

and signed under President Bush and the China strategic dialogue began under President Bush. You're grossly exaggerating the novelty of our investment in Asia.

John Donovan:

Do you conclude, Kristen, that our influence in Asia is less than it was eight years ago?

0:56:44

Kristen Silverberg:

Absolutely.

John Donovan:

Evidence?

Kristen Silverberg:

The gravitational pull of China's growing economy is even greater and really our one tool to try to counteract that was the TPP, which has now failed for lack of political support. In fact, it was the one thing on which Donald Trump and Secretary Clinton agreed.

Derek Chollet:

John --

John Donovan:

Let me give -- let's give Derek a chance. Derek.

Derek Chollet:

I mean, look, there are only two countries that benefited from the events of the 2000s and the decisions of the Bush administration, that was China and Iran. And there -- when we inherited that situation, President Obama inherited in 2008, what we had to do was arrest the decline of the United States so we could be on better footing in dealing with China. We needed to shore up our alliance relationships in Asia Pacific, and be more involved diplomatically, militarily, and economically in the challenge of Asia Pacific and I think that happened. So, to get to Russia, just to answer Eliot's question, he's raised it a couple of times, Eliot doesn't know and I don't know what the administration has done in response to Russia in this cyber-attack on our election.

0:57:44

So, let's not -- you know, we don't know, right? The administration's been very careful when talking about it. But again, I go back to why was Russia so interested in influencing the outcome of our election? I mean, Barack Obama was pretty clear on who he wanted to succeed him, his Secretary of State during the first term, and it seems to me that Russia's interest in the outcome was that they thought they were going to get a worse deal if Hillary Clinton, a continuation of Barack Obama's approach to Russia, would be elected.

John Donovan:

What does Russia represent in terms of my question about America's influence on events abroad?

Derek Chollet:

Well, Russia was a problem for George W. Bush when it invaded Georgia in 2008. It's certainly been a problem for Barack Obama. We got something out of the reset in the first two years. We got fear of nuclear weapons. We got Russia agrees to sanctions on Iran, which was critical for the Iran deal. We got a resupply route into Afghanistan, which helped our soldiers in need of resupply.

John Donovan:

So, we got stuff we wanted.

Derek Chollet:

We -- it was a transactional deal and we got a lot out of it.

0:58:41

John Donovan:

Eliot Cohen.

Eliot Cohen:

First to -- you know, your original question on Asia. When the president of the Philippines, with which this country has had a very long relationship, refers to President Obama as the son of a whore, then the chances are that our influence there is less than it used to be.

[laughter]

You know? I think that's pretty self-evident. With regard to Russia, I mean, you know, it was pretty striking to me what Derek -- what you just said. We don't know what the administration is doing. The administration was well behind civilian, non-governmental cyber authorities in saying, yes, it was the Russians who went after the DNC. Yes, it is the Russians behind some of the fake news websites. And it's not that hard to figure out. It is stunning to me, actually, that even as his own candidate is going down in flames, the president couldn't even bring himself to speak about it.

Derek Chollet:

I mean, Vice President Biden said, we know it was Russia, and we're going to respond, but I'm not going to tell you how.

Eliot Cohen:

Right, which is the right approach given the kind of -- in this kind of --

John Donovan:

He's got the secret plan thing going?

Eliot Cohen:

I mean, I really do want to --

[laughter]

Eliot Cohen:

I really do want to -- I love secret plans.

John Donovan:

Yes.

Eliot Cohen:

I really want to come back to this Asia issue.

John Donovan:

Okay. And then after, I'm going to stop after this comment so that we can go to audience questions. Go ahead, please.

Eliot Cohen:

This idea -- the election of Duterte is like the election of Trump. It is an anomaly, it is something that he couldn't have foreseen how to deal with. It would have been the same for any American president to have to figure out how to deal with that. The next president will have to deal with that in the Philippines. But Vietnam, Malaysia, the -- Myanmar opening up and moving towards democracy, many countries that were not very interested in doing anything military with the United States have grown extremely interested in partnering with us. The relationship with Vietnam is absolutely transformed. It is because the United States said, "We see, we want you to be able to have good relation, constructive relations with China and good, constructive relations with us.

1:00:46

And oh, by the way, we are here to help make sure that international norms continue to be followed in the Asia-Pacific, and we're going to be your partners." And they had responded.

John Donovan:

Okay. I'm going to go to audience questions. The way this will work, if you raise your hand, and I'll call on you, a microphone will be brought to you. I really ask you to wait for the microphone, and I ask you to stand up and tell us your name. And now here's the tricky part. I need you to

really phrase a question to the debaters to get them to debate in an even deeper way on the issue that we're debating, which is whether or not President Obama's foreign policy is a failure. I don't want you to debate with the debaters.

[laughter]

I'm fine if you stay to one sentence premise, but I don't need a long explanation of what you're thinking. And I'll have to decline if that starts to happen. And also -- and I'll do it very respectfully, don't worry. But I'll also pass on questions that I feel are off point for the motion or that have covered something that we've already discussed already because we want to keep things moving. Sir, I'm looking right at you.

1:01:47

If you could stand up. The mic's coming down on your right-hand side. Can you tell us your name? And try to get out a good, clean question in 30 seconds.

Male Speaker:

Hi. My name is Josh Frandell [spelled phonetically], big fan so far of the debate. Given the assumption that I think everyone in this room would agree with, that globalism is sort of good to be pushed for, and given the rise of nativism, provincialism in Europe and England coming almost to the United States, what share of the blame would Barack Obama and his foreign policy have in regards to that both in terms of what you spoke about a little bit, the failure of things like the TPP, also in terms of the way that he has presented sort of a vision of globalism –

John Donovan:

Thank you.

John Donovan:

That was a great question, but two phrases back, it was already a question. Okay.

[laughter]

Let me take it to Derek Chollet first, then I'll take it to the other side.

Derek Chollet:

Well, I think there's no question that one of President Obama's greatest frustrations as he's leaving office is the fact that globalism -- globalization is under assault from all corners.

1:02:48

And certainly, one of the projects of his presidency, and I expect of his post presidency, will be to continue to make the case on behalf of the United States and the world for the benefits of globalization but also the huge challenges globalization presents and what we need to do about it. Again, I don't think that that's part of whether it's a success or a failure of his foreign policy. I think he's tried to project the foreign policy in the way he engages with allies and the

way he's tried to engage with adversaries, and the way he's projected American power in the world and diversified the use of American power in the world to put us in the best position possible to deal with the increasing challenges of a globalized world.

John Donvan:

Eliot Cohen, would you like to respond?

Eliot Cohen:

Well, we have -- actually two responses between the two of us. I would say part of the blame does fall on Obama because of the nature of the domestic politics that he practiced. And I think part of what we've seen in this country is a kind of identity politics backlash in which, if it's okay for everybody to be segmented as an identity, well, why can't you know, working class white people say, you know, we have an identity too, and in some cases, not all, by any means, to react accordingly.

1:03:59

So, I think the backlash was probably a while coming. I do think, you know, the Trump election is in part about Barack Obama unfortunately.

John Donvan:

Vikram Singh.

Vikram Singh:

Look, I think -- I think this is -- I think that is an incredibly off -- off base. The fact is -- and it afflicted conservative politicians in many democracies. But the willingness to essentially play footsie with the most extreme parts of their parties has led to those extreme parts growing stronger and stronger and then enveloping the conservative political parties in a number of democracies. Our Republican party right now is beholden not just to the Tea Party, but to the farthest right elements that empowered Donald Trump. And it's because they --

John Donvan:

Okay.

1:04:46

[applause]

John Donvan:

Kristen, I want to come to you but I really want you to pull this debate back to the foreign policy part of the argument.

[laughter]

Kristen Silverberg:

Thank you. Donald Trump ran aggressively against trade -- apologies. Barack Obama ran aggressively against trade in 2008. He ran against the Colombia FTA, he ran against NAFTA, and it helped to fuel this antitrade -- strong antitrade sentiment within his own party. When he -- when he finally -- when Republicans, after the midterms elections and the Republican win, he went back -- he went to Congress to ask for trade permission authority, but he passed overwhelmingly with Republican support, not with support from his own party. And so absolutely I think he bears strong responsibilities for this sort of antitrade, anti-globalization sentiment.

John Donovan:

Another question? Yeah. You're wearing a red hat. And you're the only person in the room wearing a red hat, but I -- it's not a baseball hat.

1:05:47

It's -- if you could stand up, please, and tell us your name.

Female Speaker:

Hi. My name is Shay [spelled phonetically]. And I was just curious about your thoughts on Obama's drone program. It's one of the least spoken about aspects of his legacy, and I just --

John Donovan:

Well, that doesn't -- that doesn't actually -- your question doesn't actually get us to whether something was a failure or a success. And then do you want to try to rephrase that in a way that feeds into the motion rather --

Female Speaker:

Yes. Do you think his use of drones has bettered our foreign policy or made it worse?

[laughter]

John Donovan:

Very clever.

[laughter]

Let's go to Derek Chollet.

Derek Chollet:

I --

John Donovan:

Very direct route.

Derek Chollet:

I think that, you know, this gets back to the conundrum of Barack Obama. On the one hand, to some of his critics, he's this weak president who's unwilling to use force and let's red lines go unenforced.

1:06:46

But to others, he's presided over this massive expansion of the use of drones to kill terrorist leaders around the world. And I think one of the things he's been very focused on -- and this is setting the United States up for the long game and to have a policy that's sustainable. And this is what I think is a success, is to ensure that we're as transparent as we can be about the use of this very effective tool, this counterterrorism tool, the use of drones, to try to ensure that we get as much public support for it as possible by talking about it openly. And there's no doubt this will be an ongoing challenge for future presidents because this is a tool that president Trump will have at his disposal. So, we will measure his use of this effective tool by how Obama has used it, and that's the precedent that has been set for the future. And I think that's a successful one. It's a very difficult issue, though.

John Donovan:

Eliot Cohen, again, the drone policy a measure of success or failure?

Eliot Cohen:

Look, it has been the most successful large-scale campaign of assassination in human history.

[laughter & applause]

And I'm not opposed to it. I'll tell you where, though, I --

[laughter]

But I'll tell you where I think he failed, and, actually, I would say the administration I was part of failed as well; that is in terms of thinking about the Jihadi threat as something that you address with this one instrument, which is targeted killing. And for the rest, you talk around the fundamental issues. So, you use violent extremists and things like that, so as if you're dealing with Lord Voldemort, or for an older generation, Sauron, rather than -- rather than, you know, what is a minority stream within Islam, but it is a stream. And it's a pity because Barack Obama is a very eloquent speaker. He could have framed that well. What is now about to happen, and it's one of the many reasons why Kristen and I have been very deeply opposed to the president-elect -- is you're now going to have the swing of the pendulum.

1:08:52

And the swing of the pendulum is just going to be talking about Muslims as our enemies, and that's A, untrue. And B, it is nuts.

[laughter]

So –

[applause]

-- I would say he failed the way the administration that I was part of failed, in being able to discuss this with the American people in a way that was true and made sense, and was actually effective in prosecuting what is going to be a very long struggle which he couldn't end, despite what he promised, and the next president can't end either.

John Donovan:

Okay. I want to remind you that we are in the question and answer section of this Intelligence Squared debate. I'm John Donovan, your moderator. We have four debaters, two teams of two, debating this motion: Obama's Foreign Policy is a Failure. Back to questions. Right down in the front row here. Mic is coming down the aisle for you, if you can wait.

1:09:46

The mic is coming down the aisle. And if you can tell us your name, please. First name is good enough.

Male Speaker:

My name is Jake Lafich [spelled phonetically], and the question I have is, Obama's relations with the only democracy in the Middle East a success or failure?

John Donovan:

You're talking about Israel, I'm sure –

Male Speaker:

Yeah.

John Donovan:

I guessed that.

[laughter]

Kristen Silverberg.

Kristen Silverberg:

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I think largely a failure. He significantly complicated the relationship early on by coming out with this extreme view on settlements. So, it's always been an irritant in the relationship when there's settlement activity beyond the security barrier. But he came out with this extreme view that says you can't have any settlement activity, even within neighborhoods in Jerusalem that are outside the green line. These are neighborhoods you can stand out and stare at the Knesset, and they basically said, "No construction whatsoever." It was more extreme than a position that the Palestinians had taken. And it was entirely politically untenable for Israel.

1:10:47

And I think it set -- sort of set the relationship off on a very bad footing.

John Donovan:
Derek Chollet?

Derek Chollet:

Well, there's been no shortage of drama in the relationship between the United States and Israel the last several years, and I think there's blame to go around on both sides. But when we think about what matters most to the U.S.-Israeli relationship -- and that's our security relationship -- it's never been stronger. And don't take my word for it. Take the Israelis' word for it. The United States is giving the Israelis more support for its military than ever before, in terms of dollars. We're giving it more sophisticated equipment than ever before. And the level of information sharing and cooperation between our two militaries is unprecedented. So, although there's been a lot of turbulence up in the upper atmosphere, at the highest levels -- where I used to work, at the Pentagon, where I spent a lot of time on this relationship, the relationship with my Israel colleagues has never been better.

John Donovan:
Kris would like to rebut that --

Kristen Silverberg:

I think it's just a mistake to measure this relationship in terms of dollars. It's a relationship that historically has to be measured in degree of trust, and there's very little trust between our two countries and between our two governments.

1:11:52

One of the things the Obama administration, I think, set out to do early on was to show some distance with Israel under this theory that we needed to do that to build credibility with the Arab world. And they entirely missed the fact that the rise -- that Iran's power in the region and the rise of these terrorist groups was actually aligning Israel with the Arab world and converging around a strategy in a way that created real opportunities, which they missed.

John Donovan:

Vikram, do you want to come in?

Vikram Singh:

Well, I just -- I just -- I mean, I don't agree that that was -- that any of that was missed. I think the United States actually thought a lot about the fact that you had a coming together in terms of interests and willingness to work together between Israel and some of our own Arab partners. And from my time in government and in my time afterwards, working a lot -- often with Israeli friends, I know that that was something that was being discussed.

There is a personal dislike between the leaders of the two countries. There is a deep and abiding commitment, however, of both of the leaders and of both governments to the -- our mutual security and our common interest.

John Donovan:

Let's go to another question. Right against the wall there. And the mic is coming down.

Female Speaker:

Hi. Anuke Day [spelled phonetically]. My question is on the migration crisis and this kind of epic flow of refugees through the world, and whether that can be considered a failure of Obama's policy.

John Donovan:

So, I think this side has already cited that as part of evidence of failure, so I would just want the other side to respond to it, since it hasn't come up in the debate before. Who would like to -- Derek or Vikram?

Derek Chollet:

Well, there's many reasons for the migration crisis, and certainly, I think one of the areas that our response -- the U.S. response has underperformed --

1:13:48

-- I don't think this amounts to a full-all scale failure is that we haven't taken in enough refugees here in the United States, particularly compared to some of our European partners.

[applause]

Unfortunately, I don't think that news is going to get any better any time soon. But look, the United States has also done a lot to try to stem the refugee crisis at the source, particularly in the Middle East by being the largest humanitarian donor to the crisis in Syria at over \$6 billion to help the refugees in camps in Jordan and Turkey so they don't have the incentive to go elsewhere. But again, the roots of this challenge are deeper than any particular U.S. policy. I mean, this is going back decades, in some cases maybe these refugees aren't a result of the

conflict in Syria. They're economic refugees from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. So, the question again is what position is the United States in to do something about it? What's the health of our relationships? What's the health of our economy to be able to afford to give the support to the refugees that are crossing these borders?

John Donovan:

Let me let the other side now respond to that essentially rebuttal of your opening statement, I think, Eliot.

Eliot Cohen:

Look, the fact is that we now know that all of President Obama's senior foreign policy advisors, defense secretary, secretary of state and so on, were in favor of trying to do something about Syria and he chose not to. And that Syrian refugee crisis would not exist if this war had not gone on as long as it has.

John Donovan:

Eliot, what would be some somethings that he might have done?

Eliot Cohen:

They were recommending arming the Syrian opposition much earlier on.

Derek Chollet:

Which we did. We did six months later.

Kristen Silverberg:

Taking out Syrian airfields, so limiting the ability of the Syrian government to engage in these kind of mass air attacks, or even taking them out, waiting until he used chemical weapons and then responding as we talked about earlier, setting up safe havens and buffer zones. I mean, the fact is, you don't actually have to conclude that any of these would've been the silver bullet to realize that the options they tried failed.

1:15:50

Derek Chollet:

Again –

John Donovan:

Derek Chollet.

Derek Chollet:

-- we're hearing a lot about what we could've done militarily to affect the outcome in Syria. I spent a lot of time at the Pentagon thinking about those very options. But always -- the question we always confronted is, so then what? What comes next? We don't -- we lived

through the Iraq war. We don't want to make those same mistakes over and over, because there's a big world out there. We have other challenges elsewhere in the world. So, of course, we want to try to address elements of the Syrian crisis and it's not a question of doing something or doing nothing, because the U.S. has been intervening in Syria quite a bit, particularly over the last two years. The question is, how do we do that with balance with our other interests around the world so we don't end up in the same situation we found ourselves in in November of 2008?

Eliot Cohen:

But you know, Derek, I mean –

John Donovan:

Eliot Cohen.

Eliot Cohen:

-- there you go again. It's all about Bush. We don't want to imitate Bush. We don't want to do Iraq again. This was a different problem on your watch and I do -- I really do think that part of -- we want to get into why did the Obama foreign policy fail the way it did in so many important respects.

1:16:50

It is the obsession with Bush, and I carry no grief for the administration that I was part of.

Derek Chollet:

I think part of whether you're a success or failure is not making the same mistakes of the past, and that's certainly something that President Obama tried to avoid.

Kristen Silverberg:

No, you make your own new mistakes. You found an entirely new way to fail.

Derek Chollet:

Every president makes mistakes.

John Donovan:

Let me just put again the point that he just made. He -- they're conceding that their president made their own mistakes, but they're also saying not making the same mistakes of the past that they deserve some credit for that.

[applause]

I just want you to respond to it. Please. I'm not looking for an applause for me, I'm just putting the question.

[laughter]

I just wanted the question responded to.

Kristen Silverberg:

Just to be clear. No one was proposing massive invasion, large scale occupation of Syria. They were talking -- the options on the table which they considered and rejected were about things to limit the ability of the Syrian government to engage in a massacre of civilians.

1:17:49

You know, the vast majority of these 13 million displaced people are fleeing the Syrian government and they didn't do anything about that fact. And, in fact, Derek published a piece not too long ago calling for a strategy to ensure that Assad goes, and that's exactly what we're arguing.

John Donovan:

Let's try one more question. Down front here. Mic's coming down to your right-hand side.

Male Speaker:

My name is Dillon Dutsan [spelled phonetically] and my question -- you talked about going a little deeper and my question sort of gets to the more argument that I haven't really heard so far. With half a million, as we talked about in Syrian dead, millions and millions of refugees, hundreds of thousands dead across the Middle East, because of our foreign policy, because of the U.S. government's foreign policy and mixtures of other foreign policies, what -- why are we not talking about the moral argument of war and the moral argument of why so many people are dead.

John Donovan:

So, how do you relate that to the failure question? No, it's a great -- we've actually debated that point before, so I want you to tie it into the failure question.

Male Speaker:

I want to know how you cannot call President Obama's foreign policy a failure --

John Donovan:

On moral grounds.

Male Speaker:

-- on moral grounds with this many people dead and displaced.

John Donovan:

Do you make a moral argument -- either the team arguing that the president's policy is a failure, do you make a moral argument on that? I haven't heard it so far.

Eliot Cohen:

He is a moral man whose actions -- or more often inaction, by sometimes his actions, have had terrible consequences. I do not blame him as a human being for that. But I think your question is absolutely the right one. And the moral issues do have to be at the center of a lot of what American foreign policy is about. And what I think is tragic -- in that I do think this is a tragic failure.

1:19:46

Let me be very clear about that -- is that because the president and his representatives here were so obsessed with actions that they thought had brought different kinds of failures with some reason, that they -- he decided not to act, not realizing that inaction can bring equally terrible or more terrible consequences.

John Donvan:

Let's let the other side respond.

[applause]

Vikram Singh.

Vikram Singh:

Syria is a catastrophe in every dimension. There is no doubt in my mind that is the thing that will torment -- and it does, I'm sure, torments Barack Obama more than any other issue of his presidency. "Could I have done more? Could I have stopped it?" It will haunt the members of this administration that this much tragedy happened on their watch. There is -- there is no doubt -- there's no doubt about that.

Does the fact that they could not stop the collapse of Syria, which is caused, let's not forget, by the brutality of Bashar al-Assad, not by the United States of America. You know, I don't -- I think it is somewhat unknowable. Is it a moral failing? Would it have been more of a moral failing if we had acted and Assad had fallen, and Syria descended even further into chaos and civil war and anarchy? You know, the fact is, you make calls. And you sometimes don't even get to know whether you made the right call or not because these choices are so hard. Barack Obama had to make a lot of hard calls. He probably got some wrong. He certainly got some wrong when it comes to Syria. But that does not make his entire foreign policy a failure even if we have to deal with the tragedy in Syria.

[applause]

1:21:46

John Donovan:

Kristen -- Kristen Silverberg, I mean, Vikram raises an interesting point that's sort of threaded throughout the whole evening, is that we're talking about what might have been if he did something differently. And he's really saying, we don't know what might have been. And it's a powerful point. What's your response to it?

Kristen Silverberg:

Well, the resolution is, did his foreign policy fail, not, yeah, what's --

John Donovan:

Yeah, but your -- but you're sort of presenting a "compared to what" kind of thing, and it's a --

Kristen Silverberg:

His -- look, you know, to go back to the question, it's not just our argument that this was a moral responsibility. That's actually what Barack Obama said. He said preventing mass atrocities is a core national interest and a core moral responsibility. So that's the question. Did he prevent, did he take action to prevent a mass atrocity. They've said that there's a series of terrible things that would have happened if we had intervened against Assad. Well, guess what? All those terrible things happened anyway. ISIS is in control of 40,000 square miles.

Syria has entirely collapsed and is taking the rest of the region down with it. So, I think it's a very hard defense that some -- that whatever other alternative is on the table, the one they chose was a success.

Derek Chollet:

But you have to take the totality. President Obama's statements that -- decisions to make atrocity prevention a factor in U.S. decision making, one, is a highly moral thing to do. Two, he acted on it. People forget, Benghazi was about an impending potential genocide. That was -- I mean the Libya invasion was about an impending genocide by Gaddafi. That's what precipitated that event. The Yezidis -- protecting the Yezidis in Iraq was about preventing an atrocity that was unfolding before our eyes. I think he's been balancing what he believes is in the realm of the possible and in many ways -- you know, we're not in an existential crisis, the kind that Eliot has written about so eloquently in the past, World War II, the Civil War. But in many ways, Barack Obama practices what Eliot really held up and highlighted in his 2002 book, "Supreme Command."

1:23:52

He interrogates, he asks, he penetrates, he meddles with the military decision makers, and he makes the calls. In some cases, they've been very smart and bold and you probably would celebrate them. He decided there should be extra helicopters on the Bin Laden raid. And it turned out we actually needed those helicopters. That was not something the military planners

were wanting to do. And Leon Panetta writes about that in his book. He decided we would rescue the Yezidis. This is not that simple. It is not black and white. And he has to be given credit for what he attempted to do. And if we did not prevent all atrocities, but we took a step towards the United States figuring out how to help stop atrocities in the future, and we learned from the mistakes as well as the successes, we'll be going a long way in the right direction.

John Donvan:

Eliot Cohen, can you very briefly respond because I want to move on.

Eliot Cohen:

Yeah. First, thanks for the plug for the book, but it's the new book.

1:24:46

[laughter]

Eliot Cohen:

The new book is in hard cover. That one is just in paperback. Look, I would feel a little bit differently, maybe, if the big decisions on Syria and Iraq were not made by Obama personally. And it's phrased "Obama's foreign policy" against the advice of his Secretary of Defense, his Secretary of State, the military high command, professional diplomats like Jim Jeffrey and Ryan Crocker. Those were his decisions. And I know they're hard. But just saying they're hard doesn't mean that you then get off the hook for whether or not they failed. It's a hard world out there.

John Donvan:

Okay. We're going to move on now to conclude this part of this section with what we call the volley round. And it's a structured time section. And what will happen is that one team will be chosen and given the chance to put its best point or argument or most demolishing anti-ballistic missile that it can in its opponents' argument. There will be -- one person on that team will be given 30 seconds to make that point. At end of the 30 seconds, a bell will ring and they will have to stop talking.

1:25:50

At that point, the other team -- one person on that team, has 30 seconds to respond. Then it swings back to the original team, 30 seconds to rebut, and the final team, 30 seconds to rebut. And the way we will decide which team has that option is, I have a deck of cards. I will cut the cards. If the card comes up black, this team gets the option. If the card comes up red, that team gets the option. I can't see this so you have to tell me what color this is.

Multiple Speakers:

Red.

John Donovan:

Red. All right. So, you get the chance to put the point to the other team. Which of you wants to go? And I will tell you, Derek is going to go first. Derek and then your 30 seconds starts now, Derek.

Derek Chollet:

So, Kristen and Eliot, you have tried mightily to deny that Obama's part of history and that he inherited something -- that he should be judged by what he inherited and what he's leaving behind. So, I'm -- the question I have is, embedded in your critique, what are you proposing that Obama should have done that would be different than George W. Bush?

1:26:50

John Donovan:

Time is up. Eliot, your answer.

Eliot Cohen:

So, again, you cannot get away from George W. Bush, can you? The question is, did Obama's foreign policy fail? And our argument is, judging by what he said he would do and judging by any reasonable criteria, he failed. Were there alternatives on Syria, were there alternatives on Russia? Yes. And on Iraq, yes. And they were put forward by his cabinet and by his senior military advisers. And he chose not to follow them. That's his prerogative. He's the president. He gets paid the big bucks. But it's his choice. And I really would like to see you get to Iran without Bush.

John Donovan:

Vikram.

Vikram Singh:

He -- the president of the United States makes countless, impossible decisions on a daily basis. Some of them are almost impossible to have a right choice. You basically have your choice of less worse options.

1:27:50

What President Obama inherited is fundamental to whether he succeeded or failed. And by any reasonable measure, he succeeded. We are not -- we do not have 200,000 troops deployed overseas. We can afford to make choices. We can make investments.

John Donovan:

Kristen Silverberg.

Kristen Silverberg:

You're acting as if we've -- holding him to some unreasonable perfect standard. We're holding him to the standard he set for himself and that any reasonable person would expect. Did he in fact end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq? Did he present mass atrocities? Did he succeed in resetting our relationship with Russia? Did he build our influence in Asia? And did he strengthen our credibility? And the answer so all those is --

Derek Chollet:
Yes.

Kristen Silverberg:
-- evidently no.

John Donovan:
All right. That concludes round two of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate where our motion is Obama's foreign policy is a failure.

[applause]

And now we move on to round three. Round three will be brief closing statements by each debater in turn.

1:28:50

They will be two minutes each. Speaking first, in the closing round, making her argument in support of the motion for the last time, Kristen Silverberg, former U.S. ambassador to the European Union.

Kristen Silverberg:
Thanks.

[applause]

Derek wrote about President Obama's effort to play the long game, to build a foreign policy foundation that could really outlast the administration. And American history is full of examples of presidents who successfully played the long game. When I worked at the State Department, I worked mostly on institutions that were established by Presidents Roosevelt and Truman. Military strategists who work in the Pentagon today are guided by deterrence and containment strategies that were developed during the Eisenhower administration. The Non-Proliferation Treaty, which we've debated here tonight, which President Obama described as a centerpiece of his foreign policy, was signed by President Johnson. Some presidencies have a very long tail. They lay a foundation for American strength decades later.

Can anyone argue today that the major initiatives of the Obama administration -- the Iran deal, the Cuba agreement, the climate change accord -- will stand the test of time? Will they even survive the next round of Tweets from the president-elect?

[laughter]

The Obama legacy is going up in smoke, one Tweet at a time. [laughter] And if that isn't a failure of the long game, I don't know what it is.

John Donovan:

Thank you, Kristen Silverberg.

[applause]

The motion is: Obama's Foreign Policy is a Failure. And here making his closing statement against the motion, Derek Chollet, counselor and senior adviser at the German Marshall Fund and author of "The Long Game."

Derek Chollet:

So --

[laughter]

-- I want to thank Eliot and Kristen for reading the book so closely.

[laughter]

Look, clearly the key to the long game is whether it's sustainable or not. And a president's successor, whether that president is Barack Obama taking over from Bush, or Donald Trump taking over from Obama -- has a lot of say in making some change.

1:30:57

The question for all of us and how we should define success or failure is, "Do we think Barack Obama has set the United States up for success," knowing that his successor can change things, if he chooses to do so. And he probably will. You know, I want to talk about how we should think about Obama historically, because I think, as we're nearing the end of his presidency, when we think about issues like success or failure, it's instructive to try to compare him to other presidents. And it's actually interesting to start where Barack Obama himself begins, when he asked which president's foreign policy he most emulates. He brings up two that are pretty surprising for a Democratic president. He talks about a George Bush -- not the George W. Bush we've talked a lot about tonight, but George H.W. Bush. And he's also talked about Dwight Eisenhower. What those presidents shared was a sense of U.S. leadership in the world, a sense of -- the importance of balance that the United States has to pursue in terms of the tools that

we use, in terms of the regions in which we play, in terms of what we expect ourselves to do, what we think others should do.

All those -- all three of those presidents -- Obama, Bush, and Eisenhower -- talked about the importance of sustainability. They ran fairly effective foreign policies. They also had the patience that's required to play the long game. And it's pretty instructive right now. There's no Republican politician that I can think of in foreign policy -- including now the president-elect -- who would like to compare themselves to Eisenhower or George H.W. Bush, but our outgoing Democratic president does. We're set up well for the long game, ladies and gentlemen. Barack Obama's foreign policy, in totality, has been a success. I urge you to vote against the resolution.

John Donovan:

Thank you, Derek Chollet.

[applause]

And that resolution again: Obama's Foreign Policy is a Failure. And here making her closing -- his closing statement supporting the motion -- Eliot Cohen, professor at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and author of 'The Big Stick.'

1:32:51

[applause]

Eliot Cohen:

And "Supreme Command."

[laughter]

So, it's transition time, and I think about a transition eight years ago. As the Bush administration's official, I was being interviewed by two quite senior incoming members of the new team -- people I had known for quite a while -- and who went on to very high positions. And as we talked, I could see the thought bubbles coming out of their head. And the thought bubbles were "Fool or Knave?" Well, we know him, so we'll just say fool. And when they left, the thought bubble coming out of my head was this -- I'm a monotheist. But if I were a pagan, I'd offer up a couple of pigeons to Nemesis -- Nemesis, the gray-eyed goddess, daughter of Zeus, who punishes hubris -- arrogance. And I thought to myself, "These folks think they know. They have no idea what they're getting themselves in for, and they have no idea how hard it will be, in fact, how impossible it will be for their candidate, the president elect, to do the things he said he will do."

He won't end the wars. He won't finish off al-Qaeda. He won't transform our relationship with Russia. He won't start us on a path to a world without nuclear weapons. Nemesis is not going

to be amused and I was right. Nemesis pursues all administrations. I have to say I think it pursued the Obama administration because of its high aspirations and excessive promises, and because of the self-confidence of President Obama himself with particular vengeance, and Nemesis doesn't care whether or not it's your fault or how hard you tried. So, if I could get Nemesis from her orbit around Trump Tower right now –

[laughter]

-- I would get her to pay a quick visit, and I know she would vote in favor of the resolution.

1:34:54

[applause]

John Donvan:

Thank you, Eliot Cohen. And that resolution, once again: Obama's Foreign Policy Is a Failure, and here making his closing statement against the motion, Vikram Singh, vice president for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.

Vikram Singh:

When next president takes office, he can choose to continue what Barack Obama has left to him. He can choose to continue a sustainable fight with a coalition of 60 nations against ISIS. He can choose to continue to try to bring stability to the Middle East in cooperation with allies and partners from all over the world, including Arab countries. He can choose to continue to advance nonproliferation. It's complicated. It's messy, but he can advance it. He can make sure the Iran deal is enforced. He can come up with innovative new ways to work with the other countries we'll have to work with to tackle the North Korea challenge.

1:35:53

He can choose to continue to make progress on climate change for the sake of our future and for our kids. He can choose to take advantage of the progress that was provided to him by this president despite the enormous challenges he inherited. I know Derek talked about them at the beginning. I know our opponents don't like to talk about them, but that -- those are the bookends. A near catastrophe at home and abroad in 2008 and a lot of progress that the next president can choose to build on if he so desires. There are no magic bullets in foreign policy. There are generally no good choices, but the motion is: is Barack Obama's Foreign Policy a Failure. There are mistakes, missteps. There could even be failures on individual areas.

We talked about one in particular, great depth, but that is not the totality of the record. The totality of the record is something that a strong U.S. president in 2017 could build on for the betterment of this country and the world. I urge you to vote against the motion.

John Donvan:

Thank you, Vikram Singh.

[applause]

And that concludes round three of this Intelligence Squared U.S. debate where the motion is Obama's Foreign Policy is a Failure. And now we're going to see which side you feel has argued the best. We're going to ask you to go a second time to the keypads at your seats and vote using the same system as before. If you agree with the motion having heard the arguments, push number one. If you disagree, push number two, and if you became or remain undecided, push number three. As I mentioned at the beginning of the evening, I congratulate all of you for wanting to sit in an audience for civil and intelligent debate, which is something that we place a very high value on and that I must say at this point after the year we've been through we see as an antidote to the toxic nature of the discourse that we've seen. Congratulations for you for being here, but also to our debaters on the stage for the spirit of respect for one another and the civility they brought.

[applause]

It was great. And to that end, that is what we do.

1:38:13

That is what Intelligence Squared is set up to do, and I don't know if you know this -- although regulars have heard me say this before -- we are a nonprofit organization and a philanthropic organization. Your ticket purchase price comes nowhere close to covering what it costs to put these on. We then release these debates into the wild, where they find huge audiences through podcasts and radio broadcasts, livestreams, et cetera. And also, they're actively used in many, many schools across the country, and we believe, around the world. We're asking again -- would you consider making a donation? This happens to be, today, the donation day, Giving Tuesday. We want to be clear that 100 percent of your donation goes straight to the programming of this series. You can go online to our website, IQ2US, and donate right away, very quickly. And the donation button happens to be at the top of every single page, so you can't miss it.

[laughter]

So, we really, really would appreciate it if you take advantage of the sort of collective Giving Tuesday today to do that. I want to talk a little bit about our upcoming debate. We have one more in our final season for the fall.

1:39:13

It will be here again at the Kaufman Music Center next week on December 7th. We are partnering for that one with our often -- our frequent partner, the National Constitution Center.

We are going to be debating this motion, "Call a Convention to Amend the Constitution." I'm expecting things like the electoral college, et cetera, will come up –

[laughter]

-- but other issues as well. Debating in favor of that motion, we have Harvard Law Professor Lawrence Lessig. He was briefly a candidate for president. And Mark Meckler, founder of Citizens for Self-Governance and former national coordinator of the Tea Party Patriots. On the side arguing against, we have the Cato Institute's Walter Olson and Georgetown Law's David Super. For those of you who can't make it to that debate or any of our debaters as members of the live audience, you can watch them live streaming on our website. Again, that is www.IQ2US.org. Once there, you can vote on the debates -- not the same way that you vote here, but you can just vote your opinion on how you feel -- watch the debates and vote afterwards, listen to our podcasts, and more. Membership to our website is free, so you can set up an account. And what we have now is we have our own way of sort of gauging your level of public discourse. You can get a score, what we call the IQ score, which comes -- is derived from how you comment and how you participate in debates. And we would like -- IQ2 score. We would like to have everybody -- sorry. It's not an IQ score. I'm sure everybody here is very good in the IQ score, but –

[laughter]

-- IQ2 score. It's our own device. And you can watch our debates also on Roku and on Apple TV apps, just by checking out IQ2US. Again, that's our handle. And we're on public radio stations across the country. And you can follow us on Twitter and on Facebook. And after tonight's debate, you can check out on Twitter what your fellow audience members were saying. So, I'm just waiting for the results to come out. Usually, by the time I reach this point in the evening –

[laughter]

-- they're out and I don't have to dance.

1:41:10

But I'm going to point out -- [laughs] -- the Russians have not hacked our system.

[laughter]

That was Eliot's comment. But one thing I do want to say about Eliot, we learned tonight, in the warmup -- just as we came out from the green room and got onto the stage -- I didn't want to share this before, so as not to tilt the vote by making him even more endearing than he seems

to be -- but the deck of cards that I brought forth -- so, Eliot took them over, and it turns out he does card tricks. And --

[applause]

-- so, if you want to come up afterwards and chat with him, here's the deck of cards. And there's no nerd stuff going on. It's okay, there -- all right.

I have the results in. Once again, the motion is this: Obama's Foreign Policy is a Failure. You've heard the arguments for and against, and remember, we've had you vote twice. And victory goes to the team whose numbers change the most before -- between the first and the second vote. In the first vote, 19 percent of you were for the motion. 38 percent were against.

1:42:13

43 percent were undecided. The team in the second vote -- the team arguing for the motion -- again, their first vote was 19 percent. Their second vote was 42 percent. They picked up 23 percentage points. That is the number to beat. Let's look at the team arguing against the motion. Their first vote was 38 percent. Second vote was 49 percent. They only picked up 11 percentage points. That means the team arguing for the motion -- our winners.

[applause]

Our congratulations to them --

[applause]

-- thank you from me, John Donovan and Intelligence Squared U.S. We'll see you next time.

[applause]

[end of transcript]