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THERE'S A WAR COMING

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Peter Bergen: Okay ladies and gentlemen, we're going to start the next session. I'm Peter Bergen, a member of the Aspen Homeland Security group. And this session in entitled, A War Is Coming, in fact, there are plenty of wars to discuss that are already happening, many of which the United States are involved in, whether it's in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libia. We have an amazing panel. My colleague Jim Sciutto will introduce the panel. It's my honor and privilege to introduce my friend and colleague, Jim Sciutto, who's everyone knows is the Chief National Security Correspondent for CNN. Some people may not know that he was the former Chief Of Staff in the Embassy in China when Gary Locke was Ambassador. And he is completing a new book amongst all the other things that he does, called Shadow Wars which is about the secret war that China and Russia are conducting against the United States. So I'll turn it over to Jim.

Jim Sciutto: Thank you Peter. This is the light hearted interlude in the afternoon, War Is Coming. So we're glad we could all kind of unwind as we discuss the various hotspots around the world. I'm lucky to have decades of experience to my left here, in foreign affairs on some of the most essential national security challenges of the last several years. Just moving from my left Tony Blinken, former Deputy Secretary of State who I get to interact with at CNN because he's one of our fine contributors. Elizabeth Sherwood Randall, whose former Deputy Secretary of Energy but also had a long time portfolio in European affairs and weapons of mass destruction, including on the NSC. Of course Yousef Al Otaib, familiar to many folks here. The current UAE Ambassador to the U.S. and then Wendy Sherman his former Under Secretary of State for political affairs. And if you know Wendy, you know she does not have a faint heart so the fact that she is writing a book called, or has written a book that's coming out Not for the Faint of Heart, September?

Wendy Sherman: September 4th.

Jim Sciutto: September 4th, should not surprise anyone here. But that's, as she was telling me, will walk you through the behind the scenes view of particularly the Iran Nuclear Negotiations. The topic today is fairly broad ranging and only because the facts of the planet that we live in today are such that there are a number of places where things can get hot very quickly, even hotter than where they are. Our remit is to discuss possibility in Europe and the Middle East but ... listen there are other places where bad things can happen. So I might just start if it's okay, to ask the panelists where they believe the highest chance there is of a hot war breaking out, particularly with super power involvement and I might just begin with you Tony.

Tony Blinken: Jim, thanks. Well first it's great to see so many people here. I mean, after Dan Coats, I think we all kind of felt like Allen and Rossi and if you don't remember Allen and Rossi they were the act that followed the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show. So, really grateful that folks are here.

Look, I suspect we're going to be in violent agreement on this. For my own perspective, if you're looking at the map, the place with the most flash points and fault lines is the greater Middle East. And narrowing it down, it's Iraq and Syria for a whole variety of reasons.

Jim Sciutto: Iran and Syria.

Tony Blinken: No, no, Iraq and Syria.

Jim Sciutto: Iraq and Syria.

Tony Blinken: As a geographic locus.

Jim Sciutto: Okay.

Tony Blinken: But within that theater, that broad theater, you have American and Iranian forces that are pretty close together in both countries, Iranian backed militia or in some cases actually Iranian forces. You have the complex in Syria particularly of Israel, Iran, Hezbollah, confronting each other potentially in Syria and possibly beyond. You have Russian and American forces that are pretty close together in Syria. You've got Turkish and Kurdish forces with the United States in the middle, again in Syria. So if I had to pick any one place where I'd worry that something unintended turns into something bigger, I'd start there.

Jim Sciutto: Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Randa: I'll add some additional concerns. Potential sins of commission and omission. On the commission side, the President's brinkmanship and his mad man theory could lead us into an escalatory situation, particularly for example with respect to North Korea. Second we have the withdrawal from the Iran agreement, which could lead us quickly into a war with Iran and I think we'll probably have an opportunity to discuss that so I won't go into detail. And third you have the President's weakening of our alliances, intentionally. Undermining alliances which are deterrents against attack both in Asia and in Europe. So there I would say we have to worry very much about the risks of a hot war which we haven't worried about for a long time.

And sins of omission, so there's lots of work that isn't being done. We have less capability in the state department and we have less credibility around the world. And George Shultz always says you have to tend the garden of diplomacy. We're not tending the garden, we don't have Ambassadors in place, we don't have people in many positions in the state department. And the one place I watch, is India/Pakistan. Huge risk of major war. You can also worry about thistle materials on the loose, we're not doing the work we used to do there to tend the garden. And finally a place like the Balkans which had drawn the United States into Europe once before in a major war, not doing the work we need to do to tend the garden and pull out the weeds.

Tony Blinken: People feeling good yet?

Jim Sciutto: Yeah, there's not enough room on my page to get that list in, but I will ... listen there's a lot to unpack there but I want to give Yousef and Wendy a chance to just zero in and Yousef, you're obviously in the midst of a hot war right now in Yemen, but with repercussions because you have ... I mean that in effect a proxy war for Iran versus you and your allies. But where do you see the chance of something expanding beyond a localized conflict.

Yousef Al Otaib: So first let me thank everyone from the National Security Forum for having me. And a special thanks to whoever thought of putting the one Arab speaker on a panel called A War Is Coming. Let me know who that is and I can thank [crosstalk 00:06:03].

I agree with Tony. I think you have ... let's divide who's in the Middle East. You have great powers, Russia, Turkey, Iran, United States. You have a proliferation of terrorist groups, even though we tend to focus on ISIS or Al-Qaeda, there's a couple dozen groups that live below that threshold that we don't talk about but they're still there. And that's exactly where I think there could be an escalation. I'm pretty impressed that seven years into this Syria war, we still haven't seen a drastic escalation, we've actually seen examples of de-escalation. Sometime they flare up but it's relatively under control in southwest Syria.

In Yemen, the goal for most of us in the coalition is to get out of Yemen. So we had a meeting yesterday with the U.N. Envoy and the strategy is how do we end the war in Yemen and pull the troops back into the UAE.

Let me explain why we are in Yemen because I think it's often overlooked. What Tony said about Syria and Iraq and what we saw in Lebanon many years ago, is we saw Arab countries come under the domination of Iran. We watched this happen in front of our eyes in the last 20 years. Yemen borders Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is not only one of the most important oil producers in the world, it's also home to Mecca Madinah. We cannot allow an Iranian foothold on the border of Mecca Madinah. And that Iranian attack or any Iranian threat to Saudi Arabia from that angle, if you think the Middle East is unstable now, imagine what it would be like to have an Iranian missile land in Mecca. I say that because it's important to understand why we're in Yemen, why we're committed to Yemen, why we're enduring the attacks and the reputational damage that we're incurring. It's important to understand the why. Having said that, it's important for us to get out, but it's equally important for us to draw a line for Iran to say, this is an Arab country that we are not going to allow you to dominate the way you have Iraq, Syria, Lebanon.

Wendy Sherman: Well, I could go a lot of places with what's been said. But let me stick with the Middle East for a moment. I think Liz has laid out some other potential hot spots, I'd probably throw Venezuela into that mix as well. Talking about Latin America, there's a chance for a hot war virtually on every continent and there

are hot wars that go on in Africa all of the time, just the United States doesn't pay nearly as much attention to them as we probably ought to.

But as far as the Middle East goes, I think at the end of the Director of National Intelligence Coats' fantastic interview with Andrea Mitchell, I went up to him and I said we're about to have this panel, War Is Coming. Where do you think war is coming and do you think it's coming? And he repeated what he said to all of us, which is if he had to pick a place, it would be the Middle East because there is so much going on and there is so much conflict and all of the elements that any one thing could spark a war.

I'm going to be a little provocative here 'cause I think at three o'clock in the afternoon it's critical to be. To keep you all engaged. I unfortunately think that the emirates and Saudi Arabia's engagement in Yemen has probably increased the chances for war because it's increased conflict but also because I think that it's probably given your country Yousef and Saudi Arabia [inaudible 00:09:50] country for all intensive purposes, greater confidence in your military capabilities. And so the chance of taking Iran on as you just said in your last sentence of your presentation was, you know, we're not going to let them. I think Bibi Netanyahu is not going to let them. With Israel security on the Golan Heights. And I don't think Israel security should be at risk.

So we have the Prime Minister of Israel, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, the leaders in your country who are not going to let it happen. And we add to that mix the fact that the President of the United States chose to withdraw from the Iran deal. Withdrawing from the Iran deal creates a pathway for Iran to go back to enriching uranium and getting to a bomb. As bad as things are in the Middle East, Iran with a bomb would project extraordinary power and would be able to deter all of the plans to not let them do it. So I never have quite understood why the President did what he did, though I know you supported the withdraw.

Yousef Al Otaib: As we supported the agreement.

Wendy Sherman: Yes, that is true. You did support the agreement and then you support the withdraw. That's a longer discussion you and I should have [crosstalk 00:11:19].

But the point here is that Iran understands that if they break this deal, which the Europeans are trying desperately to hold on to some way. If they break this deal, it creates the pathway to war with them to blame. They're not stupid, they're pretty smart cookies, and they understood that. So we have a game of chicken going on in many ways and I give a lot of credit to the Europeans who I consider our allies, trying to hold on to this very fragile peace. And it's not to say that we should not push back against Iran's malign actions in the Middle East. We absolutely, positively should and there are many, many ways to do that and there are many ways we're collectively trying to do that now. But there are so many ways [inaudible 00:12:10] and the last point I will make is it'll be interesting to see whether the President has Putin come to the White House

before or after the mid-terms. I suspect it will be after. But if not, and if it's after and the President feels he needs to take some action, some October surprise, conflict in the middle East is on that list.

Jim Sciutto: Lots to unpack here, and I [inaudible 00:12:34], but Yousef I want to give you a chance to respond because Wendy said that your country has increased the chances of war in the Middle East via action in Yemen.

Broader war I should say.

Wendy Sherman: I understand why you went into Yemen.

Yousef Al Otaib: Right. I think my point would be ... we've been in the Yemen war for three and a half years, well before the withdrawal from JCPOA and like I said, I articulated pretty clear to you why we did it. And we did it with the knowledge of the Obama Administration, not with a lot of support. I think most people here know that we don't have a lot of support from the administration now in what we're doing in Yemen, but we're doing it anyway.

For the last 10 years, there's a debate that's been going on in this country that U.S. doesn't want to get more involved, that there's still a hangover from Iraq and Afghanistan and there's really no ... one very senior official looked at me once and said there's no constituency in the U.S. for us doing more in the Middle East. When we hear that, it means we need to do things on our own. It means, okay, our super power allies don't want to support us in X or Y, so we have to take things on our own risk. You can't then come to us and say well we don't want you to do this in Yemen and we ... you can't have it both ways. You either support us and work with us and our partners and say yes we're invested with you or you say, no, the U.S. the Middle East doesn't matter to us, we're going to focus on Asia, that means we're going to do it by ourselves. And whether it's a perfect coincidence or sheer luck, President Xi Jinping just arrived in Abu Dhabi today.

We are looking to spread our relationships to build our alliances with other countries, China, India, Europe. Because if you're a country that produces one product that your economy survives on, it's smart policy to diversify your relationships and your interests. And where the Chinese are our largest trade partners, and they're the largest country in terms of foreign direct investment in to the UAE. We want to take our trade from 60 billion dollars to 150 billion dollars per year. That's smart policy and that's policy that will happen regardless of what the U.S. posture is in the Middle East. But I think, and this is the perfect audience to think about this question ... regardless of what the UAE and Saudi and Israel does, I think the question for the United States is you have to define what you want your role to be, in the world? Do you want to be engaged or do you want to be disengaged? Do you want to work on strengthening alliances or do you want to withdraw? And I'm not articulating you should do this or that,

but I think that's a question this country has to wrestle with and come to conclusion before you say, you're doing this and putting X at risk.

Tony Blinken: So Yousef, that's exactly the right question.

Jim Sciutto: No, it's a great question, but I do want to draw us back, because again there is so much to unpack here. But I want to draw us back to what is the essential question here, which is are there circumstances in particular where regional conflicts, or regional hot spots draw the super powers into conflict together. Do you see, Elizabeth or Tony, I mean Syria would be the obvious example, I mean it was a few weeks ago that the U.S. killed some 200 to 400 Russian mercenaries there, that's already a shooting fight, right, between the U.S. and Russia in effect. Can the two sides get drawn in to a shooting war there?

Tony Blinken: So the answer is yes, but there are ways of preventing that and avoiding that, or at least minimizing the possibility. A footnote to what Wendy said on the Iran deal, and the unfortunate dynamic that I think we've now restarted where we're inexorably heading toward a moment of conflict. It may not be the next month, it may not even be next year, but as Iran if it decides to do this, ramps up it's program again, we'll be right back where we were before we negotiated the deal ... faced with this terrible binary choice of either allowing Iran to get nuclear weapon or taking action to stop it. That leads to conflict. But in between here and there, there are likely to be increased provocations, coming from Iran and elements in Iran that feel they can now lash out. And it may not be with the intent of starting a war, it probably won't be. But it's very easy, unfortunately for something that is not intended to start a larger conflict, to actually do it.

Let me give you one quick example of what we're now missing. And Liz and Wendy and Yousef will remember this very well. At the very end of the Obama Administration, some American sailors got waylaid, and wound up in Iranian territorial water. And they were taken in by the Iranian Navy. Within 24 hours, we had that situation resolved. They were released. Why? John Kerry, the Secretary of State at the time, had on his cell phone the email address and the cell phone number of Javad Zarif, the Iranian Foreign Minister. And being with him at the time, I saw him engage Zarif probably a dozen times in 24 hours. We were able to get our guys back, we were able to prevent a situation from getting dug in. When things get dug in, people start to do very dangerous things. To my knowledge, we don't have even that basic connectivity right now with Iran. That's a very dangerous thing.

Jim Sciutto: Elizabeth, are there parties to this that want war with Iran? That would like to see the U.S. either strike or be forced to strike and who are they?

Elizabeth Randa: That puts me on the spot Jim.

Jim Sciutto: It does. I'm going to ask him next.

Elizabeth Randa: Look I think there's those who have advocated against the Iran agreement and who have supported the President's decision to withdraw from it. [inaudible 00:17:49] Tony just said, which is that when we began the work to negotiate the agreement, the Iranians were about three months away from having sufficient missile material to build a bomb. President Obama did not like that scenario because that was too short a window to take action if they created a risk that they could deter us. And in defense of a regional ally, Israel for example. Therefore we negotiated the agreement. So if you think about why someone would want the agreement to be disabled, though it was being implemented superbly and the Iranians had dismantled much of the infrastructure that was necessary to create both Plutonium and high enriched Uranium, then you would say, we need to have this happen, this military action happen before the Iranians can reconstitute their program, because then again they will have the capacity to deter an attack.

And so that means there would be potentially pressure on the part of those who have advocated against the agreement since the Trump Administration came into office, to go to war. And to have us lead the way because we are the only country with the capabilities to take out the regime.

Jim Sciutto: Are you saying Israel wants the U.S. to attack Iran?

Elizabeth Randa: That is a hypothesis that has to be considered.

Jim Sciutto: Yousef, does your government [crosstalk 00:19:11].

Yousef Al Otaib: No, I think if you look at the region and what's going on, the last thing we need is another war despite the title of this panel. I mean we are stretched pretty thin, we're deployed in Yemen, we're deployed in Libia, we were deployed until recently in Somalia.

Elizabeth Randa: But then why would you say you supported the agreement when it was negotiated and implemented and you changed your mind.

Yousef Al Otaib: Because our relationship with the United States.

Elizabeth Randa: Ah, so not on the substance of the agreement.

Yousef Al Otaib: We had issues with the substance of the agreement in the beginning. And we had issues when it was done. And Wendy knows this very well. But it's because of our relationship with the United States. And we would have loved, and you know this better than anyone, we would have loved that the offer be presented to Iran that their nuclear deal looks like the 1-2-3 I negotiated with you guys. The one that has no enrichment, no reprocessing. So imagine a U.S. ally, one that's fought wars with you, gets a worse deal than Iran.

Elizabeth Randa: How [inaudible 00:20:05]. We can go on these small pieces for a long time.

Yousef Al Otaib: I don't want to. I'm trying to answer the question that the UAE does not want any increased tension in the region.

Jim Sciotto: Do you believe that Wendy?

Wendy Sherman: This is the piece that gets complicated. I believe Yousef when he says, I believe you when you say you don't want to go to war. Who wants war? War means that people die and undoubtedly there would be many in your country who would die. So you can't want it. I think the problem that we all have is that the Middle East is a constantly changing fabric although there have been de-escalation agreements between the U.S., Russia, Jordan ... they really are in tatters. Syria, Assad, with the help of the Russians and the Iranians are heading to take Dara and then on to Idlib. There are twelve million people who are either refugees or eternally ...

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Wendy Sherman: -a million people who are either refugees or eternally displaced. The people, the country, is a disaster area. Assad believes he now can win this militarily. We have American forces in Syria. We have American forces in Iraq. To Tony's point, an accident could have us at war, and that is what I think Director Coats was talking about. There are just too many pieces on the table that could go awry.

Yousef Al Otaib: I mean if I could just ...

Jim Sciotto: Please, please, one more.

Yousef Al Otaib: [crosstalk 00:21:32] back to a strategic realm. Today the UAE is the second largest economy in the Middle East, one of the most open, one of the most progressive. Whether you talk about the culture, and the Louvre, and the NYU Abu Dhabi, or you talk about our nuclear program, and our military, we have a lot to protect. We need to protect what we've built in our society in the last 45 years. In 2018, the US is no longer the global guarantor of world security that it used to be in 1991 and 1995. We have to take responsibility for protecting what we built. It doesn't mean we want to go to war, but it means we have to think very, very clearly about what we need to protect our own nation interests.

Jim Sciotto: Fair. I want to get to Syria, but on the question of desire for war, and Elizabeth and Tony, or both of you if you want to, does President Trump want war in Iran? Does he see circumstances where I'd be the guy who got it done?

Tony Blinken: Look, based on everything I know, which is very limited about President Trump my sense is no. To the contrary, I think he wants to actually stay out of war. My concern though is that even though that's his intent the policies he's pursuing are more likely to lead us in to war again, unintended.

Jim Sciotto: Why? In Iran specifically, or ...

Tony Blinken: Again, pulling out of the agreement, I think was as Wendy said very eloquently, "A huge mistake that makes the prospect of conflict greater, not lesser," but Yousef makes a really important point, and I think-

Yousef Al Otaib: Rarely happens.

Tony Blinken: Well, I'm gonna note down the date just so we can ...

Yousef Al Otaib: It must be the altitude.

Tony Blinken: Countries around the world do look to us, as the UAE does, and they are looking to see whether we have their backs, but that means a lot of things. It means, as Liz said before, "Do we stand behind our alliances?" Are we committed to the commitments that we've made, whether it's in Europe or in Asia? If the perception takes hold that we're not then as Yousef suggested, countries are going to do their own thing. They're going to start to arm up themselves. If our allies in Asia, particularly Japan and Korea decide that we don't have their backs then we're probably heading toward an arms race at some point in Asia, same thing in the Middle East, potentially, so I think this does matter.

But the only thing I want to add quickly is this. Yousef's exactly right that the United States has to decide whether it wants to be engaged, or not. I think we all probably share the perspective that the world doesn't organize itself, and either over the last 70 years the United States has played a lead role in doing that, or when we haven't someone else has stepped in and done it in a way perhaps, that doesn't actually meet our own interests and values, or no one does it then you have a vacuum filled by chaos.

The problem though is this, it's not enough to ask do we want to be engaged or not? The question you have to ask after that is how do we want to be engaged? What is the nature of our engagement? I think the problem we've had in the Middle East, in particular, is that we wound up spending a decade with large scale interventions that seemed endless with a 100,000 or more American troops on the ground. That made no sense for our national interests, and honestly really didn't make sense for the underlying problems that we were trying to help solve. So, that's really the argument that we need to have not whether, or not we should be engaged? I think we all agree that we should. It's what's the nature of that engagement, and how do you engage in a way that makes the prospect of war and conflict less likely, not more likely?

Jim Sciutto: Elizabeth, don't we ... but let me on that point. Elizabeth, don't we already have the answer to that question? At least for this administration because the president has made, not just statements, but substantive moves to undermine the treaties, alliances, and rules based systems that have help keep the peace. Whether you're speaking about public statements on NATO, trashing the G-7, going around the edges certainly with the WTO, and by declaring US allies

national security risks, the US is already, at least under this administration, is it not signally to the world that it is drawing away from that path?

Elizabeth Randa: Going it alone is a word that's used. America First is going it alone. I doubt declaring a trade war on our closes allies, calling the EU a foe ... Look, we have a situation that's unprecedented and we don't know what the answer is to the question, then what will you do? How will you stay out of war? What will the White House do when the Iranians restart the centrifuges that will generate the highly enriched uranium? What will you do if the North Koreans don't implement the agreement?

I mean the North Korean challenge, Wendy knows this better than anyone, is much harder than the Iranian challenge, and we've just demolished the Iranian agreement because North Korea actually has something like 60 nuclear weapons. That's the public number. And not only do you have to do everything we had to do for Iran, get rid of the fissile material production facilities, and the existing stocks of fissile material, you actually have nuclear weapons, highly unstable, can't be moved out, and they're gonna have to be taken apart on site, and that's a long arduous process, so the idea that you take the one agreement that's working and walk away from it, and then say well this is gonna be easy. We're gonna have it done in a year. Now they've said, no rush, which is alarming because that means the North Koreans can keep producing stuff.

Jim Sciotto: Sorry, Yousef I stepped on you, and please Wendy as well.

Yousef Al Otaib: No. I was going to make a slightly unrelated point. If I asked any member in this audience a question 10 years ago, and I said, "Do you actually believe that the prime minister of Israel is going to visit Moscow more frequently than he visit Washington? You would have thought I was absolutely crazy, but that's exactly what's happening today. The prime minister of Israel is going to Moscow more frequently than he's coming to Washington. I say that as a way of trying to tell you how different the Middle East is today than it was 10 or 20 years ago.

The Chinese president is making his first visit to the Middle East since his new confirmation to the UAE, not to Saudi Arabia, not to Egypt, not to one of his traditional allies, to the UAE. We need to understand that the Middle East has already changed. It's not changing. It's already changed. Again, I take it back to my initial question. What does engagement look like in the new Middle East? What does engagement look like with players like Iran and Turkey?

Turkey should have its own panel. There should be another question just on the Turkish role in the Middle East, but we need to understand the region is very different these days. The leadership is confident. And just one response to the comment Wendy made, we have confidence in our military, not because of Yemen. We have confidence in our military because we served in six coalitions with the United States, and we just spent 11 years in Afghanistan fighting on the same side. That's why we have confidence in our military.

Wendy Sherman: Right. I believe you have ... What I really was targeting that comment more to is I think Saudi Arabia now has confidence in its military capabilities it did not have before because they had not done all that you had done, Yousef.

Yousef Al Otaib: That's fair, but when the Saudi ambassador's here you should bring that to his attention.

Wendy Sherman: I've met with the Saudi ambassador. I think there are two underlying points here that are really important. One is, every country looks for a security guarantee. Every country wants to know that it could be prosperous. The underlying dynamic in the North Korean negotiation is there's no way in hell, pardon my language, there's no way in hell that North Korea is going to give up its nuclear weapons unless there is some security guarantee that ensures them that the regime can continue exactly as it wants to continue.

Likewise, your point is well taken Yousef, that in the Middle East folks want their security guaranteed, and if the United States is not going to play the leadership role it has traditionally to, in essence, be that guarantee for the world. We have the strongest military in the world, and I am incredibly proud of that. The president has added additional funding for that defense. We understand that our military is part of our security guarantee, but it is also critical to the security of the rest of the world.

The president, to your question Jim, doesn't I believe want to. I don't think he campaigned on putting more Americans into conflict, quite the opposite. Certainly, President Obama won election largely on a basis of, among other things, not having Americans go into another war that goes on and on forever, so I think that what we need to do here, however, is that the president wants to look strong and powerful. That's part of the defense increase, but that may also be part of decisions that he takes, particularly with the national security advisors who has rarely seen a war that he didn't want to wage.

Jim Sciutto: On that point though if I can, I mean and I'm going out on a limb here by saying that this president has been somewhat inconsistent on that point because a few months ago before sitting down with Kim Jung-Un he was beyond rattling the saber publicly, in private it was CNN's reporting, and my colleagues at the New York Times. There were discussions in this White House very seriously about taking military action against North Korea. I mean are you certain that this president isn't willing to ... and if not willing today, in the moment, if he becomes frustrated with Kim Jung-Un, or feels that Netanyahu is paying too much attention to Putin and not to himself ... I mean we have seen policy decisions made seemingly reactively to things like that. I'm just saying would you discount it?

Tony Blinken: [crosstalk 00:31:05] raise a good example and Wendy will have a lot to say on this too. At that time, the fire and fury moment, I think there was a view in the White House, and perhaps from the president himself, that a very strong, but

very narrowly defined cabined military strike to bloody the nose of the North Koreans would somehow get the message to them that they needed to stop what they've been doing, come to the table, and behave. I suspect that what some people around the president told him is that you're playing with a different kind of fire and fury if you do that, and there is a real risk that such a strike even if intended only to be a very limited demonstration of US power will be profoundly misinterpreted by North Korea as a regime ending campaign, and then they would unleash, at least, all of the conventional weaponry they have poised 25 or 30 miles from Seoul killing tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousand of people.

So, it may be that the process of going through that discussion got him off of where he was going, not for purposes of starting a larger war, but using force in a limited way. Now, we've seen two demonstrations of the use of force by this administration in Syria. Limited missile strikes in the wake of the horrific use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, which many of us actually applauded except that we said a strike is not a strategy, and we saw absolutely zero follow up, and so we're no better of, in fact, arguably worse off than we were before.

Jim Sciotto: On that point, I remember the night of that strike I was told in no uncertain terms by the White House that this is part of a plan. It's not just a one night action. It'll be followed this and that, of course none of that materialized. Sorry, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Randa: Jim, could I pick up on something Yousef said because I think the-

Jim Sciotto: Can you pick on Yousef? Absolutely.

Elizabeth Randa: No, pick up on something Yousef said. Yousef rightly suggested that we should have a panel on Turkey and Jim Jeffrey our former ambassador to Turkey was somewhere in the audience. He could join us for this. To add to the list of potential explosive situations is the possibility that the Middle East goes nuclear, so if the Iranians do move to break out, as I was discussing, most likely the Saudis will do the same, and the Turks will do the same, and you could decide-

Yousef Al Otaib: How could you blame us?

Elizabeth Randa: ... to violate your E and R agreement and do the same, of course.

Yousef Al Otaib: How could you blame us?

Elizabeth Randa: E and R is enrichment and reprocessing agreement to have civil nuclear power without having the potential for creating the material for a nuclear weapon. We could see a nuclear cascade in the Middle East that would create a wholly new landscape in terms of the possibility of all out nuclear war. So, that's something, back to the tending of gardens, that we need to be working very hard to prevent.

Yousef Al Otaib: You can do a case study on India and Pakistan, and that's exactly what happened.

Elizabeth Randa: Exactly.

Jim Sciutto: Guys, I want to ... because then I do want to get the audience when we get to 15 minutes to go, but I do want to turn back to Europe because actually the starting point of this conversation was a US marine commander who raised the prospect of a hot war in Europe. Do you find that far fetched, or can you see circumstances for instance, could you imagine Russia taking a signal from the president that perhaps we're not so committed to the Article 5, and sending little green men into Estonia, for instance.

Wendy Sherman: Right, indeed. To pickup on what Liz said about the Balkans, I think that's one of the areas where you could see a hot war.

Jim Sciutto: Balkans or Baltics? Balkans.

Wendy Sherman: Balkans, as well as, Baltics. I think when the president met with President Putin there was some discussion of the Balkans, not just the Baltics.

Tony Blinken: Montenegro.

Jim Sciutto: They're very aggressive people. [crosstalk 00:34:34].

Wendy Sherman: How can we ask Americans to defend them not understanding that the only time that NATO has invoked Article 5 was on behalf of the United States in Afghanistan. The only time in history, so we sort of owe it to stand up for NATO and for our allies, so I think that it is indeed possible for that to happen. I think that by continuing to prop up President Putin, and I quite agree with you, before the president got there not only was Bibi Netanyahu there, but so was Mahmoud Abbas, so was the foreign minister of Jordan, so was [Valiate 00:35:14] the senior advisor to the president of Iran. Everyone made a pilgrimage to Putin. The week before the president went to have Helsinki because of the point you're making, which is they wanted to affect the conversation in what would happen in Syria, and what would be done in Syria, and whether Russia could do anything in Syria.

I quite agree with the DNI, though he has more information than I do these days. There is no way that Russia can ensure that Iran gets out of Syria. I'm not sure that Assad can assure that Iran gets out of Syria once he takes back control, so it's a little fool hardy on their part, but I certainly can see that Russia is gonna feel emboldened and stronger because of all of this attention, and could easily push in Europe. As we remember, and maybe not everybody does remember, we fought the war in the Balkans because of the treatment of Muslims.

Tony Blinken: This gets to the heart though of security guarantees and alliances that we were talking about. There's one reason that the Russians intervened in Georgia and Ukraine, but not to date in the Baltics, or for that matter any other member of NATO, and that's NATO.

Jim Sciutto: Right.

Tony Blinken: That's the knowledge that if they actually do attack a NATO member there's a pretty good likelihood that not just one country, but all of the alliance including The United States will stand up against it. That's a very powerful tripwire, so what was distressing about the president's comments this week about Montenegro is it seems to reflect a lack of understanding of the power of the security guarantees and these alliances, and actually making war less likely.

Elizabeth Randa: To deter attacks.

Tony Blinken: It's the most powerful deterrent. If we let that slip away and slide away then it really is potentially open season. If President Putin, or anyone else believes they can act with impunity despite the commitments we made through alliances, though security guarantees, that makes conflict more likely.

Elizabeth Randa: It's one of the things that we don't know about that private meeting with the president held with Putin. Did they talk about reducing US troop presence in Germany? Did they talk about reducing the training and exercising and equipping that we do with our NATO allies.

Jim Sciutto: He's already done that once. [crosstalk 00:37:21].

Elizabeth Randa: He's done it in South Korea and immediately there was alarm in Europe. What does that mean for us? Those are the actions that ensure the deterrent, and if that changes then there is much more of an invitation. We've been talking so much about cyber, the Baltic states are still tied into the Russian grid, shockingly, 25 years after the end of the cold war. It would be quite easy for Russia to disable our Baltic allies, the functioning of their country, so then what happens? Will we respond? The view has been of course the United States would respond until it has been called into question.

Jim Sciutto: So far these things have been hypothetical, but as we know, and just ask George W. Bush, you can be surprised by circumstances you don't expect. If Russia were to take that step into a NATO ally and the US balked, or did something half way that wasn't quite a military response, how would that play out? I mean would Germany, and France, and the UK act without the US in those circumstances? What would happen?

Elizabeth Randa: They would have to. They're asking themselves that question now.

Jim Sciutto: Can they? [crosstalk 00:38:34].

Elizabeth Randa: They're asking themselves that question.

Wendy Sherman: Well, I think that's why we're seeing the European Union create a coordinated defense mechanism. As much as I know, they're not seeking to compete with NATO in any way, but the United States for years has said that the European Union should get its act together on defense. That's part of the president's push on NATO spending, which has been the push by everyone, and I'm glad to see that indeed more of our NATO allies are spending more money on their defense, so we can do this collectively because we are all mutually assured deterrence.

Elizabeth Randa: Yes, and so you have to translate that money into capability. That's the work that we do in the alliance. That's what the supreme allied commander sitting in Belgium and [inaudible 00:39:16] Belgium is doing every day, training and exercising with allied forces, so that we're sure that even little Montenegro now that it's become a NATO ally, can contribute something should Article 5 need to be invoked.

Jim Sciutto: One topic, and President Putin seems to telegraph some of the things that were in that private conversation here-

Elizabeth Randa: At least his version of it.

Jim Sciutto: Well, his version, yeah. Maybe it's accurate. The idea of the US striking a deal with Russia in Syria where we kind of pulled back, and Yousef you're aware of this as everyone else is, this idea that Russia, Israel they kind of team up there and can repel Iran, keep them off the border, Israel's border with Syria. Do the US and Russia actually have shared national security interests in a result like that?

Elizabeth Randa: The experience-

Jim Sciutto: That's to all of you. I'll let Elizabeth go, but Yousef I want to hear what you think.

Elizabeth Randa: No, but everyone can chime in here. We've had a very rough go of it. The efforts to de-conflict have been very challenging in Syria. Each of you knows this. Our interests are not aligned, potentially with the exception of our not having a hot war between the two of us in Syria. That you could anticipate would not be sought after.

Tony Blinken: We came remarkably close.

Elizabeth Randa: Close, right.

Tony Blinken: There's an incident that many of you know about a few months ago in which Russian, "mercenaries," attacked Kurdish forces that we were allied with and had embedded American forces with. We called out the Air Force. By some accounts no one ... Well, I don't think we on the outside know, the

administration probably knows, several hundred Russians apparently were killed. President Putin immediately put that under the carpet. The last thing he wanted to do was to wind up in situation where this escalated and he got into a conflict, but this can happen every single day.

I would say on the question writ large about the interests in Syria, look, the hard thing is any of us who were involved in Syria policy over the last years have to look ourselves in the mirror and look at failure. We failed, and the failure continues. The suffering continues, and it's a very painful thing to acknowledge. I think in the case of Russia I have to admit I think I've been wrong in assessing that they would want to get out, or ratchet down a lot faster than apparently they are. We all knew that they wanted desperately to hold on to their one foothold in the Middle East. So, we understood that, but I have to acknowledge I didn't think that they would want to wind up in a situation where they were perceived as being allied with Iran, with Hezbollah, killing-

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Tony Blinken: Killing thousands, millions of Sunni's? I didn't think that they would want to be in a situation where they made more likely terrorist attacks in Russia, in Central Asia, in the caucuses, in retaliation for what they were doing in Syria, and I didn't think they'd want to get bogged down, because they are bogged down. They are the finger in the dike for Assad. If they pull out then he's likely to go. So they're kind of stuck. And Putin has repeatedly said he's done. He's declared that they're coming home, and of course they haven't.

So I think we thought there was a moment at the end of the administration that we served in where in a sense the interests aligned only to the extent that we didn't think Russia wanted to stay there indefinitely, and that we could negotiate something that led to a transition or lead to a process of transition that wound up moving Assad out.

Wendy: [crosstalk 00:42:53] I think the alliance between Iran and Russia's an alliance of convenience. I don't think it's a true alliance and the way that, at least for over 70 years we had an alliance with NATO and with Europe since World War II. I think it will either come together or fall apart as circumstances require, but there's no love lost between Russia and Iran. And you know, there are ways one can work with Russia, there's no doubt about that. I think we are probably all of us up here people who believe in engagement and certainly there wouldn't have been an Iran deal that now doesn't exist anymore, pretty much without Russia's involvement in it. And there are places that we have done good arms control agreements with Russia.

I think over the past history when all else fails, we come back to arms control with Russia because it's been one area where we've had some interest that do align as the nuclear powers in the world. But now I think so much of what is going on is what is convenient for the moment, for our interests, for everybody

who's playing in the Middle East. And I think it does make it hard for those who actually live work and want to prosper in the Middle East that everyone is using the Middle East as a playground for their short term interests.

Tony Blinken: I agree with Wendy, and also one way to look at that particular argument is just look at the frequency of Israeli strikes on Iranian Hezbollah assets inside Syria that go on with Russian blessing, that go on with coordination and acknowledgement and sort of looking the other way from the Russians. And so I-

Wendy: One of the reasons Netanyahu was in.

Tony Blinken: One of the many reasons, but I think this is happening. And on one hand, yes it could escalate, yes it could become a hot war. On the other hand, I'm actually amazed at the number of strikes that have taken place and it hasn't escalated until now.

Jim Sciutto: So let me ask you, do you think that Russia has the will and the capacity to tell Iran it needs to pull back and pull out?

Tony Blinken: I honestly don't know. I honestly don't know, but I think we should test the proposition. And if they don't, maybe they push them out of a certain area. Maybe they don't push them out completely. Maybe they limit their ... but it's worth the try.

Wendy: And my observation in the implementation of the Iran agreement was that there was a highly transactional relationship between Tehran and Moscow, and if you were to identify reasons that this would be to the benefit of the party that you are seeking to get out and used the relationship that we're describing, you could potentially have some impact, but probably not on the scale that you're looking for.

Jim Sciutto: I want to have time to go to questions I should Coates just said it was the US assessment. They didn't, Russia did not have the capacity or the capability, but it's just one assessment.

Wendy: Jim, can I take something up on, at Wendy's point about arms control? Because the President took up in the Helsinki press conference the matter of nuclear weapons and Putin spoke specifically about extending the new Start treaty, and so that sounds good in principle. That's a superpower arms control agreement to reduce the weapons that the two nuclear superpowers of the Cold War maintain.

We have a lot of issues to work through if we want to sustain this agreement into the next phase that is available to us, and that is because the Russians are fielding advanced systems that potentially undermine strategic stability. They may be outside of new Start, but we have to hold them accountable for their

developmental programs which could put our deterrent at risk. Second, they're in violation of an arms control agreement in Europe, and that's publicly known, the INF agreement. And again, Putin has to be held accountable for that if we're going to give him what he said he wants, which is an extension.

Jim Sciutto: Sign an agreement when he's in violation of another. All right, we've got just under 15 minutes. So let's go to the crowd. A voice from Saudi Arabia. Ali here.

Ali Shihabi: Yes. Ali Shihabi from the Arabia Foundation.

Jim Sciutto: And if I could just say, if you have a question for a particular panelist, let us know. Otherwise, we'll ...

Ali Shihabi: Yes, no. My questions for Tony. Tony, if you'll permit me, you presented an example of the Arabian incident in the Gulf where the Iranians took US troops captive, and you presented as an example of the benefits that you got from JCPOA because secretary Kerry had the capacity to talk to Javad Zarif 12 times in 24 hours to have them released. I will tell you that in the region that was seen very differently. In the region, it was seen as an emboldened Iran daring to humiliate the United States by taking its troops captive, humiliating them on television for a 24 hour period. And having the American Secretary of State, you know, basically have to beg the Iranians to release those troops.

What I can tell you is that the impression today is that there were Iranians wouldn't dare to pull such a stunt on America. And so while whatever you might say about the lack that this administration doesn't have Mr. Zarif's number on speed dial, an element of deterrence has been brought back towards Iran and nobody thinks that the Iranians would have the courage to pull such a stunt on America. And I think what you don't understand is the price that was paid in the region when people sensed American weakness.

And that is far less the case today.

Jim Sciutto: Do you want to respond?

Tony Blinken: Yeah, no, I appreciate the comment. I think that you make a very important point that perceptions matter, they matter profoundly. And I will be the first to acknowledge that the way our engagement with Iran was perceived in parts of the Middle East through the nuclear deal was very much what you described. Now we have to make the best assessment we can of what is in our national interest. And hopefully it also winds up being in the interest of our allies. And in the case of the Iran deal, it was profoundly our assessment that the agreement was in our national interest, and that the alternatives to that agreement were profoundly not, and that not only would it be beneficial for us, but actually it would be beneficial for our partners and allies in the region starting with Israel as well as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and others.

But we can disagree over that. But you do make an important point about perceptions, and I acknowledged that, but you know, Yousef was talking earlier about Yemen. And let me give you an example on the flip side of where, you know, I think we have to do a better job talking to each other. When the Houthis tried to take over the country and there was this response appropriately from the Emiratis and the Saudis with support from the United States. It might not have been everything you would have liked, but it was there and it made a huge difference.

As it happened, ambassador, I was dispatched to Saudi Arabia and I had the privilege of spending some time with the then newly anointed defense minister and deputy crown prince MBS. And the purpose of the mission was twofold. It was to tell Saudi Arabia on behalf of President Obama that we had your backs, which is to say, if the Houthis were going to engage in any aggression against Saudi Arabia, we would be there, and we would be with you.

But that was one point. The second point was I was there to ask a question, what are your objectives? What are your strategic objectives in Yemen? And so that was the question that I respectfully put to MBS. And his immediate response was to remove every last vestige of Iranian influence in Yemen. That's a fine objective, but honestly it is not achievable. And my response was, "We might want to rethink what the objectives are." That's not the way to get to a place that Yousef described, which is ending this, but in a way that puts us back to where we were before the Houthis aggression, which was getting to a political way forward in Yemen. So, yes, it's right to have expectations of the United States, of your partners and your allies. But we also have expectations of our allies and partners. And we need to have that conversation.

Jim Sciutto: Josh.

Josh Rogan: Thank you very much. Josh Rogan, Washington Post. A quick comment and then a quick question on the subject of the Trump administration not being able to reach Javad Zarif in a crisis. I don't have his phone number, but I do have his personal email. It's JZarif@Gmail.com. That's real. That's his really email, for any Trump administration officials in the room. There you go. Crisis averted. You're welcome.

Wendy: And he loves email. Loves email.

Josh Rogan: My question is for ambassador Otaiba. You said you don't want increased tensions in the region and you want to roll back Iranian influence. How does the Saudi UAE led blockade of Qatar advance those goals exactly? Also, how is that working out? Do you think Qatar is really close to caving into all your demands? Thank you.

Otaiba: It's a great question and I want to make sure you understand this very clearly, Josh. The blockade is not ... the blockade of Qatar is because Qatar became too

close to Iran. It's not we pushed Qatar towards Iran. We left Qatar because of their proximity to Iran. That was well before the blockade. And if you want a history lesson about our issues with Qatar, I'm happy to provide it, but this is not our first issue and challenge with Qatar. This has been going on for 20 years.

We've had another run of this about three years ago in 2014 where we pulled our ambassadors. We had a big fight. The Qatari signed a document committing to not violating some six principles. That document is public. They never lived up to that document, and so it escalated. And so this is not a whimsical decision. Our decision or our issues with Qatar are philosophical, it's about what we want the Middle East to be. We want the Middle East to look more like the UAE. Civil, innovative, focusing on young people, focusing on governance. Qatar has spent billions of dollars on promoting political Islam, on promoting Islamists.

Everybody on this panel knows exactly who Qatari supported in Libya. Everybody on this panel knows who the Qatari supported in Syria. They've supported dissidents from our countries. So these issues are pretty serious. That's between us on the Qataris. You don't have to solve it for us. In fact, we don't want you to solve it for us. We need to solve this on our own, and this is not about bullying Qatar or twisting their arm and getting them to cave. They are sovereign, very rich country. They have every right to say, "We don't want to work with you guys. We want to focus on Iran and Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood and [inaudible 00:53:48] Al-Nusra. Those are our partners. We want to work with them, and they have the right to do that. We also have the right to say, "If that's your choice, we don't want to work with you."

Jim Sciotto: Back here. The gentleman in the light blue shirt.

Ed Butler: Hello Ed Butler from London and former Commander of British forces in Afghanistan, which hasn't been mentioned. I don't think there a war coming there, but really focused on all members of the panel and the former administrations you served and to Yousef. What do you think should be done in Afghanistan now going forward? Or is it picking up your comments sir, it's another war which the US has lost.

Jim Sciotto: Who'd like to take that? Please, be my guest.

Wendy: I think that there's an entire panel on that subject.

Tony Blinken: Yeah, and the Afghani Ambassador's here.

Wendy: And the Afghani ambassador is here, so I think probably we should let that panel go forward. Afghanistan is a very tough, tough problem and I, as a former administration official, am incredibly grateful to all of the countries that joined the United States in Afghanistan and gave up their lives of their countrymen and treasure to do so. So the solution for Afghanistan is ultimately up to the Afghan people, of course. But I think it is a discussion that we need to have with our

NATO allies in support of the Afghans and the Afghan government to see if there is a sustainable way forward. But it is a very, very tough story.

Jim Sciotto: I looked this up the other day by the way, 29 US allies lost soldiers in Afghanistan, one of which is Montenegro.

Wendy: So I think it's very important to speak about Afghanistan in the presence of one of our British colleagues who stood shoulder to shoulder with us in the hardest places they're down in Helmand province. This is an example of why we need allies in the world. When we need force multipliers, when we need to legitimize the use of force, we do it in conjunction with others. We don't go it alone. That is the way that we work in the world effectively to advance our goals, and so the fact that there were 29, the fact that we bled and died together and there are maimed soldiers all across the alliance from this service reflects what an alliance means.

It's not something you snap your fingers and create. It couldn't be recreated if we destroy it, and we looked to our allies every time we need to get anything done in the world. On the climate change negotiations, on the Iran nuclear deal, on Afghanistan, on global public health our allies stand with us. And of course the UAE was with us in Afghanistan as well, because we had partners who joined with NATO. So I think when people are wondering, "Do we really need alliances anymore? The Cold War is over and maybe we're going to cozy up to the Russians after all." Actually, we need them more than ever. We are stronger when we stand together with other countries and when we're alone, we are less effective in advancing our global goals.

Jim Sciotto: I know that when the president made the statement about Germany recently taking a shot for their financial contribution and mentioned US loss of soldiers there without mentioning Germans, that particularly, that was a gut punch for, and understandably so, for German leaders. I think if I have it right, what do we got like two minutes to ago? Probably one question, unless you're like really swift. Ambassador.

Peter Westbrook: Thanks very much. Peter Westbrook got question for Yousef, my old colleague in Washington.

Otaiba: Hi, Peter.

Peter Westbrook: Wonderful to see you, Yousef. Can ... I take your point that the reason why the Emirates changed their mind on the JCPOA was because of relations and political importance of getting off to the right start with the new US government. But can I just ask you, do you think that killing the JCPOA actually offers the prospect of reducing the Iranian dominance of your region, which you were saying just now was a big priority for your government and for that of Saudi Arabia?

Otaiba: Again, all my fellow panelists know this because we've had so many discussions on this and I've sat through a lot of briefings with Wendy after every negotiating session she came back from Europe. Our issue was maybe, 10% of our concern about Iran was JCPOA. 90% of our concern with Iran is support for Hezbollah of support for Hamas support for Houthis. The 120 missiles that have landed in Saudi Arabia in the last three, four months, they weren't made by the Houthis. They're coming from Iran, and that has nothing to do with JCPOA. That's our concern with Iran. So whether you have the JCP away or not, our main concern, that 90% of the Iranian threat in our part of the world still has to be addressed.

Peter Westbrook: Of course.

Jim Sciutto: Can I do one more or do you want to call it? Anybody have a really short question? Just in the back here. And please pick your panelists so I don't get in trouble for going over time.

Jonathan Miller: Hello, I'm Jonathan Miller. I'll pick a Tony.

Tony Blinken: I got the [inaudible 00:59:01].

Jonathan Miller: Great. With respect to comments on the potential for proliferation in the Middle East were Iran to develop nuclear weapons. There's obviously regional implications for that. What are the broader implications with respect to the NPT and norms around nonproliferation within the international community were that to occur?

Tony Blinken: I suspect Liz is actually a better placed even to address that. But I would say very simply two things. One is I think the history of this suggests that when other countries in the region are looking at country X, that may be thinking about developing nuclear weapons and deciding what to do they usually themselves don't decide to go nuclear until country X is actually gone nuclear, which is to say holding Iran in abeyance makes a difference in terms of the prospects of fueling an arms race. To your broader point, I would simply say that, you know, we really risk the further unraveling of all of this architecture that we built up over so many periods of time.

It's profoundly imperfect, but again, don't compare me to a God. Compare me to the alternative. And in a very imperfect world, especially in the policies that we're all dealing with, that's really what you're looking at. But I think Liz should actually have the final word on this because she's forgotten more about this than I'll know.

Liz: Tony, you know all that you need to know on this topic. I think the reality is when the United States walks back from its word in an internationally negotiated agreement with multiple parties, the Chinese, the Russians, the Europeans, and the United States, that undermines every agreement that we have reached internationally because we are the guarantors of the order. As

Tony said, the world has been ordered by the work that we have done since the end of the second world war to build its institutions. And the NPT as part of the UN is one of those institutions. So we're weaker for it

Jim Sciutto: We're going to take a break. Then we're going to talk about chance of war in Venezuela. So please stay where your sitting-

Speaker 1: I was going to say, Latin America has never looked safer by comparison.

Jim Sciutto: I know. I know. Know where to plan your holidays. Tony, Liz, Yousef, Wendy, thanks very much. Thanks to all of you.

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