

[Transcript] The Realignment / Podcast Premiere | Arsenal of Democracy: America Is Not in Decline, but It Needs Help (feat. Walter Russell Mead)

I was about to say Marshall here. Welcome back to the Realignment, but today's episode is a bit special. I am cross-posting the first episode of my new Hudson Institute podcast, Arsenal of Democracy. You're going to hear my conversation with Hudson slash The Wall Street Journals, Walter Russell Mead about America and the world, and the broad set of topics we're going to explore

on the Arsenal of Democracy podcast. If you enjoy this conversation, definitely go click the link in the show notes and subscribe wherever you listen to your podcasts to the Arsenal of Democracy. We'll be back next week with another episode, of course, and be sure to rate us five stars on Apple podcasts or any other podcast service that offers the ability to rate and review.

We'll be back with our normally scheduled Realignment programming next episode.

Welcome to the Arsenal of Democracy, a podcast from Hudson Institute. I'm your host, Marshall Kosloff. In this podcast, we cover key developments in US foreign and domestic policy, with an eye to

equipping policymakers with the tools to confront the most dangerous geopolitical environment since

the end of the Cold War. For our inaugural episode, I speak with my Hudson colleague, Walter Russell Mead. Walter takes us on a tour of global hotspots, covering everything from Russia's invasion of Ukraine to the US position in the Indo-Pacific.

But the Russians and the Chinese are actually in some ways offering better deals to the world's elites

now with many of these countries than we are. You can be as corrupt as you want.

You can move as much money as you want. You can get in bed with drug cartels. We don't care. We're with you. And furthermore, if a bunch of Democratic mobs are attacking the presidential palace, we'll supply guns and diplomatic support. Our friends don't get pushed out in color revolutions

and Democratic coups. We close on American Crisis, his domestically focused series published a tablet.

American Crisis explores how we lost faith in the future and how we can get it back.

Walter Russell Mead, welcome to the arsenal of democracy.

It's great to be here and good to see you, Marshall.

Yeah, it's great to see you too in person at Hudson. It's funny. I do so many podcasts. I had to pause to make sure I said this. No, this is Arsenal of Democracy, our new podcast at the Hudson Institute. Since this is the first episode, we're going to go a bunch of different places, but I'd just like to start by just asking you, what does the phrase arsenal of democracy mean to you when you hear it? Well, it originated, I think, in the 40s with Franklin Roosevelt. And the idea was that he understood that America was not ready to get itself involved in World War II, but he also understood that it was necessary for us to prevent the UK, especially from collapsing. So the idea was that the United States would produce the weapons with our enormous industrial capability. We could produce the weapons that were needed to keep America safe. And I'm curious, whenever you have these big debates about 2023, we're talking about the Indo-Pacific versus European theater debate, can we do everything? A quick talking point that comes out is this idea that America is just no longer the America of 1941. They will say, well, at the end of the day, the productive capacity isn't there, deindustrialization

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isn't there, economic policy has changed, the world order has shifted. To what degree does America have the economic and productive potential it had in 1941 versus today?

Well, in 1941, we had a lot of potential, but actually our factories weren't making things for weapons. You know, our factories were making cars, they were making tractors, making railroad cars, and so on. So it actually, this idea that somehow America could just, you know, turn on a dime and become a great war economy in the 1940s is delusional. Now, it's true that today we don't have, you know, we're not making as many things as we used to make, although deindustrialization honestly is a little bit overstated just because sometimes people look at the manufacturing employment, which has fallen pretty steeply, but manufacturing output hasn't fallen. That is, in value added in manufacturing, we're just doing more through automation. So my sense is if we really had to, and we all felt it was a national emergency equal to World War II, we could probably build up our industry as our war industry almost as quickly as we did back then.

And the reason why I chose Arsenal of Democracy as the title for this podcast is it gets at, separate from just the economic and production side of things, it gets it in an articulation of what America is, what it can be, its specific role in the world. We're in the middle of a huge debate about what that actual role is. How do you interpret what America is at this moment, and why do you see that interpretation playing out?

Well, I think the United States remains a sort of unique and necessary power in the world. And let me just start by saying you hear a lot about American decline these days.

Now, I've been around since the 1950s and I've been hearing about American decline since the 1950s.

I kid you not. When I was a kid in elementary school, the big story was the Russians have Sputnik. They're eating our lunches in outer space. Americans can't teach math. Our schools are failing. We're in decline. Then came the missile gap with Kennedy. Oh, the Russians are ahead of us in missiles. We're going to be destroyed. Then it was balance of payments in the gold deficit, Vietnam War, riots in the cities. America's in decline. We'll never recover from the Vietnam War. Then Japan was eating our lunch in the 1980s, and it was the new superpower.

America was so over. Then it was Germany and the European Union. They were way ahead.

So we've been nonstop declining for 70 years, and yet here we still are. So I'd say in the first instance, this idea of American decline I think is just way overdone. And before I'm going to be convinced that the United States is actually in decline, I need somebody to explain to me, okay, so why have people been telling you this for 70 years and been wrong about it for 70 years?

So then I'll listen to why your analysis is different. So far, I haven't really heard nothing convincing on that score. So that's my first point. But the second thing here is that the United States, I think, is unique in the world, not because we are so much more virtuous than other people. I'm not really sure you can make that claim convincingly, not that our political system works better than anybody else's in the world at the moment. That's also a little difficult to argue.

But America is a great power whose basic national interests are broadly aligned with the national interests of most other countries in the world. That is what the United States really wants in the world, or have to have, let's say, vital interests. We need a balance of power at both ends of Eurasia, that huge supercontinent of Europe, Asia, and essentially Africa. We need that, you know, no single power dominate Europe the way Hitler tried to do or the way the Soviet

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Union tried to do, or that Putin and his dreams would like to do. And the other, and we need for no great power to dominate Asia, as China seems to be doing to trying to do today, as both the Soviet Union and Japan have tried in the past. And here's the thing, unless you're a country that's trying to dominate Europe or Asia, you actually want the Americans to win in that context. If you're a Denmark or a France or a Norway or an England, and you have no ability to dominate Europe, but you worry that somebody else might and take away your independence, the United States is a pretty good ally and you want it to be around. Same obviously in Asia, where you look at Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Vietnam, India, all of these countries look at China, and they look at the United States, and they really hope that the American national interest prevails in this to the extent that China is unable to establish itself as a regional hegemon. Beyond that, what does America want? We basically want a world economy that works.

We want people to be able to buy and sell stuff around the world. If our people travel around the world or invest around the world, we want them and their investments protected by the same rule of law that countries should be giving their own people. So in that sense, we're not a perfect country and we certainly get a lot of things wrong, but the world that we want is closer to the world that average people all over the world really want and would benefit from than the vision of any of the other great powers. And having done a deep dive on your writing before this episode that most readers or listeners probably not done, I can say that your optimistic articulation of America and our role in the world and prospects against decline doesn't quite reflect some of your projects. So one of your projects is called the American crisis. So I guess what I'm curious about is putting aside superficial decline narratives, what concerns you about the American project right now? I think that we need to dig a little deeper even and say, here's the thing. When people talk about great powers of the past and they compare that with the United States, what they often do is they make the assumption that the goal of a great power is to avoid change. So you're the Roman Empire, you've conquered the Mediterranean world, you want nothing to change,

your job is done. If you're the Pharaoh of Egypt and you've united upper Egypt and lower Egypt, let's have 3,000 years more of quiet pyramid building, no change. But the American power and American society are built on capitalism, which is a revolutionary instrument of change. And if capitalism is working, then you're going to have massive social, economic, political changes not only in your country, but around the world as new technologies come in, as new countries are able to access powers of technology. So an American world is not a boring, stable world where everything runs on and life in America, we just sleepwalk from one decade to the next. If capitalism is working, you're actually going to be living in upheavals.

So I can say America is in crisis and there's some things we've got to get wrong or some bad things will happen. And to me, that does not contradict the narrative of an America that is an enduring, strong force in the world. Yeah, and I think what's helpful there is that in a capitalist system, you're going to have an economy that's going to shift from an industrial one to one where we're talking about working from home, which is going to bring to mind, okay, does a city make sense? Does public transportation, as it's currently constructed, make sense? So we should understand a change that way. I guess the next question would be, when you're talking a little earlier about the economic ends that America seeks, you're bringing to mind one of

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the recent Wall Street Journal columns, you wrote where you were arguing against the economic vision

of the Biden administration, as was expressed by Jake Sullivan, what people were really calling Bidenomics. So I'm interested in understanding the gap between what we could broadly say the United States wants and the actual debate we're having around how we should orient the economic project of the country. So how would you sum up their position and why do you basically articulate it as this 1950s backwards looking vision that's not going to be successful? Well, I have to say I did hear something back from the administration about that column. They did not like it.

Did you pick the headline? I never picked my headlines. My headlines are imposed on me by others. I could just see the next headline is going to be Jake Sullivan, Sick Man of Washington. Look, I think that for many on the Democratic side and even some Republicans, especially some of these sort of, you know, neo-populist Republicans or whatever you want to call them, there's this kind of hazy sense of a golden age of the late 1940s, 1950s, early 1960s, where basically international trade had not really recovered from World War II and the disruptions of the depression of that matter, even World War I. Foreign trade was actually a lower percentage of American GDP in the 1950s than in the 1790s. So the global international system

had kind of broken down. And as a result, each country had a lot more opportunity to sort of organize its own domestic economy the way it wanted. And in the U.S., coming out of the Depression and World War II, we had an economy that was much more heavily regulated, but also much more heavily concentrated in terms of oligopolies and monopolies. I mean, a lot of folks listening to this podcast, I'm sure are not old enough to remember or perhaps don't even know, then the United States, we once had only one telephone company, AT&T. And if you didn't like your telephone service from AT&T, you were free not to have a telephone. And, you know, we had the three big three car makers, the big three networks. We had, I think it was the seven sisters oil companies. I think there were seven big airlines. Competition was regulated. A bus company could only charge the fare between any two cities that was allowed by the regulators. And not only that, it couldn't run service between any two cities without first getting permission of the federal government. So you had this incredibly highly regulated economy. And one of the things that was very nice about that economy for a lot of people was you didn't often get fired in that economy. And if there's only one phone company, they don't actually worry that their factory in Ohio is not making a lot of money. For one thing, in these regulated systems, the way the government decided what your profit was going to be was they would look at your operating costs and then give you like a 4% increase over your operating costs. That was your profit and that determined the prices you could charge. So there was actually not a lot of pressure on companies to cut costs, perhaps even the opposite. They used to say that a lot of these businesses, you could make money by redecorating your office because that would then go into your cost basis. And I think what is true is that a lot of people, they, people yearn for the jobs of those days when you just, you know, you'd go, you'd get a job right out of college or high school, get gradual little raises and promotions all during your career and ultimately retire on a stable pension. People like that kind of security and jobs, but nobody wants the products of the 1950s and 60s. The crappy phone service, the horrible cars, you know, the high prices for everything. It was, and it was actually the consumers movement under Ralph Nader. It was the left

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that in some ways organized to begin to attack these corporate oligopolies, which were seen as really imposing high prices and bad quality products, unsafe products on the average person. And the fact is in that time, economies were growing pretty quickly and wages for blue collar workers were rising pretty quickly as productivity rose in manufacturing. I think, you know, the reasons were that both in Europe and America post war, there was a lot of room for growth. America had had 10 years of depression before the war, then all that war production. And afterwards people were hungry for cars and houses and all kinds of things. So this is pent up demand. And in Europe, you were repairing the devastation of the war, lots of jobs in that. So there's a sense among a lot of people in the Democratic and Republican popular side that, you know, well, why did that all go away? Because evil greedy corporations and rich people decided to attack it. We had a perfectly good, perfectly sustainable economic system. And then gratuitously, these people came along and attacked it and destroyed it. And now we live in this horrible doggie dog, Blade Runner type world of, you know, we're eating soylent green and everything is just so terrible and it's all casual labor, et cetera, et cetera. And I think that's historically wrong. You know, what happened was that, you know, actually we've been moving out of the kind of stable industrial economy. We're not going to get a stable middle class based on manufacturing again, because you don't need that many people to make your goods anymore. And robots will soon be taking even more of the jobs. This idea that somehow if we could de-globalize, de-financialize, and renationalize the economy and put in heavy federal regulations, we would go back to stable growth. And he's just a fundamental economic policy mistake, but it's a very attractive one politically. It seems that you're really articulating this idea that if you're saying we could pursue these 1950 style policies and get to a 1950 style world, that would be incorrect. But I think the fair counter would just be, look, just three years ago during COVID, we had this massive supply chain crisis because of dependence on China. Therefore, that's why we're using the term de-risking and sort of decoupling. So let's focus on the more national security and like let's say security-minded side of the argument. What is your articulation of how supply chains and just basic industrial capacity can be protected without trying to recreate a past world? Okay. No, there is something to be, I mean, there clearly is a solid national security argument for not depending on China for our computer chips or a whole range of other key technologies. In the first place, though, we ought to accept that this represents a kind of a strategic setback for the United States, because our goal was to create a world, a peaceful world in which it didn't really matter where things came from. You just used purely economic criteria. And if you do that, your economy's going to be efficient. I mean, let's not forget that we've had almost, we had almost no inflation for 20 years, even with pretty high employment and rising wages. So this more efficient, globalized economy actually delivered us from a lot of very ugly policy trade-offs that we used to face. Okay. I think, and so we have to acknowledge that as we're going to go back to a more efficient from a standpoint of national security economy, but less efficient from a purely economic economy, we're actually going to see real losses in term. It thinks it will cost more inflation already. We can inflation is a lot more of a worry than it was before we started going back to these things. So just to put the fine point on what you're saying, your point is that many on the left and right would argue that this return quote unquote is actually a win.

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Things are going to just inherently be better. And you're pointing out that even if it's a move in the right direction, it's because there's a specific cost.

It's necessary, but not necessarily positive. But the other thing I would say is we need to understand that this is a treatment for a problem. And like any medical treatment, you overdose on it and it's bad because what's going to happen. And you can already see it happening in every industry that wants to produce crappy products and sell them for high prices is suddenly saying, look at me. I'm a national security case. You need to protect me because China will win if I can't overcharge you for bad stuff. And so what we're going to see is a whole political and bureaucratic

class that is going to sort of be lobbying to get these kinds of, you know, to distort these policies. We have to do some of it. I couldn't agree more. And it's kind of stupid that we didn't start earlier, frankly. But given that the people who believe in industrial policy are the last people who should be allowed to get anywhere near an actual industrial policy, because they will instinctively go for more when they should be going for the minimum that will get you to the level of safety and security that you need. So what would you say is so on? Let's talk about critical industries. That'd be part one and then part two would be supply chain risk. What would you say is the critical safe mean you could find there in both categories? Again, it's going to vary from industry to industry and thing for thing. But also, I think you have to make a really important distinction that we're going to be, we need to be doing probably more friend shoring. That is to say, India is a place where we should be looking for more imports from rather than trying to bring all the manufacturing home. And that's, you know, for two reasons. One is America is actually

not a great place for a lot of manufacturing if only because Americans don't want to work for rather low wages. And so, you know, if we're only going to have goods that are produced at home, we're going to have prices that many Americans can't pay for the things that they need. I'll give you an example. The industries where we've seen the most ghastly, unsustainable price rises are things like healthcare and college education, which are entirely domestically produced under the web of American regulations, American guilds, all of these things. And if you really want to turn Wal-Mart and, you know, have Wal-Mart price itself like American colleges, right, that would mean bringing all your manufacturing at home. So we actually can, we need to have as diversified a manufacturing supply chain as you can get. And that's, you know, that's Mexico, it's South America generally, it's certainly India, it's East Asia generally outside of China.

We need to be doing this both to keep our prices down and our standard of living high at home, but also because we need to be offering those countries economic and development opportunities if we aim to keep them on our side against China. If we're basically, if our message to poor countries around the world is going to be, sorry, we're just going to bring everything home and, you know, we don't, you know, you're just not going to develop. Why then are they so interested in helping us with anything we're interested in, like balancing Chinese power? So we need an, we need a global economic policy that recognizes the real security risks that are out there, but doesn't forget that there are, there are actual laws of economics. There are advantages, you know, to specialization of production. There are advantages to international competition, and we need to keep as much of that as possible while also having the security of no longer having vital supply chains involving sort of Chinese choke points.

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And, you know, we've mentioned a couple of different countries and regions here, so I think this is a good chance to kind of zoom out and kind of travel around the world a bit. Obviously, this entire podcast and this conversation is happening in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. You're actually really recently in Ukraine. It's just like, you know, the counter offensive has begun in certain respects. I'd love for you just to start by articulating like what you saw and how you see the current situation playing out at a strategic level from the perspective of the United States. I would say the thing I learned about in Kiev was that I'm a really terrible traveler in war zones since that I slept through the air raid alert in our hotel. So fortunately, you know, nothing landed, but I'm just not ready to go back. And had I gone, I discovered that there really has been progress. There's Wi-Fi in the bomb shelters. So, you know, people say, we haven't gone forward in the world. Well, we have Wi-Fi and bomb shelters now. You can keep up on your email while the missiles are falling. Life is going on better in Kiev than you might think. This is not the kind of bombing that we saw in World War II where whole, you know, quarters of cities are getting wiped out. Thanks to the missile defenses, not that many missiles are getting through. You could go up to where the fighting was in the early months of the war when the Russians attacked Kiev itself and you see a lot of devastation. You certainly see a lot of refugees, but in the city itself, life goes on. So, you know, you'll pass a building that has broken out windows. You'll see a crater where something hit, but it is not the blitz over London or something. That was a bit of a surprise for me to see that odd mix of fear of total destruction that could hit at any moment alongside completely normal life. But the Ukrainians, certainly the ones that I talked to, are determined, united, see no alternative to fighting Russia because the idea is even if you made a deal with Putin today, would he stick with it two months from then if he thought he could get an advantage by breaking it? The answer is no because, you know, Russia recognized Ukraine's boundaries in 91, then in 2014, there seemed to be an agreement. So, you may, you know, Putin will keep slicing territory. So, looking at that, there's really not much constituency in Ukraine for accepting another deal like this. The counteroffensive, it's too soon to tell, clearly at this point, first of all, in any offensive, it takes a while to see how things are going to go. Will there be breakthroughs? Where will they be? How tough will the Russian resistance be? How effective will new Ukrainian weapons be? Let's have to understand that in this war, there's a lot that's new and that each side is using drones, they're using electronic battlefields, integrated sort of systems of command control in ways that are not only new, but are constantly evolving in the war. So, you know, if you remember the Heimar things that at one point, this was the, you know, grand weapon that, you know, was knocking out all these Russian things, then you stopped hearing about them. As I understand it, the reason is that those things depend on GPS systems for precision attacks, but the Russians learned to jam the GPS. And so now, you know, they still, you can still get them out there and they still blow up, but you can't target them in the way that you used to be able to. And that's, so it's turned from this wonderful precision weapon into an extremely expensive form of mortar fire. And at the same time, the Russians are constantly improving their drone designs. The Ukrainians are constantly racing to match it or to come up with their own breakthroughs. There are soldiers on the front lines in Ukraine who will get together to raise money for pieces of off-the-shelf commercial tech equipment that actually provide them with real-time information about what the Russians are doing.

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And the Ukrainian version of Amazon offers two-day delivery to places near the battlefield. So you didn't have Amazon in World War I or World War II. So it's, because of all of this, this war is just very hard to predict. And then if you add that on top of that, neither side wants to reveal any information that might be helpful to the enemy. You get a perfect fog and I think that's what we're seeing. Something you've written about, because we started with World War II in terms of our civil democracy. That was the real crescendo of industrial age warfare, mechanized factories, total war, all those dynamics. You're describing this war as the first information age war. Talk about that mix, the mix of drones, but also artillery duels. Not something that folks would have thought of as particularly important. Right. No, in very weird ways, this war is a lot more like sort of World War I and 1917 than it is like World War II. That is, World War II, you had these masses of tanks, sort of fleets of tanks driving across the countryside. Some of the battles in Ukraine and World War II would involve total territory of 80, 90 miles or more and take place on 300 mile long fronts. Today, what you see is much smaller groups of tanks, more like you would have seen in the very early dawn of the tank age. And they're sort of doing these battles with entrenched forces that are relying heavily on artillery. This is an air power, oddly, is more used as it was in World War I, where it's mostly, it's more about reconnaissance than it is in World War II. You'd have all these dive bombers and, you know, so that when your troops are going, advancing, you'd have planes going with them, shooting machine guns out and taking out infantry and all of these things. You don't have fleets of planes buzzing over the battle lines this way. So it's more like World War I, where the chief purpose of air power was for surveillance. And at the same time, the fact that so much of what's taking place is not really taking place on a battlefield at all, but in the kind of electronic cyber world where you're trying to jam each other's communications, intercept each other's, where commanders are relying on an integrated suite of tech devices and software to enable them to build up a picture of what's happening on the field. And so they're, and since they're, it's almost a little bit like playing a video game, you know, where your information is coming from the screen rather than from your eyes and messengers coming in. It's like nothing, it's nothing we've ever seen before, except that at the end of the day, it's people killing each other and dying. So that, you know, it's a higher and higher and more complex web of technology strategy and counter strategy, but it's the same old hideous meat grinder, you know, at the point of contact.

And the aspect of this war that is most similar to the American experience of World War II would be the concerns about production capacity, especially in the United States. This is the broader conversation about munitions. Do you have any thoughts on that broad topic?

I've written several times about a generational failure in American foreign policy, that the 30 years since the end of the Cold War saw the United States fundamentally misjudge many of the elements of the world situation to sort of neglect some of the most obvious things that you need to pay attention to while engaging on these sort of grandiose ideas about global democracy, promotion, global transformation of civil society, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. While forgetting, for example, that if you lost your margin of military superiority around Taiwan, you would face the urgent problem of a possible war with China, or that if you lost the ability to deter Russia from attacking Ukraine, you'd find yourself involved in some way in a war that would transform the international situation and not in a good way. And in the very long list of important things that we failed to pay attention to was the maintenance of a sufficient industrial base

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for our defense capabilities. And it was bipartisan. Both parties were happy to talk about peace dividends. Both parties were happy to not invest in maintaining production capacity for some of these things. And so now we find ourselves, after everybody used to sort of scoff at well, we'll never have a peer competitor. History is over. The Russians won't amount to anything. If the Chinese do amount to anything, they'll have to democratize to get there because only liberal democracy can support a complex society, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. We had all these ideas in our head. And as a result, we failed to invest in these capacities. And now we suddenly are having to look at, do we have enough arms for Ukraine and for Taiwan? And I would throw something else. And if I were Putin, I'd be thinking, how could I generate a nice little war crisis in the Middle East so the Americans could have a third place that they needed to provide more arms and protection for? Plus maybe I could drive up the oil prices with a nice little Middle East conflict. So we have allowed ourselves to stumble into a situation where we do not have the resources to securely meet all the contingencies or even many of the contingencies that are out there. What do you do in that situation? Well, first of all, you really do have to take rapid steps to get better. You do have to work with your allies and see, you know, which of your allies also maybe have some unused capabilities. How can you work together?

I think in the long run, the AUKUS agreement with Australia and the UK is going to yield results, but we need results in the shorter term than that. Again, fortunately, these days, technologically speaking, it's easier than it used to be to build even fairly complex factories and assembly lines. In the US, a lot of our delays in building are all about permitting and regulatory things and NIMBY-esque lawsuits. I mean, imagine if you were trying to build a big new munitions plant somewhere, how many lawsuits from neighbors, environmentalists, and so on, how many years would it take? So if we're serious about correcting these defects in our weapons productions capabilities, and I think we should be, then we're going to have to engage in some much deeper domestic reform than so far at least you've heard people really thinking about. Another question I'm curious about, given just your intellectual background, you made the point that it's pretty clear that the Ukrainians are committed to the status quo. There were some useful lines you had about grandfathers who fought Russians. I'm fighting Russians and my grandchildren were probably at the fight Russians, where this commitment is a little

more unclear, separate from policies on the American side of things. You have this interesting situation where it seems the center left and the center right, despite debates about policy, are broadly aligned towards that longer term commitment, and it's toward the edges of both sides where you have a lot of difficulty. It's on the right though, where it seems if politicians and policymakers are having a harder time navigating that difficult dynamic, so I'll focus there. What is your advice for Republican politicians who have this narrative of, okay, we're backing democracy, we're supporting the weaker side against the Russians, but also while we have this populist base now and people are always APU, this Jacksonian instinct, this is in their interest, how are you explaining this to them? First, I do think that the Republican establishment needs to do some introspection here. When we talk about a bipartisan generational failure in American foreign policy, let's think about what was the establishment saying to people in the 1990s. Well, free trade is going to make Mexico and China democratic, and it's going to

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make Americans so rich you just won't believe it. Oh, and it's also going to stop NAFTA will reduce the problem of illegal immigration across the southern border, and that was the entire establishment, was united in singing that song. Then it was weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and then, okay, well, there weren't any weapons of mass destruction, but now we're going to build democracy across the Middle East, right? So the establishment has been serially wrong about massively important things for 30 years, and so you can't now turn around and try to argue from authority, hey, I have a degree from the best political science university in the United States, or I served in the Bush administration, or I served in the Obama administration. Those are not credentials that impress people, and I would say also out there in the base, out outside the Beltway, people have noticed that people who make big mistakes in public life don't seem to need to step back or suffer any career consequences for being wrong, where sort of the elites keep getting socially promoting, and they give each other a pass on their past errors. So when we go to people and say, you know, this Ukrainian war is really important for X, Y, and Z reasons, it's not a sign of lack of intelligence when people greet you with skepticism, and they don't necessarily immediately go for your arguments. So I would say that, and this is what I've tried to do a bit in my column, is to keep that perspective in mind that in fact, the American foreign policy elite, boomer and millennial generations, were not very good at their jobs when it comes to certain basic aspects of promoting the national interests and national security. It's not all bad. I'm not somebody who thinks that everything that happened was wrong. There were some really good things that we could get into them. But on the whole, we are nowhere near where we thought we were going to be 30, 20, or 10 years ago. And if you're saying, well, we did nothing wrong, everything was right, and we should keep things in the same way, well, then where are we going to be 10, 20, 30 years from now if these trends continue? So we need for people in the political space to be able to talk honestly and frankly about what went wrong, what we've learned, and why the arguments that we're making about Ukraine now are not analogous to the arguments that people made about the Arab Spring or weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Russian resets, we can go through. Right, exactly, right. It's a really long list. And the establishment tries to forget, but the ordinary folks remember. And I think this is the space that that empowers someone like Donald Trump. You know, Donald Trump's sort of classic political message is, the emperor has no clothes, and I alone have the courage to tell you that. An age of upheaval, that's a particularly effective message. And, you know, you know, the person who tells you that may not be wearing any more clothes than the emperor. But until you've got an establishment that's willing to admit that, you know, things are not right and have not been right, it's going to be very, very hard to defang or to turn this skepticism into intelligent support of sound national security policy. I do have to ask the obvious question. Folks are probably wondering, what does everything that we've just described from the American political scene to Ukraine and Europe, how does that all apply to the Indo-Pacific and the Taiwan situation specifically?

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Well, other kind of rooms, obviously, but that's the elephant in the room.

Well, first of all, I would definitely put myself in the group of in the people who say that the Indo-Pacific region is likely to be the center of both world economic and world military and geopolitical history in the coming century. You know, with India and China, you've got 2.8 billion people, you throw in a, you know, half the world's population basically lives in that zone. And they are, the economic growth is faster there. The technological capabilities of people there are growing. And the geopolitical situation is deeply insecure with lack of strategic trust, challenging powers, a whole range of very difficult problems. So Henry Kissinger once said, they said this back in the 1990s. He said, when you look around the world, the unification of Germany is more important than the consolidation of the European Union. The fall of the Soviet Union

is more important than the, than the unification of Germany. And the rise of India and China is more important than the fall of the Soviet Union. That remains, I think, absolute, all of those things I think are still true now. And so we do need a kind of a Copernican revolution.

And the American foreign policy establishment to a certain degree is still instinctively Atlanticist and thinks that when it thinks about foreign relations, it thinks first and foremost, get Europe right and then go attend to the fiddly bits elsewhere. That I think is, is the wrong way to think. We really do have to move to a Indo-Pacific central foreign policy thinking. So now we, you know, one would ask naturally resource allocation between Ukraine and Taiwan and political attention and so on. Well, you know, first of all, I'd say there's a difference between an urgent problem. You know, somebody's the greatest long-term threat

to your health might be, you know, gradual arteriosclerosis that might lead in 20 years to a heart attack. But if you've just been bitten by a snake, you have to deal with that first, even if it means you put off going to the doctor for your cardiogram. And there's something to be said for the war in Ukraine is such an immediate challenge. It needs an immediate response, even though absolutely you need to be focused more on the Indo-Pacific. Now the question, the sharp edge of the question that people like Elbridge Colby and some others have asked is, well, what about, what if the resources that you are sending to Ukraine mean that you're not able to present a credible defense of Taiwan? And so while you're putting everything into Ukraine, China reaches out and attacks Taiwan and you're not prepared to defend it. That's a dilemma that we're in. And as I say, because we haven't done the hard necessary and may I say it obvious work of trying to keep our defenses up. But okay, but here we are. In reality, I think the overlap between what Taiwan needs right away and what Ukraine needs right away is not so huge. What happens in Taiwan is not going to be about tanks. It's going to be predominantly a sea and air war. So some of the issues might come in in the world of missiles and drones. But again, those are, it's not this, this simple obvious one-on-one trajectory. Another issue really is one of will that's very important. And you know, how do you deter China from attacking Taiwan? Because again, I want to just underline, you know, my goal is not to have the United States win a war with China. My goal would be to have the United States avoid a war with China while maintaining our own way of

life and the necessary economic and military security that we need to do that, but without war, which means a combination of first deterrence to get things to where the Chinese say, okay,

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we can't do that. And then diplomacy where you try and figure out, okay, now that you know that you can't take us down, let's talk about how do we live together? That's, I think, the way we want to be dealing with this. So deterrence, how do we have deterrence? We first have to understand our deterrence failed in Ukraine. We were not able to prevent the Russians from launching a war. And the key thing too, it's not that we didn't just, it's not that we didn't prevent. We didn't signal what our response would be. There was no, there was, I think, we didn't know. Well, I guess the thing is, and this is why it's fascinating, though, and this is why I think your combination of the domestic and the foreign policy is actually very, very critical, because there's obviously the analytical side of the Elbridge Colby argument, how many ex bits of ammunition are we creating? Can they go this or that? But I have a hard time imagining the American people going from a chaotic withdrawal of Kabul, from Kabul, to a devastating defeat in

Ukraine to, oh, by the way, now we're going to have the energy to back Taiwan seriously too. That falls into that establishment for impulsive fear dynamic you're describing. Yeah, I think, I know, I think it's right. I also think that, you know, the Biden administration really did not do a very good job of strategic communication with Russia in the lead up to the war. They, you know, they signaled that we wouldn't be sending troops. Now we weren't going to send troops. There was no political support for it. And it's not clear even now that US troops would do anything, you know, would help might just dangerously escalate, but you don't necessarily start by telling your opponent a list of things you won't do. You would prefer to have them thinking, well, they just might. That's what deterrence is about in some ways. But beyond that, you know, we let the Russians know and the world know we have really great intelligence. We, we know what's happening inside Russia. We know what Putin whispers to his teddy bear at night because we were releasing all this information. The Russians are lying when they say they're going to do this. The Russians are doing that. So we're telegraphing. We have fantastic intelligence. But what we're also telegraphing is we say, we put, we urge all the Western ambassadors to leave Ukraine. We pull our ambassadors out. We offer Zelensky a plane on which he can get out of town. That message is saying to the Russians, we think you'll win a war, the war. If you attack Ukraine, that's not a message of deterrence. It's a message of incitement. It's saying we know everything and we know you're

stronger than Ukraine and you will win this war. So, you know, I imagine there are people in Russia that are now saying, this is an even more devious American plot to lure us into a disastrous war because that's the kind of conspiracy thinking that they love over there. So we failed to deter Russia and as a result, we had this nasty war and dangerous war. So obviously the thing we've got to do is think about, okay, well, how do we avoid making these mistakes in Ukraine? Sorry, over Taiwan. One of them I do think is standing by Ukraine. What China actually most worries about is not actually a big battle in Taiwan. I think they think that once they land, they could probably win. What they worry about is that what happens after that, if we stay united and there's no oil coming into China, China's unable to trade, you know, we actually put a real embargo up and they can't import the soybeans they need to eat from Brazil. They can't import, they can't export anything. So their companies are all losing money, their people are unemployed, they don't have, they have food shortages, all these kinds of things. We're all material shortages of every kind and that, you know, we're just gonna, you know, will we continue with that? That I think is why

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China is not eager to have a war with the United States is a fundamental reason and they know that that played a huge role in our defeats of Japan, of Germany, in both world wars that this is the classic tool of Anglo-American sea power in world affairs. So in that case, the question of will is important. Are we gonna behave like we did in Kabul and just cut and run, even though a very small force could have accomplished our goals, I think for some time to come, or are we going to, you know, are we gonna stay the course? And so sticking the course with Ukraine, I think is sending an important message to China. So for these last two big questions, to bring back some, you know, Cold War era language, what about the second world? An aspect of the conversation around

the war in Ukraine has been the fact that many countries like who see themselves outside of the American or Chinese series of influence have either stayed on the sidelines or even countries that are more aligned with us on other questions have kind of held back as well too. How should we think about that issue moving forward? Well, we do need to think a lot harder about why other countries side with us and how we can influence their thinking about that. And I'm afraid we have too many people in Washington who believe that the rest of the world just admires our noble ideals and that our deep commitment to democracy, our deep commitment

to gay rights, all of these other things that make us just in our own eyes, perhaps, so transcendentally

special that other countries just admire that, want those causes to win and will support us for that. Even countries that actually sympathize with those things don't respect us as much as you might

think because they see our hypocrisies, our limitations, they say, oh yes, you're fighting, you're a great crusade of democracies against China, which includes, oh, checks notes, Vietnam, another communist party, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, the generals in Thailand, you know, a long list of people. So it's not actually our adherence to our values.

Countries look at these things very much with their own interests in mind. The big thing, and this is, I talk about a generational failure of American foreign policy, this part was, was at least partially a success. The American system offers a road for other countries to get rich. Basically, you can lean on like, oh, so many countries did, as China did, you can export your way into prosperity under the free trade system that Americans built up after World War II and continue to develop. Open economic opportunity. That meant a huge amount.

We are slowly, actually in some ways, we're quickly undercutting that for all kinds of reasons, some good, some bad, but we are sawing off the limb on which we're sitting to some degree. The countries noticed that in COVID, in the COVID era, every Western country sort of made sure it got vaccines before sharing, which again, is perfectly natural human behavior. Even on airplanes, you're supposed to put the oxygen mask over your own face before you put it on the child next to you. Fine. But nevertheless, it turned around, you know, the sharing didn't seem to go that far. The economic damage that some of these countries sustained, think about the Caribbean, where tourism was just a huge percentage of GDP for many countries. And now, for three years, there's, there was no tourism. What, what financial aid was there? What, how did the international system help them? Answers, it didn't really do very much. They look at some of the environmental stuff. And what many countries see is, wait a minute, you developed using the

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cheapest energy you could find. If it was coal, you used coal. If it was hydro, you know, you used whatever you could get your hands on to industrialize. But now you want to put a bunch of rules on us that we can only, if we don't do it your way, we're, you're going to punish us. So, you know, Brazil says you cut down all your forests, you know, as many of your forests as you wanted to, to mine as much of your land as you wanted to, but you're telling us, oh no, the Amazon is important to the whole planet. And so Brazil must not do what we did. Countries like China, you and Russia use this as a way of reaching these other countries. And in the Cold War, we had it kind of easy, relatively, because basically the communist idea was, okay, if we take over your country, we're going to kill your entire ruling class, take all their stuff. So, in all kinds of countries, the elites naturally thought, well, at least the Americans won't do that. We may not like some bunch of other things that they do, but, but I can live and my children can live if the American side wins in the Cold War. But the Russians and the Chinese are actually, in some ways, offering better deals to the world's elites now of many of these countries than we are. You can be as corrupt as you want. You can move as much money as you want. You can get in bed with drug cartels. We don't care. We're with you. And furthermore, if a bunch of democratic mobs are attacking the presidential palace, we'll supply guns and diplomatic support. Our friends don't get pushed out in color revolutions and democratic coups. So while you're an American friend like Mubarak, you know, for 30 years, he loyally supports the Americans. Then the minute the Americans find him inconvenient, they dump him. But on the other hand, the Russians say, look what we're doing with Assad. Okay, yes, he's a bloody stinking war criminal, but because he had our support, he still has his job. That is a very powerful message to leaders in many countries around the world. Americans need to think through what is our policy? What is the message that we are giving to folks whose cooperation we think we might need in these new circumstances? I'm not in favor of signing up to the, you know, dictatorial protection league, you know, or the war criminal asylum league or something like that. But I am saying we need an integrated strategic understanding of the kind of world we're in now and what sorts of policies are going to make sense in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia, as we think this thing through. You know, the well taken part of what you just articulated is to your earlier point about how the current system should be beneficial and in the interest of most other countries. It seems to me that if we're being challenged by non-status quo powers, the key thing to do is make the status quo as amenable and as workable as possible. So the final question here will start where we began just referencing your American crisis work. You made the point in one of your pieces that a successful American foreign policy is rooted in a strong domestic policy. I've just noticed as an interviewer, you very rarely see overlap between serious domestic policy work and serious foreign policy work. If a huge portion of this episode is critiquing 30 years of foreign policy at an establishment level, how do you advise the establishment get better at balancing these two aspects together? Because there's just no, it's hard to specialize in both. And by definition, foreign policy is not one that's going to bring you to thinking of questions of what is the future of the Republican party and California look like and NIMBYism and those different topics. Right. Well, look, I think, actually, I think it was George Schultz when he was Secretary of State

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would have new ambassadors, newly named ambassadors would come to meet him in the Secretary of State's office and walk them over to a big globe. And he would say to them, okay, which one is your country? And most of them would point to the places where they'd just been appointed ambassador. And Schultz would say, no, and point to the United States. That's your country. All right. If you are, if you're an American who's concerned with foreign affairs and you don't know the United States, you're not going to be good at your job. If you don't understand the country you're representing, whose interests you're trying to think about, whose well-being you're trying to advance in the international arena, you don't understand. And maybe in some cases don't really like the country that you ostensibly represent. You're gonna, you're not going to be that good at what you do. But on the other hand, I'll say this, if you are someone who is focused on domestic politics and really wants to make life better for the people in your district, your state or your country, and you don't understand the international environment, you don't understand what might get these people involved in a war or what might give them economic or political benefits of some kind, then also you're not doing your job. So yes, we can't all be specialists in everything. But if, if you believe that you have a vocation to lead this people at this critical hour in world history, then I'm sorry, you just, you got to, you got to do some homework. You've got to, you've got to know American history, you've got to know foreign history, you've got to get out from outside the Beltway, get in touch with the real American. I don't necessarily mean Austin when I say that, Marshall. Urban road divides popping. But you know, if you're from New England, go hang out, go learn the south. If you're from the west coast, go to the middle west, you know, learn your country before you, before you try to develop a foreign policy. Again, if you're governor of Georgia, you should be spending some time learning about the international world, international history, and all of that. So are we going to get it perfect? No, but could we do better than we have in the last 30 years? I absolutely think we could. That is an excellent place. Tendent, Walter Russell Mead, thank you for joining us on the first episode of The Arsenal of Democracy. Thank you. If you enjoyed this conversation, be sure to leave us a five-star review on Apple or wherever you listen to your podcast. We'll be back with weekly episodes.