

## [Transcript] The Realignment / #381 | Michael G. Vickers: Intel, Special, Ops, & Strategy from the CIA's War in Afghanistan to Ukraine

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.

A few weeks ago, a Re-alignment Supercast subscriber asked me and Sager for our thoughts on the parallels between today's policy of support for Ukraine against Russia and America's past support for the Mujahideen in Afghanistan in the 1980s against the Soviet Union.

We gave our own answers on that episode. But today, I'm lucky to speak with Michael G. one of the original and leading architects of the CIA's secret war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Michael has a new memoir out by all means available, memoirs of a life in intelligence, special operations and strategy. Beyond the Afghan-Ukraine parallels, we discuss his career which spanned his time from a enlisted Green Beret straight out of community college to his final role as an Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence in the Obama Administration. It's kind of rare to speak with someone who's been at the tip of the spear from a special operations perspective while also working in intelligence and the broader strategic issues he faced as a Undersecretary of Defense. So, I hope you all enjoy this conversation and I really recommend his book. Another quick few reminders. Number one, if you'd like to get access to all of our previous AMA episodes on the Supercast, much like the one we released last Friday, you can go to [realignment.supercast.com](http://realignment.supercast.com). And last but not least, a huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation which is the new name of our previous sponsor, Lincoln Network. All of the great work that Lincoln Network did before continues with FAI and I know that there will be plenty coming down the pipeline that we will love to elevate to everyone else here. So, I hope you enjoy this conversation and let's get into it.

Mike Vickers, welcome to the Realignment.

Now, thank you, Marshall. Pleasure to be with you.

Yeah, I'm glad to chat. There's so many different things I want to hit here. I normally like to avoid just getting into biography with folks just because that's going to be the thing which every single interview you hit is going to go over. But I think that what we can do here having the book is pick specific iterations and phases of your life and career that hit at the broader policy topics we're going to get into later. So, I just want to start here. You enlisted in the Army to become a Green Beret out of community college right towards the end slash after the Vietnam War. And that period in the mid-70s is fascinating to me because it seems like so many aspects of American foreign and defense policy rhyme with today. You've got recruitment problems, debates around the structure of the armed forces, domestic, civil conflict, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and a broader debate about how we should actually approach the Cold War referring to like rollback, detente, et cetera, et cetera. So, let's just ask, why did you enlist in the Army during that specific moment?

So, the specific aspects of the story is during my senior year in high school, an international relations teacher put a copy of that day's New York Times in front of me while I was sitting in the school library. And it had an article about a CIA paramilitary operation in Laos during the Vietnam War supporting the modern tribesmen, a secret army to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He put it in front of me and said, you might be interested in this. And I had no idea why he thought I would be interested. I was kind of a jock in high school. But I was. And I imagined myself leading secret armies. I probably saw too many James Bond movies and other things. But after my sports career or after I realized my sports career wasn't going any further in community college and both baseball

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and football, I thought, what am I going to do with my life? And I wanted a life of adventure and to have a real impact on events. And so, I thought about becoming a CIA officer and first a Green Beret or Army Special Forces soldier.

Yeah. And I guess when you were thinking about that moment, did you at all think about that post-Vietnam era? Just in the sense that when you're reading the book, you're not writing about, oh, everyone's getting spat on when they like, you know, land back in the States. Like, did all that matter? Were you just, frankly, so focused on like the personal aspect of it? Yeah, I was pretty focused on the personal aspect. And, you know, I had ambivalent feelings about Vietnam, but I really admired the Special Forces and those who were doing daring events. And so, you know what? The Wizard of the War maybe was one thing, you know, and I was

a teenager at the time, but I didn't have really super-formed views. But I admired the great exploits that I'd heard about and wanted to be part of that. So, when I completed Special Forces training and joined my first unit, you know, there were a lot of Vietnam veterans, just as I had read about, who mentored me and, you know, I had extensive combat experience and a variety of roles going into Laos and North Vietnam on dangerous reconnaissance missions and working with Indigenous troops. And there were also a lot of Eastern European emigres. I was in a unit that was oriented toward if there were a big war in Europe, how we would liberate Eastern Europe and halt to

Soviet advance. So, there were a lot of soldiers and officers in our unit from, you know, every state you can imagine in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. And they taught me a lot about

their countries. You know, their dream was to liberate those countries at some point. And so, I had a real great education during those very lean years of the 1970s when we had a hollow army, as it was later described, you know, we went through a lot of domestic travails.

But I was just focused on becoming the best Green Beret I can first as a soldier, then as an officer and completing my college studies so I could go into the CIA eventually.

You know, and later on in the book, when you're talking about the, you know, prospect of a new Cold War between the United States, China, Russia, everyone's allies, of course, you point out that one of the causes of this moment is the perception of American terminal decline.

So, the reason why I bring up the 70s example is just that if we're looking at this declineist narrative, you could say a lot of aspects of that story in 1974 to 1978 would rhyme very accurately with decline. So, how does the consideration of whether America's on the decline or not, how is that influenced by your thoughts on looking back on that 1970s moment?

Well, I certainly hope we recover as rapidly as we did in the 70s, you know, in the 80s, to turn the situation around. This decade, I think, will be critical. You know, this Cold War is very different from the Soviet American. You know, one, it takes place in a globalized economic environment. We have a significant economic and technological competitor in China that we didn't really have in the Soviet Union. You know, in the 20th century, we never had an adversary, the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, et cetera, that had more than 50% of our GDP. And China's already surpassed that, not on a per capita basis, but on an exchange rate basis. You know, and that got me narrow further. And at some point, they may surpass us at least in

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exchange rate GDP, you know, and certainly not per capita for a long time. So, but one of the things that it shares with that period of the 1970s is our adversaries today, China and Russia, both believe that a variety of reasons were weak and in terminal decline, and that the 21st century, certainly, Chinese feel belongs to them. You know, in the Soviets at the time, they had won a string of victories, and we had had a series of defeats. Their victories were pretty modest, but they felt like they were really on a roll. And of course, Marxism tells them that, you know, history is inevitable, it's got one direction, and it's on your side. They were very wrong about that. But, you know, so there are parallels in that sense, you know, and so hopefully we'll have the political leadership that will galvanize America and get us out of this. As I write in that chapter on winning the new Cold War, the domestic bases of our power, I think, is the most important thing for our national security is really addressing a lot of those challenges. Yeah, and something an author I recently interviewed pointed out was just that if we're looking at your era when you're coming up in the, you know, defense space, given the fact that the economic side of the picture just wasn't as relevant to the way you're describing it, what was deeply relevant for you when you were my age and your career was weapon systems and specific strategy questions, what languages are you learning, what branch of the armed forces are you taking in? There was just no aspect of that career, which I think you're really prepared for, that focused on the domestic economic side. So how do you think about the domestic side? If you're speaking to the portion of the audience that are, you know, the Georgetown School of Foreign Service types, who I think at this for 10 years ago will be focused on counterterrorism, but now all of a sudden have to think about technology and industrial policy in those aspects. Yeah, so, you know, my career was roughly divided into two halves, an operational half of the Special Forces and CI, and then a second half as a policy maker and intelligence community leader. And as I was in those latter roles, while I was focused a lot on defeating Al Qaeda and the raid to kill Osama bin Laden and things like that, I began to turn in the last few years of my career toward broader questions of grand strategy, you know, how are we going to posture ourselves to compete in a long-term competition with China? And so while

I had spent, you know, the previous couple of decades thinking about the military problem of China, direct conflict, while certainly possible, is less likely because of the effect of nuclear weapons and the risk of escalation as it was in the Cold War. It doesn't mean it can't happen, it just means that likely to be contained in some way, because both sides fear escalation. And that means you got to think about how you're going to win this long-term competition. And that really is the contest of systems, you know, political systems, economic systems, innovation systems, etc. And so that really kind of galvanized my attention in my senior latter years in government in a way that it hadn't really before that. You know, it had all been operational of one form or another, as you rightly described. And as you kind of point out also in that final chapter, the key thing to understand about the early Cold War period, you know, you compare this moment today, much to 1947, when you're having all sorts of not just like containment as a policy, but specific operations across government, restructuring the actual way the military worked, etc., etc., etc. What big thing to be technical? Did we get right? So that even when we made tactical or strategic mistakes later on, even during the 1950s, we were still relatively okay

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because, you know, think of an aircraft carrier, if you turn it like one or two degrees, that's going to make a huge difference over time. So what did we get right then? And what would you compare today? Like what's something you think we need to get right, even if we're going to debate the specific tactics and strategies maybe a little later in the decade?

Yeah, so one of the ways, you know, I think the two Cold Wars are different is that, you know, we didn't want a Cold War coming out of World War II, but we quickly realized we were in it, you know, within a year, 1946, 1947, and you had, you know, George Channon's long telegram outlining the problem and the general strategy of containment. And as you rightly noted, Marshall, you know, containment had its debates throughout. You know, it was more of strategies of containment

that administrations would pursue in different ways, but still with the overarching idea, you know, some more offensive or rollback, others more defensive, some asymmetric, some symmetric, et cetera. And the way I view the first Cold War is that we started very strong for a variety of reasons, and we're having more challenge now because the threat is, you know, there isn't an army occupying half of the industrial heartland of Europe and threatening Japan and what we wanted

to be our allies, you know, at the time we're prostrate, and they're not now, and so open economy. And so it's hard to galvanize public opinion in the way that you could, I think, in the late 1940s. And then we moved very quickly, you know, with aid degrees in Turkey, with organizing our national security establishment, with creating a secretary defense and chairman and national, the Joint Chiefs, National Security Council, my alma mater, CIA, et cetera, and then moving toward an alliance system in 1949 with NATO. And so, and then the Eisenhower years doesn't really get enough credit, you know, putting us on a path toward fiscal sustainability, but also really recognizing that we were in a tech arms race with the Soviet Union in space and intercontinental ballistic missiles, and we actually won that hands down at the time we were more scared than perhaps we should have been in the 50s. Today's tech arms race is very different. It's, you know, in technologies that transform everything, economy, society, as well as national security, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, synthetic biology, et cetera.

So it's a different challenge for the government and more of a challenge in a way for all of our society and public sector than, say, the space race was or, you know, intercontinental missiles or thermonuclear weapons. But I think we basically got that right. And then we lost our way a bit in the middle decades, the 60s and the 80s, and then really, 60s and 70s, excuse me, and then really finished strong again in the 80s. This Cold War will likely play out in that same way. But, you know, a key test is, what are you building power over your adversaries? And when your adversaries, you know, and you want to take advantage when your adversary makes mistakes, as Soviets did in Afghanistan, as we did in Vietnam, and try to limit the side that, you know, the mistakes that we're making and take advantage or capitalize on mistakes that your adversaries are making, because they'll inevitably come up. And right now Russia's making a big one in Ukraine that we can certainly take advantage of. Yeah, that's an excellent pivot to the, you know, CIA aspect of your career. We can talk about the fact that you led American efforts to support the Mujahideen against the Soviet invasion and occupation of the country. So a couple of things I want to hit. So one, like, let's just get off the heady topics for a second and just ask a question. I wanted to ask you, actually, for a couple years. So folks who are listening to this episode,

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if you want to watch a fun movie, you could find Charlie Wilson's War on Netflix right now, convenient. It's convenient streaming timing there. And you are portrayed in the movie. And a question I wanted to ask you, when they introduce your character, they demonstrate your intelligence by having the guy who plays you, he's playing six games of chess at once. And I remember thinking this, even back in high school when I watched the movie, do you play chess or is that like a convenient screenwriting shortcut? We're not going to have you giving a defense policy lecture, just the chess thing. Do you play chess? The answer is no. So Aaron Sorkin, the screenwriter for the movie, you know, who wrote West Wing and other things, you know, figured that's how you capture on film, you know, a CIA strategist who's running a big covert action program, you know, it's a multi-level chess game or multiple games going on at once. And no, I stink at chess. This is just a really validating of 2009 Marshall's intuition. I was like, I was like, I just, I just, this, this feels like a convenient screenwriting thing. Okay, so thank you for, yeah, I didn't have, I didn't have time or interest for just a couple of days. Yeah, no, thank you for indulging 15 decades long curiosity. So now onto the actual series part of the Afghan war aspect, we actually got a bunch of listener questions about this once I said you were coming on the show. What I'd love to hear how you, how you understand the public perception of our efforts to support the Mujahideen in the 1980s, because right after September 11, this is really seen as look at our hubris, there's a bunch of confused narratives about like whether or not we actually supported people who eventually became, you know, of a Taliban, al-Qaeda, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, put that to the side. Is this really seen as like, man, this was just sort of something that went too far. But then ever since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, this is now held up as look, we had this policy went on for a decade, it didn't escalate, it didn't become politicized, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So how do you understand the public perception of the campaign? And then we could just go from there. You know, so I think there are different public perceptions, you know, you know, there was certainly a debate at the time about were we just, was this hopeless, were we fighting to the last Afghan, the Soviets would eventually win. And that was more of the view on the left. And then on the right, you know, the view was in some quarters, we weren't doing enough, and you know, this was Reagan administration, so he was being criticized from the right that we weren't doing enough that there was corruption problems. And you know, and you have echoes to that in Ukraine today as well. You know, and then in terms of the, you know, that anything good we do automatically turns bad, you know, that's the perception that some people have. I don't think that's true, but I do think that success is never final. You know, when you look back at history, you have these great victories, they may produce a piece that last half a century or maybe more, they don't last forever. And so what you do in the aftermath really matters as well. So I think the Afghan co-production program, our secret war against the Soviets in the 1980s, as do I think a lot of others, played a significant role in helping end the Cold War and, you know, it was the only defeat the Red Army had suffered in its history and coupled with other events going on in the Soviet Union, discredited the system in various ways and let Gorbachev take it too far and for an ultimate collapse. And then what we did is, you know, in a way, I like to say we got spoiled by success. You know, we had at the months after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, one intelligence analyst expected the communist Afghan government to collapse right away and it didn't. It survived longer than the

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Soviet Union in one of history's ironies. But the Berlin Wall fell, Eastern Europe became liberated and our attention shifted to Europe and the, you know, reunification of Germany and other things and, you know, saw Afghanistan and Pakistan as problems of another era. And then we had to cut off aid in 1990 because of congressional legislation when Pakistan was going too far with its nuclear weapons program. And so that disengagement from the region is what eventually brought the Taliban,

you know, first it led to a civil war in Afghanistan, then to the Taliban coming to power with Pakistan's

support, then Al Qaeda moving there and then Al Qaeda building all of these training camps and ending in 9-11. And so some try to draw a straight line in that decade, but one we never supported any of those Al Qaeda, you know, again, the hijackers are all non-Afghans, they're Arab nationalists, and they were mostly voyeurs in the Soviet Afghan war.

They went and helped out in the border region a bit, but that was about it.

And then as we saw it with threat gathering, and I wasn't in government at this time, we didn't respond properly to this new global threat of jihadist terrorism that was very different from the terrorist incidents we had experienced in the 70s and 80s, you know, a hijacking airliner, and then you maybe get safe passage to a communist country and release most, if not all, of the hostages. And this was, you know, a global campaign that may have been overly ambitious, but their ambition was to topple regimes and change the global order. And, you know, 9-11 was a bigger attack than Pearl Harbor. And our responses in the late 1990s were mismatched to that threat, you know, cruise missile strike that didn't do much, a few programs to try to disrupt Al Qaeda. You know, had we known what we knew after 9-11, I would hope that any sensible administration would take a more forceful response to stop that threat.

You know, the danger, the big lesson in counterterrorism after 9-11 is you can't give global jihadist terrorists any sanctuary. And there's no reason to give them that in most parts of the world now, unlike the Cold War. And it took us a while to learn that lesson. So, you know, I wish history didn't turn out that way. I got called back into government to deal with that new problem of disrupting dismantling and defeating Al Qaeda. It took us a lot of years to do that, but we had a fair amount of success over time and the threat is very much reduced. And we haven't had another 9-11 attack. But I don't see, you know, the Clinton administration and the first part of the Bush administration had choices to make about Al Qaeda that they could have

decided different things. And they, you know, hindsight's 20-20, but they didn't. And so, I don't think it's an inevitable straight line from the Cold War to 9-11.

And then given that history just taught us, how should our experience in Afghanistan in the 1980s inform how we approach Ukraine today? Yeah, so I think it's, as I mentioned,

I think it's very important to support Ukraine for a variety of reasons. One, you know, they're a democratic state battling for their freedom, but also it's a chance to really deal a blow to a Russia that made up a major strategic blunder and is an ally of China, you know, at least the tacit alliance allied against us. And so I think it would not only hurt set Russia back quite a bit as well as having moral virtues and everything else of our assistance, but it would set China back in our global competition with them. And so, you know, there are operational lessons to learn from our experience in the 1980s about having appropriate

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scale and kind of winning the battle for tactical escalation dominance that we did in Afghanistan in the 80s. We haven't quite yet in Ukraine yet. We've been a little slow and incremental and also have withheld certain systems that I think would make a difference on the battlefield, but generally we're heading in the right direction there. But it's the conflict of our time. You know, it's far more significant, I think, to this new Cold War than, say, the Korean War was, which occurred very early in the Soviet American Cold War, was to that outcome. Fascinating. And I guess something I'm curious about to your point about the, you know, Afghan approach in the 80s being secret. That meant that the issue was just not politicized in the same way exactly. You weren't going to have a domestic culture war and various respects fall into that debate, which you think you've clearly seen with the Ukraine war. And obviously, if we're talking about your career, not really preparing you for quantum computing debates, let's say, in terms of what you're actually focused on, it seems to me that something that modern strategists and military officials have not been prepared for is just the American domestic political scene and how very quickly seemingly tactical and strategic debates, which we could put in a category of empiricism, descends into, once again, that culture debate area outside of the military. What would your advice be for folks who are now having to navigate that new environment? Because it was just fascinating how quickly, and once again, obviously, the majority of the country and the majority of people left and right at an elected official level do in fact still support the status quo policy in Ukraine. But certainly, in the Republican primary especially, there are aspects of the war that became politicized in a way that the Afghan war didn't become. Yeah. So you raised a very good point. So one, the Afghan war was a covert action program done by CIA. So even though it was an open secret in certain aspects, our best covert action programs are our biggest, not surprisingly, because they get scale advantages. They still have a degree of secrecy, but they become a bit more open. You see more effects. And so one, that made it more the oversight of, you know, you still have a press getting stories from time to time and trying to follow events, but it's more the Congress and the executive branch and particular committees in Congress that are really debating that more. And Afghanistan was also seen publicly, just broadly, not as the good war. Central America was far more controversial in the 1980s. Afghanistan, you had this David and Goliath situation, a big, ugly superpower invading a third world country and defenseless people almost. And so it was easier to rally people to that side in Congress on both sides of the divide. You saw that same sort of good war, bad war thing with Iraq and Afghanistan after the invasion of Iraq, until Afghanistan eventually became the bad war. And there's a lesson there for strategists about fighting insurgencies that, you know, Americans have expectations of winning from World War II, from others and irregular wars, counterterrorism wars, counterinsurgencies tend to take longer. And so you need a strategy that you can sustain across political administrations, sensible political administrations I would add, but still, you know, there's still differences and that the American people can tolerate. You know, and I think we had largely achieved that in Afghanistan and we just gave up. I think it was a blunder to withdraw the way we did. And I think, but the Trump administration was heading there and essentially signed the agreement and the Biden administration capitalized on it. And then as you said now, our politics are so polarized that even something like Ukraine that really shouldn't be polarized is if one guy's for it, the other guy's got to

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be against it. And that plays out in our politics in all sorts of ways. And again, that's something political leaders have to deal with, but strategists certainly have to be aware of when you embark on something and you think, you know, it's in our interest to do it and you can win and you've got a strategy. How is that strategy going to be sustained politically? And you really need to think about that. When I was asked to come back into government, ironically, it was because things were going badly in Iraq and President Bush called me and a couple retired four star generals into the Oval Office to talk about strategy. And the point that I made was that this force probably not going to be over when you leave office. And right now, political support for the Iraq war was really declining and we needed to turn around the strategy in a way that let it be sustainable across the next administration, which very likely would be democratic, but whatever it is, they might have different views based on popular perception. And so secret war, open war or overt war, you know, they all affect this calculus, but there's things you definitely have to keep in mind. Yeah, I like the point you just made in the sense that the thing that you can do as a strategist or, you know, non political official is find a way to maintain sustainability. If a new administration comes in, there's going to be a different angle. There are going to be different generals who maybe get different positions in others. But the question is, and this is once again, the successful policy we achieved during the Cold War containment continued to be the strategy, even if there were swings within that specific bucket. So the goal can be to find to find aspects there. So let me just add to that too. President Bush, Bush 43 did something extraordinary and unusual. You know, everybody talks about the surge a lot. But in the last six months of this administration, he really started an aggressive campaign to go after Al Qaeda in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. And presidents there last six months usually don't do a heck of a lot, you know. And that was successfully handed over to President Obama, who carried it even further, much as Reagan did on Afghanistan from Jimmy Carter, you know, the Carter administration kind of started our support for the Afghan resistance in the late 70s and 1980. Reagan continued it and then dramatically expanded it. And then we won. President Obama followed a similar path through at least through his first term, and then it tailed off some. But by then we had done enormous damage to Al Qaeda. So it's a good example of bipartisan continuity across administrations when you have a sustainable strategy and a pretty good cause. You also, and a few questions ago, hit on a use for dynamic to follow on. And this impacts the war in Ukraine. The question of how long are the broad American people willing to support a war? And it seems to me the issue with the war in Ukraine is that obviously you have the David and Goliath dynamic you described with Afghanistan in the 1980s, but in many respects, from the tanks to the drone warfare to the fact that we're sending, you know, Bradley's and, you know, German leopard tanks, it looks much more if you're just a non expert. If you're if you're someone who doesn't really follow these issues, it looks a lot more like World War Two, but it looks like Afghanistan in the 1980s. So then you have to your point, the expectations game, the expectation is, if we're fighting a conventional war, well, that needs to be one that needs to be handled within a specific period of time. I don't see folks, I see folks approaching a 10 year Ukrainian insurgency. We're Russia for some somehow is able to conquer the entire country. And we're debating, do we continue giving weapons to the Ukrainians? I think that debate would have been less politicized than maybe the specific debate of like, okay, but how many more Bradley's are we going to send?



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Why can't Zelensky just wrap this up, etc, etc, etc. Maybe they need to concede now. Just introduce like that. I'm right to hear your reflection on kind of what I just introduced. Yeah. So I think initially, you know, the administration was planning for a Ukrainian insurgency and the prospects for it were pretty good. Russia didn't have enough troops and had friendly countries on its border. A lot of the conditions that I outlined in my book, certainly were present in Ukraine, but what shifted it to a conventional war was Russian failure. You know, they couldn't take the capital, their offensive bogged down. They had to hang onto the sliver of the dances that they made. And, and then it became this conventional or first an artillery war. And then now maybe a war of movement on the Ukrainian side, but you're right. The political expectations are very different for one for another. One likely would have been more covert and protracted. The other more expensive, more high intensity, but you expect results sooner. And, and, and there's this fear of escalation. And so that's the challenge really is can we win an indirect war? We're supporting the Ukrainians with training and, and equipment and intelligence and the Russians are engaged directly. You can, but you've got to, you know, put a lot into it, you know, and I would also add it's never good to, to extend wars longer than you need to, you know, one, your enemy adapts, but two people just suffer. You know, it's, it's, it's much better to make sure you have overwhelming force to the extent she can, or at least local escalation dominance and advantage. And that's where I feel we've missed the mark a bit in Ukraine. And hopefully now there's enough where the Ukrainians will succeed. But, you know, like this whole debate about they don't need fighter aircrafts, of course they do. You know, we wouldn't fight without it. No army in the world would try armored offensive operations without combined arms and air power supporting it. You know, so if there's restrictions on doing it, I get, you know, if you're politically worried about the Russians and escalation, well then maybe you don't. I think those fears tend to be a bit overblown, but it's silly to argue that, that wouldn't help the Ukrainians with war. And also I would add, even if it takes time to give it to them, time's a wasting, but if the Ukrainians are successful, they're going to need to, you know, the peace that comes out of that is likely to be a cold peace. And so Ukraine is going to have to deter future regression. And the response to that has got to be security guarantees of some kind and continued military assistance, including things like fighter aircraft to make it much tougher for Russia to do this again in the future in five years or whatever and after they recover. Yeah. And I think this is a good opportunity to address the escalation dynamic because the critical issue, and this is why, once again, I was speaking to the younger listeners here, the strategic questions we face are much more similar to the issues you faced in the 70s and 80s than they were in the immediate September 11th period. Because once again, there's no escalation when you're doing with Afghanistan or Iraq. Issues with those wars aside, the concern is not does this escalate our nuclear weapons to use, do other powers come in, et cetera. So how do you advise people in my cohort to think about this escalation dynamic? Because it's just been so absent. And this also applies to Taiwan. This applies to China. How should we think about escalation? Yeah. So one, great power wars are fortunately rare, but they have major consequences when they occur. And since the late 1940s, the superpowers have been armed with nuclear weapons. And so that's another feature of any conflict involving those powers that you have to take into account. During the Cold War, early, the first several decades of the Cold War, we and our allies relied on tactical nuclear

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weapons to try to halt the Soviet advance because they had numerical superiority. And then having won the Cold War, we got rid of most of those weapons. The Russians didn't because the Russians felt they now had conventional inferiority unlike the Cold War. And so the escalation dynamic in terms of Ukraine is broader. I mean, one, it's the sphere of nuclear weapons, but it's also this fear that a great power might horizontally escalate, might open another theater, again, has happened in history. And President Biden has talked about World War III. Well, in my view, the Russians aren't capable of defeating Ukraine right now, let alone taking on Europe. That would be folly of folly for the Russians. But it's something that's on people's minds. It's kind of a legacy of a Cold War when there was a far more powerful Soviet Union that if we fought them in Europe, there would likely be a secondary theater. They would race for the oil fields of the Persian Gulf, so we had to be able to defend there. A war in Europe could escalate to limited nuclear use or tactical nuclear use. So this is ingrained, at least in the older generation of strategists, you know, me and those older than me, maybe not so much the younger generation. The only thing we're really worried about with escalation, I think with al-Qaeda, was right after 9-11, was did they have a WMD, Weapons of Mass Destruction capability that could inflict even greater damage? If they had it, it was believed they would use it. Fortunately, they didn't. They weren't that far along in their programs. And then we took the fight to them and achieved escalation dominance over them. So, you know, I think that's the the art of it is, you know, nuclear weapons are really regime survival weapons. You know, they're not really very useful battlefield weapons. The Russians have recognized that, that precision weapons have, and the U.S. has recognized that, that precision weapons has taken a lot of the functions that tactical nuclear weapons would have performed in the past. And so, you know, I think we need to rethink that whole escalation dynamic and how you, how you actually went a war under these conditions.

So, for the final two quick questions, so number one, to your point about you can't just rest on success, it'd be easy for me to say, okay, Middle East is handled, we're repositioning ourselves, ISIS, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. What should folks who, what should folks be remembering in the back of their minds about that region now that we've narratively moved on? Yeah. So, I think you have to divide the region into, you know, sort of a couple different problems. The one, the global jihadist terrorism with the remnants of al-Qaeda and ISIS, you just want to keep them down. And it doesn't take a lot to do that. You know, it takes things like predator drones, good intelligence, and relationships with governments around the region to disrupt plots. And that, you know, comes from intelligence.

It would be a mistake to just say, we're not going to watch these guys anymore or not, not do something as we see them gathering. I mean, that's the mistake we made before 9-11. And you don't, you know, what you don't want out of that region is another 9-11. You know, and then you have the Iran threat to the region for regional hegemony. But Iran is really a lesser included case of the capabilities you developed for China and then to some extent Russia, you know, a Russian invasion of NATO's frontline states, somewhat different capabilities. But there it's more of a sizing question of, okay, if I have to fight one and a half wars, how much do I really need? How big do I need the US military? It's not that I need necessarily different capabilities. We're counter terrorism. You know, just like you have nuclear weapons, high and conventional warfare, and then things that are very useful for counter terrorism, those weapons, you know, have a specific purpose.

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They don't move across the, you know, the things that are very good at the high end, aren't good at the low end, and the things that are good at the low end, you know, can't really do the high end. So you need a bit of a mix. But Iran and North Korea and these regional powers are really more lesser included cases of the great powers, you know, and if you can deter the great powers, hopefully you can deter the regional ones as well. And so you can't forget about the Middle East, but you shouldn't overemphasize it. I think one of the mistakes that we made strategically after the Cold War, you know, after 9-11, we focused on terrorism, but focusing on these middle range powers and thinking that's the way the world really is, and we really won't have a China or a resurgent Russia again to deal with, which is a far more serious problem. And that's what we have now. And the final quick question, 18 to 20-year-old you picked a branch of service and a career path that was at the center of events for the next 40 years. To be a little reductionist, if you're imagining 18 to 20-year-old listening to this conversation, what career path within the broad intelligence military community do you think being at the center of things? So maybe the Navy matters more than it did in September 12, 2001.

Right. So I, you know, part of the reason that I was attracted to that special forces and operational side of CIA is I thought individuals could really make a difference, you know, one person could make a difference, not appeal to my psyche. I think that's still true for those areas. But as warfare has shifted, what's really strategic, so you know, it depends on what your aspirations are as a young man or woman. But as warfare has shifted, what's increased in importance

on the Navy side is undersea warfare. That's an area would be currently dominate and want to keep dominating. And so submarines is a very good place. On the air side, it's really global precision strike capabilities, missiles, but stealth bombers and things of that nature as the conflict, the battle spaces extended, but it's also new things, even more remote warfare like space and cyber capabilities are very important. I argue space superiority is to 21st century warfare, what air superiority was to the 20th. And then the final point is really the rise of unmanned systems. And this is, you know, autonomy and part of, but that's a cross-war shared domains, you know, robotic combat vehicles, undersea vehicles, air vehicles, you know, space is inherently remote, but unmanned. And so expertise in that area becomes more important. And so then

you might say, okay, so if there's less, if combat is more extended range and more sophisticated high-tech platforms and even unmanned platforms going into the fight, what's left for the warrior? And well, that's where war is going. And so there's still pockets where there are things, and for those inclined to that, you know, there's the army and Marine Corps and special forces and others. But those are the broad trends. And that's where we really want to excel as a nation. That is excellent place to leave it. Mike Vickers, thank you for joining me on the realignment. I enjoyed it very much. Thank you, Marsha.

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