

You Might Be Right - Foreign Alliances - Transcript

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Rahm Emanuel: Power vacuums get filled, and I'd rather have a centrifugal force of power around America's interests than around Russia or China, who are clearly trying to harm us.

Michael Kimmage: The positive of a less values-based approach or less ideals-based approach is that it gives you a lot of flexibility. If you want to conduct diplomacy with Russia about ending the war in Ukraine, you can do so on a very pragmatic footing.

Marianne Wanamaker: Welcome to "You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics, brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee, with funding support for members of our Producers Circle. To learn more about how you can support our work, visit youmightberight.org.

As the global landscape evolves, the dynamics of power, trade, and diplomacy are increasingly interlinked. Are alliances with other countries essential to U.S. safety, security, and economic success? Or are we best served by an America First approach? In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee Governors Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam, and their guests discuss the pros and cons of foreign alliances and the new international order.

Bill Haslam: Phil, welcome back. We have a topic today that's definitely in the headlines, and it's of great importance to all of us. The whole idea of foreign alliances. What's America's role in the world? What should it be?

Phil Bredesen: It's going to be an interesting topic, and I think there's hardly anything which isn't in the headlines these days, but we've got, I think, some really good people. And in terms of the long-range future of the country, these are really important issues to get sorted out.

Bill Haslam: Yeah, I think the other thing is it reminds us again that very little is new under the sun. The conversations we're having, we were having a hundred years ago in pretty much the same manner.

Phil Bredesen: Right.

Bill Haslam: So let's jump in.

Phil Bredesen: Let's do it.

Well, Bill, our first guest certainly has a wealth of experience in this. Rahm Emanuel. Ambassador Emanuel, served as the U.S. Ambassador to Japan under President Joe Biden. Prior to that diplomatic post, he was the mayor of Chicago from 2011 to 2019 and was the first White House chief of staff to President Obama. Served three terms in the U.S. House of

Representatives and was also in Bill Clinton's administration. This is a man who's got a lot of experience in this field and probably a lot of wounds from things that have happened, and I think it would be really good to talk with him.

Bill Haslam: Let me jump right into it. There's a lot of discussion now about just what should America's role be, and we've come a long way from Kennedy's, "Bear any burden, pay any price in the cause of liberty" or even George W.'s Freedom Liberty Agenda to where now it's America First.

We've tried being the world's policeman, and it didn't work out in Iraq, and it didn't work out in Vietnam. Let's worry about our own problems. You've, like I said, worn several different hats. Give us your perspective. What should America's role in the world be?

Rahm Emanuel: Well, let me— to answer that, let me break down if I can.

Bill Haslam: Sure.

Rahm Emanuel: There is a legitimate criticism of the fact that, mainly around Iraq, Afghanistan kind of gets tucked in underneath, where we did not take care of America and we were spending blood and treasure overseas, and part of that was building schools and hospitals when things in America and communities in America got left behind. So there's a legitimate that we were not taking care of the fundamentals, and that is a criticism that gets wrapped up in globalization. We can get to that.

But the idea that you could simply either turn your back or pull up the bridge and forget the world. As the old saying goes, "You think you can leave the Middle East, but the Middle East will find you." And the world will find us. So, therefore, how do you define America's role? We are a defender of rules, but they're in service of freedom, self-determination, and economic kind of freedom, for both political and economic. And the reason I say that is those are the principles that I actually think unite us to our allies. Our allies become force multipliers.

There's fundamental things that need to be reformed rather than abandoned. That's— Take the World Health Organization, take the United Nations, take NATO. All of these lived on fumes for the last 10, 15 years, and clearly, they serve a purpose, but they have not been modernized to the task at hand. And America is an economic, political, and security leader, and we should maintain that leadership.

Bill Haslam: And let me stop real quick and ask you why, why should we?

Rahm Emanuel: Why should we? Because if we don't, the darker forces like Russia and China and Iran and North Korea will do it. Power vac— All three of us are pols. Politics is— International fears is politics. Not one of us would ever say a vacuum stays. You two are a Democrat-Republican governor. I'm a former mayor and chief of staff. We all know that power vacuums get filled. They don't stay empty.

Bill Haslam: Right, right.

Rahm Emanuel: And if we don't do it, why do we do it? So the people that are trying to harm us don't fill it. Simple as that. And either we're going to do it and it's going to be around our interests, or they're going to do it, and it's going to be around their interest. And one of my big challenges with the current administration is that they think or they by cozying up or somehow talking to Putin, Putin has been explicit about his desire to harm the United States and replace the United States, and diminish America's leadership in the world.

Well, if he's trying to do that, that means it's in our self-interest not to let that happen. This is not a man who's looking out for the United States. He's very clear. There's no ambiguity. He is looking out for President Putin and Russia and its greatness. And he sees it in direct conflict with the interests of the United States. So the reason we want to do it is power vacuums get filled, and I'd rather have a power and a centrifugal force of power around America's interests than around Russia or China, who are clearly trying to harm us.

Phil Bredezen: The American foreign policy from probably the end of World War II until just recently has been, in large, a substantial part of values-based thing that we want to promote the idea of self-determination and democracy as you've talked about, rather than a more transactional short-term kind of thing.

Whereas what it seems is going on now is sort of an abandoning of the former and a focus much more on the latter, that it's all about transactions. Does it read to you that way and do you think there's a reason for America as a value leader continuing on into the future?

Rahm Emanuel: Yeah. I mean, look, I am the former mayor of Chicago. I'm also the grandson of an immigrant who fled Eastern Europe's pogroms. I make this point all the time because a lot of people think Putin's reacting to NATO moving east. NATO never moved East. Poland, Romania, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, they moved west because they know the cost of Russia explicitly, and they know the benefits of freedom and being tied to the West. Now, while overall at 10,000 feet over the 70 years, we have been a security and economic and national security blanket of the West, we haven't been a perfect steward of that.

Iraq is an example. Iraq was built on deception, and it cost us trillions of dollars, not counting the thousands of American men and women who've lost their lives and who have been maimed for life. So we're not perfect stewards of it, but we have gotten it more right than wrong, and more countries constantly want to align themselves with us. And I don't— Teddy Roosevelt had that infamous phrase, "Talk softly and carry a big stick." We're now carrying a small stick and talking loudly, and we're doing it at the expense of our allies. And that's crazy.

Our allies bring a lot to us, and I think the transaction piece, well, transaction has been part of foreign policy and always will be. It's not to be explicit because nobody wants to lose their own dignity when they're doing something as a payback for something you did for them. And why

would you put somebody in that uncomfortable position, meaning that you don't get to expend other type of political capital on behalf of your shared interests? It's bad politics.

Bill Haslam: And so you just come from being our ambassador to Japan.

Rahm Emanuel: Mm-hmm.

Bill Haslam: What are the implications of that in that part of the world where you're obviously in China's neighborhood, North Korea's right across the way, et cetera? What are the implications of that foreign, of our current foreign policy change in that part of the world?

Rahm Emanuel: Well, so let's step back. One of the things, you know, all three of us have run campaigns. I know foreign policy is supposed to be a gray flannel, double-breasted suit with a pipe and a room filled with smoke. No. It's just politics at another level. China has a theory of the case. We're a rising power. America's a declining power, get in line, or you're going to get all the power of China bearing down on you – economic, political, military. Our message – the other way. America is a permanent Pacific power and presence and you can bet long on America. That's really it in a dichotomy.

Now, if you look at the quad between India, Australia, Japan, and the United States, you look at the trilateral between Japan, Korea, the United States, Japan, United States, and the Philippines. You look at AUKUS that we set up between the UK, Australia, and us on submarine development, it was to isolate China in their own backyard and our countries that are aligned with us with our power, both economic, political, and strategic, counter China and keep it as a counter weight and also keep not only our allies free, but our allies invested. Way before the United States talked about 2% for countries who are aligned with us of their GDP to go into defense, Japan announced it.

There wasn't even a tank on the Russian-Ukrainian border, and they announced it. 99% they're going to go from the ninth to the third-largest defense budget. They're going to spend 100% of that increase on equipment, of which the United States is 90% of that purchase. They're the long pole. Now, if you're not working with Japan and you're not working with Korea, you think you're a deterrent to China from Long Beach, California? Okay, we have the largest military presence in any one single country is in Japan. Korea is like third or fourth. The seventh fleet based in Japan is the only place in the world that the United States has a permanent aircraft carrier based. Nowhere else in the world. You have thousands of Navy and Marine and Air Force personnel there.

It is a real threat. It's not only a threat of, what I mean by that, a deterrence. If it wasn't for the United States, what do you think China would be doing today with the Philippines and the South China Sea? We are the deterrent that stops China from moving against another country, a sovereign country that happens to be a treaty ally, just the implicit presence of the United States Navy men and women and the ships that make up the seventh fleet that go through the South China Sea in the Spratly Islands, and our allies enhance that deterrence. Everything we have

done in the last five years, not just on the political side, meaning the trilaterals and the quad.

On the military side, every one of those exercises have gone from the U.S., Philippines to the U.S., Philippines, Japan, Australia, the French. We have finally gotten Europe interested in the Indo-Pacific. That is a deterrent. And so it means real things. Now, there's political benefits, economic benefits. Japan is the number one foreign direct investor in the United States for the last four years. Every year for the last four years. Almost, just shy, of 50%, it's like 44%, 45% of their investment in the United States is in manufacturing. They employ a million Americans, of which about a little over half a million are just in the manufacturing and industrial space.

So there's a security piece to it. There's a political component. When Japan was head of the United Nations, they called a Security Council, and they had a whole hearing that the UN did not want to do on what happened on Hamas' sexual assault of Israeli women on October 7th. And then there's the investment part, where they are the number one investor in the United States, creating over a million jobs, of which over half of them are in manufacturing. So, to me, there's a lot of reciprocity here that has accrued benefit to the United States, and they host the United States armed forces and make our deterrence, which is to prevent war, actually have credibility.

Phil Bredezen: There's a lot of people who feel that the state of our foreign relations, say, six months ago, was not perfect and that a new administration, a new look at that might look at some things that needed to be changed or altered in the way we dealt with the rest of the world. Do you think there are none of those, or are there things that you think that we should be doing differently?

Rahm Emanuel: I don't know a time in which anything is ever perfect. The last time that happened was Adam and Eve. I don't know of any period of time that is perfect where you hit an equilibrium and say it's ideal. Now, that said, what I do know is that because of what Putin did and because of what we did, Finland and Sweden, that for 60 years did not want to join NATO, did.

Phil Bredezen: Right.

Rahm Emanuel: 10 years ago, five years ago, everybody, quoting Macron, president of France, said, "NATO is brain-dead." Well, not anymore. It was brain-dead five years ago. Now, it's revitalized, rejuvenated, and it has a purpose. And the member countries are all participating, and many of them exceeding our dollars as a part of our GDP, like Poland, they're at four plus percent. We're not even close to that. So I'm not sure. I think the goal of getting Europe, individual countries, to bear more of the burden of European security could have been accomplished without all the adverse effects of Germany, Poland, and other countries going nuclear, out losing U.S. military contracts, which would adversely affect manufacturing jobs.

And, I think, if countries have their own independent weapons systems, finding integration in the future is going to be really hard, which is important for the security. I just think there was a way to have worked our allies that they would have stepped up and I think our allies on the

sanctions. And I'll tell you the biggest move. Let me back up one other point. When I walked into the office as ambassador to Japan for the United States, Europe was not aligned with us as it related to China. One of the big things that have happened in the last five years was China lost Europe and the European market because of their alignment with Russia. And the way we're treating Europe now, China finally has a way back into their good graces, which we had kicked them out.

Prior to— Now, there's things you can find fault with the Biden administration. I can find probably 20 more than you can. But they isolated China out of Europe, mainly, and they took advantage of China's mistakes, got Europe invested in the Indo-Pacific, where they contributed to joint patrols, joint operations. Italy's one aircraft carrier, for the first time since World War II, ended up going to Japan this summer. France has regularly participated in naval exercises. Japan went through the Taiwan Strait. They haven't done that in 70 years, and they did it with an Australian boat with them. China lost Europe and isolated itself in the Indo-Pacific.

Our actions are letting China back in, having made two major mistakes of which we took advantage of. Now, I don't know of a time in which anything is ever perfect, but China made some of the biggest strategic blunders backed up by Russia's strategic blunder going into the Ukraine, losing 600,000 men and women both killed and wounded and the drain on their resources and their isolation of the world. Is it perfect? No, but we had an advantage, and we were on our upper toes, and I would say I would not have replaced our position for China's position or our position for Russia's position.

Phil Bredeesen: I want to ask you a little bit around about your personal development here. You served in two White Houses and also obviously as ambassador and with a little time, with some time out to be a mayor.

Rahm Emanuel: And a congressman.

Phil Bredeesen: How— That's right. The—

Rahm Emanuel: I can't keep a job.

Phil Bredeesen: You're probably like me, Jack of many trades, master of none.

Rahm Emanuel: Yeah.

Phil Bredeesen: But how has your, has your view about foreign policy and how it fits into the culture and the operation of our country, has it changed from the 1990s until today? Has your view changed in any way?

Rahm Emanuel: Oh, big time. Well, that's a very good question. So first, it's changed a tremendous amount. As I told the president, he asked me. He said once at the state visit, "I want to thank you." I said, "Thank me, I want to thank you." I think I could say this to you two.

We both, well, all three of us. I mean, I know both of you. You obviously know each other, but it's not like my Wikipedia page is empty. But the idea to go become ambassador and to have something at this point in my life, this intellectually engaging, that intellectually challenging, learning something new, learning— I couldn't tell you what the First Island Chain was before, thinking about doing trilats, why they were strategically politically important.

But also then, to the core of your question, I left the Clinton White House as senior advisor in October of 1998. If you go pull articles then, people were talking about a unipolar world where the United States was the superior economic, military, and political country of the world. It was in the— Still, we were outside the shadow of the end of the Cold War. America's economy at that point had created 22 million jobs. Its GDP was, on average, a little over 3%, et cetera, et cetera. We were the country that could determine in the Balkans peace, enforce it. There was no— We had just come off the President Bush 41's very successful Desert Storm. We were a singular power in the world. That is 1998. It's a blink of an eye in human history. It's 2025.

Now, I look at America's place in the world, and I kind of put this all on all of us. And there's a Democrat, Republican governor here, which is why I want to come to— And I've worked with both of you in different ways. I think America's biggest on-goal is that it lost the confidence of the American people, the political leadership of which all three of us, and I've participated in it. And my, I wrote a piece for the Washington Post. They gave me a lot of space, but it was what I learned about China, what I learned about Japan, and being away from America, what I learned from America about America, both good, bad, and the ugly.

And I think as I think about our role in foreign policy, we are a unique country, both politically, militarily, economically, culturally. We are the benchmark in which other country, and most importantly, their people benchmark off of. I'll give you this one anecdote. So I started hosting regional country ambassadors, Latin America, Africa, and I do individual regions of the world. And we did a rotation. So, every quarter, we did it. An ambassador of an African nation came to me, been in Japan 14 years. He told me this, that night was his first night ever in the U.S. Ambassador's residence in Japan, which is a very— That's where MacArthur lived. It has a lot of history.

Bill Haslam: Right.

Rahm Emanuel: Fourteen years, he never stepped foot in the residence. There's a lot of receptions in 14 years. And he said to me, "You know, your country is the way we evaluate whether we're making progress." And it really struck me how powerful America was in this ephemeral, not very just material sense, but he was talking about their political system, their freedoms, their economic. They knew our movies. They knew our music. They knew our culture. That America had a role to play. And the problem is we were stood taller in other people's eyes than the country itself stood to its own eyes.

And I think one of the things I learned about our national security, we lost the confidence of the American people and we earned, and we need to earn it back. And my biggest view about

America around the world is we are a unique country. We are a country in which other people hold up their own country to measure itself. And we have failed our own people by not investing in our communities, not investing in our political system, allowing our politics to become kind of like a version of the Game of Thrones and Braveheart battle. And I participated in that. And I think the best way to stay strong abroad is to invest in America at home.

Now I say that, and let me say one other thing. You know, I've done a lot of lip service, and I said, "Oh, America's economic ecosystem is really unique and dah, dah." It really is unique. Our capital markets, our entrepreneurs, our sense that you can fail and then succeed again, our entire system of using our universities to— You guys are in Nashville, what you have done on healthcare, there's no place else in the world that has done what the United States done and has that. It's something really, really special.

So my view on the, when it comes to us around the world, if we stay true to ourselves, and I don't mean to be kind of Aspen Institutey, but if we stay true to ourself at home, we would really stay in strong in the world. Nobody wants to be aligned with Russia or China, Iran. They can get coerced into that. People willingly want to be aligned with us. Belarus has lost its independence, so it has to be with Russia. Same true about other countries in the ASEAN area.

They're coerced into that dependence. Poland —We should not lose sight — Poland, Lithuania, they chose to be part of us. They want to be. Their political systems couldn't stop it. Their people wanted to. And you can't lose sight of, you know what, breaking news, freedom is really seductive, and oppression is really oppressive. I don't know how's— I just, that's what I learned.

Bill Haslam: That feels like a really good place to wrap up. Ambassador, thank you. We appreciate—

Rahm Emanuel: Thank you.

Bill Haslam: —Your insight and your candid approach to the challenges we face today. We're grateful for your time.

Rahm Emanuel: Thank you.

Bill Haslam: Our next guest is Michael Kimmage. He's the director of the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute, where he focuses on international affairs, and particularly the U.S. policy toward Russia. He's also a professor of history at the Catholic University of America. From 2014 to '17, he was on the secretary's policy planning staff at the U.S. Department of State, where he held the Russia-Ukraine portfolio. Obviously, a lot to talk about in his areas of expertise. Michael, thanks for joining us.

Michael Kimmage: Great to be with you. Thank you so much for having me.

Phil Bredezen: Michael, I think this needs to be a two and a half hour podcast—

Bill Haslam: Seriously.

Phil Bredesen: –With all your expertise here. Let me just start out asking you just a little bit of historical context here. We have this competing vision, it seems to me, in America today of foreign relations and foreign policy. There's the, on one hand, there's the JFK vision, "We'll pay any price, bear any burden in defense of Liberty." An America that's very engaged in many ways with promoting our ideals around the world.

And then there's the side of it saying, "Yeah, and how is that– that hasn't worked out. This is, I guess, the America First side. Look at Vietnam. Look at a host of other situations we've been in. It's time to focus on some of these problems at home and disentangle ourselves from these alliances and these responsibilities. This can't be, it certainly isn't the first time in American history we've been at this juncture. Maybe give us a little context here of how this fits in with the whole arc of American history and our involvement in foreign affairs.

Michael Kimmage: Well, I very much appreciate the question because I think it takes us back to some of the really essential history here. And it's very much the case that with commitment to the outside world and great belief in the ideals of the republic, what you see is that the story ebbs and flows over the last 120 years. And after the First World War – this is a classic story connected to the word isolationism – but after the first World War, the U.S. really does withdraw some of its interest in the outside world. It felt that it got burned in the First World War, that it didn't deliver the results the U.S. was hoping for. After the Second World War, you don't see any kind of withdrawal. You see a much deeper engagement in the outside world.

But the Cold War was also a story of ebbing and flowing when it came to international engagement for the United States. Certainly, after Vietnam in the 1970s, there was a period of retrenchment, looking inward, and you had a bit of that after the Iraq war of 2003. I wouldn't say that Barack Obama was looking inward, but he was thinking about how to prioritize. Used the phrase about nation-building at home rather than nation-building abroad.

Simply put, in terms of what we're going through at the moment, this seems to me the most intensive phase of retrenchment that I can think of in many respects. Although, in other respects, President Trump is pretty active on the international stage, but I've never seen the shift as abrupt as it has been from the previous administration to the current one.

Bill Haslam: Given that, one of the things that's important, we have our own issues to think about, our own political decisions that have to be made, but we also have to think about the consequences. What are the consequences to each of those policies? An America First policy – I'm talking about internationally. An America First policy versus America, the defender of liberty and freedom around the world. How does that play out with our allies in particular and then the other nations across the globe?

Michael Kimmage: So, I would identify two consequences, in the sense, one positive and one

negative. And I'll start with the negative consequence, which is that the very abruptness of the shift exacts a certain cost, whether or not the shift is the right thing to do or not, because there's this sense of whiplash on the part of allies and partners of the United States, that the U.S. is one thing under one administration and very much another thing under another administration. So what can you trust, or what can you expect? And this image of the U.S. as less and less reliable is a key factor among allies and partners and a very difficult one. And I think there's a question that's being asked at the moment outside of the United States about why it is that many of the conflicts at the present moment for the Trump administration seem to be conflicts among allies as opposed to conflicts with a block of allies against adversaries. And here, I think the relationship between the U.S. and Denmark and the U.S. and Canada is pivotal at the moment because it's potentially conflictual. And these are, of course, two NATO allies.

So, that's it seems to me a negative of the current moment, but the positive of a less values-based approach, or less ideals-based approach, is that it gives you a lot of flexibility. So if you need to deal with Saudi Arabia, you can do so regardless of what the form of government is in Saudi Arabia. If you want to conduct diplomacy with Russia about ending the war in Ukraine, you can do so on a very pragmatic footing. I'm not saying that that's destined to guaranteed to succeed at the moment, this kind of diplomacy.

But the flexibility that a less values-based approach give you is pretty extraordinary. If China needs to be a potential partner, you can sort of travel in that direction. So I think that is the argument that the Trump administration is making at the moment, that we have things that we need to do and to accomplish, some of which are with governments that are democracies, some of which are with governments that are autocracies. And we're simply going to be more flexible and more successful if we don't make that much of a distinction. I think that's the theory of the case.

Bill Haslam: One of the other arguments that President Trump would make would be, "The rest of the world has started to freeloader off of us," if you will, that, "Europe's not paying their fair share" and so on. What's the— give us your view on that issue of, well, it's great to do all this, but everybody else has come to count on us.

Michael Kimmage: I mean, to get to the factual basis of this question, or the factual core of this question, what President Trump has said about this is also what President Obama said and also what President Biden said. So it's not unique to the moment that Washington feels a certain frustration with Europe, in particular, about not doing more or having higher levels of defense spending. So that's not a new argument. It's being driven with a new intensity at the present moment, but it's one that has a pretty broad consensus behind it in American politics. I think that the key thing is tone of voice when it comes to the conversation, and you could, I guess, argue that you really have to be sharp to get the Europeans to move. And actually, Europe is moving in new ways over the last couple of weeks. But I think tone of voice is very important for alliance maintenance, and I have concerns there at the moment.

And I also think, and this is really the strategic question more than the political question, that it's

a matter of timing. That what the U.S. can do now with Europe, which is becoming increasingly willing to spend on its defense, is to make sure that this is a phased transition. That there's not a period where Europe is highly exposed, two, three years where nobody is supporting Europe, and then it gets to the other side and is able to support itself. That this is really done in a careful way because if Europe is subjected to the Russia threat at the moment without being ready for it, the consequences could be disastrous.

So I think Republicans and Democrats alike can agree on the image, the goal of a more autonomous Europe, but it's important to get there with polite and civil dialogue. And it's also important to get there with a strong sense of how much the U.S. is going to support in the short to medium term until Europe really does get there.

Bill Haslam: We've kind of compared America's role in the world, one of we're there for noble ideals of liberty and freedom versus transactional things, but sometimes they can be both, right? Typically, we view, Republicans have seen our strong role in the world to be, we're going to have a strong military that's going to have a presence around the world and that will advance our interests.

Democrats have said, and I'm way overgeneralizing here, but have said, "We're going to have a Peace Corps out there, and we're going to have a USAID that's strong. And through different aid packages and programs, we're going to advance the U.S. interest that way." Let me just say whether it's the strong military approach or we're going to be giving out aid around the world, has being engaged in this way actually advanced our interest as a country.

Michael Kimmage: I mean, it's gotten us into trouble at certain points. The early Cold War turned a lot of this stuff into a missionary enterprise and that leads us to Vietnam. And I think some of the ways that we responded to 9/11 was too strongly on the military side. We can have this debate about a number of different conflicts and moments, but on balance, this sort of integration of a certain positive, optimistic view of the international situation, that you can make a difference, that you can make a change, and sort of a willingness to use military power at times for the sake of advancing democracy, I think it's served American interests very well over the decades.

If you take the longer view, the kind of big picture view, I think that you can point to a great number of successes. The Cold War is a very complicated matter, and there were huge numbers of missteps in the Cold War, but there's something structurally right about the Cold War from the U.S. side. That the U.S. did contain the Soviet Union. That was a military endeavor. It was a matter of hard power. At the same time, the US did build a very strong relationship, transatlantic relationship, strong relationship with Japan. That was often a matter of values and shared political practices. And at the same time, for Eastern and Central Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. was a positive example of a democracy.

And all of that paid quite considerable dividends that the U.S. has profited from greatly after 1991. A more open world, a more cooperative world in some respects, chances to trade and to

develop prosperity along those lines. By no means a perfect system, but it's so effectively successful over the past few decades that its presence almost seems invisible. We take for granted some aspects of this success because it's become so familiar. So it's possible to see the big successes of this system, I would say if you take a big picture.

Phil Bredesen: It's easy to see these things kind of like a chess game where there's tactical moves, and there's also the development of a strategic position, which is important for that. If you assume for a moment that you want the United States to prosper strategically in the sense of setting up circumstances and situations that are likely to be hospitable to the kinds of things that we want to achieve, what are the big things, given what you know, what are the big things we need to do to achieve that?

I worry, for example, about the kind of withdrawal from the Southeast Pacific commercial area and the way that we have done. What do we— from your perspective, what are the big things we need to do here?

Michael Kimmage: Well, I think your question points us toward the importance of alliance maintenance, and it is easy to present allies as freeloaders. Maybe sometimes they even behave that way at times, but the dividends paid to the U.S. through these alliance relationships are enormous. So large, sometimes that again, they become a little bit invisible. And you think here of the U.S. relationship with South Korea, U.S. relationship with Japan. We could put in Australia and New Zealand to see a foundation of really strong working relationships in the Indo-Pacific. And the transatlantic relationship is the other part of this picture.

There's prosperity that comes from this. There is— speaking more practically, going back to the earlier question about military power, American power projection in the world would be truly impossible without allies and you think only of the case of Germany that the U.S. has a very important air force base there, military installation. A lot of what the U.S. does in the Middle East is made possible by the close working relationship with Germany. So there is a system out there of working relationships. That's the way I would put it. It's based in part on values, but it's based also very much on interests.

And those working relationships really make the whole American presence in the world possible. Otherwise, the U.S. would be something of a very large island. It would be a hemispheric power, but it would have a much smaller profile and a much smaller role. And what the U.S. has learned, this is another historical point that you could say, is that even when you kind of ignore the global picture, as the U.S. somewhat tried to do in the 1930s, the global picture doesn't ignore you.

And so the need to have these networks of relationships in every different direction in the western hemisphere, in the Indo-Pacific, in Europe, and elsewhere is really the jewel and the crown of American foreign policy. And when it hasn't been there, you see that the U.S. is far more vulnerable and far more at risk.

Bill Haslam: So let me— let's go kind of from the general to the specific. One of your areas of expertise is the whole Russia-Ukraine issue that's such a key issue in the world today. We recently had the dramatic showdown in the Oval Office between President Trump and President Zelenskyy. Help us put the Russia-Ukraine situation in the historical context we've just been talking about.

Michael Kimmage: Sure. I think it fits perfectly. There are questions of values that matter with Ukraine, and there are questions of very hard interests that matter with Ukraine. And in some ways, I think we're a little bit more familiar with the values argument, so I'll put a strong emphasis on the interests argument. And I think that that's the argument that would speak most eloquently to the new administration. What interests are involved in U.S. support for Ukraine?

But in terms of a narrative or a story about liberty, self-government, and democracy, it's, of course, extremely significant that you have a democratic election in Ukraine in 2019, and that produces the figure of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is democratically elected in that year. And the way that Zelenskyy has conducted the war, the kind of legitimacy that he enjoys as a politician, the relationship he has with the people of Ukraine, a sort of constructive and open relationship that he has with the people of Ukraine, that has contributed greatly to Ukraine's success. And it's also made the argument for Ukraine's place in Europe in the future.

That reminds me of a lot of what John F. Kennedy was talking about when he gives his speech in Berlin that you've already referenced, sort of, "Pay any price, spare any burden for the sake of liberty." And it also takes one back even to the figure of Woodrow Wilson, who speaks of ethnic self-determination in Europe. I mean, Ukraine is just a perfect example of that. So Ukraine is on the continuum of a certain vision that the U.S. has had for Europe, a certain international vision, and is a strong example of how self-government matters and how self-government can be a part of a country's success.

But the interest-driven argument is equally, if not more important, for the United States, that a revisionist Russia that's going to change the borders of Europe and start perhaps with Ukraine and then menace other countries that are NATO allies of the United States runs the risk of destabilizing Europe. And the destabilization of Europe runs counter to any number of very practical U.S. interests—

Bill Haslam: Michael, can I stop you for a second? How does it—

Michael Kimmage: Yeah.

Bill Haslam: So your point would be if Russia invades Ukraine, and keep, maybe they could keep doing, how is that different than the domino theory that we had 80 years ago, and that's why we went to Korea and to Vietnam, et cetera.

Michael Kimmage: Right. It's, I think, a bit different from the domino theory, which functioned on this idea that there was all of this communist sympathy in different countries. And if one

went, other countries would go in the direction of the Soviet Union. It's not that we're contemplating all of Europe or half of Europe falling into the Soviet, or falling into Russia's pocket at the present moment. It's more that if Russia were to have success in Ukraine, it would threaten countries on Ukraine's border. It would just cause problems.

It would also cause a lot of panic and concern. We see now that there's a debate in Europe about countries like Poland acquiring nuclear weapons. So there's a nonproliferation aspect to this, and it just makes Europe a more dangerous and less stable place. It's not as if Russia has the power to march into Berlin or to Paris or any of that. And that, I think, would be the kind of fearmongering that you were referencing with the early Cold War. But the destabilization of Europe, even a partial destabilization where things just feel less stable and secure, everything is on a more warlike footing. I think that that really runs counter to U.S. interests.

We spoke before of these web of relations, that the U.S. has a web of relations in Europe that contribute to American power projection. All of that is placed in question if Europe is becoming more and more under the shadow of war. It's also the case, and I think we take this a bit too much for granted at the moment, that Europe is a huge trading partner for the U.S. It's a huge source of investment in the American economy. There's a lot of innovation that comes from business cooperation between American and European companies and between American and European individuals.

Again, if the shadow of war is going to fall across Europe, all of that becomes less constructive and less helpful to the United States. So, I think that there's a strong national security argument that Ukraine matters to the U.S. because Ukraine matters so much to Europe. But there's also a strong argument that for the sake of the American economy, we need to promote regional order and stability in Europe. And we do so at the moment because Russia is the challenge. We do so at the moment by supporting Ukraine. So, I think that there's a really clear interest-based argument that favors American support for Ukraine.

Bill Haslam: Michael, you've been terrific. One of the questions we ask all our guests is taken from Senator Baker's, Senator Howard Baker's quote about always remember the other person might be right. Can you think of, particularly, when it—

Michael Kimmage: Sure.

Bill Haslam: —Comes to foreign— America's role in the world or foreign alliances, anything in that broad area where you said, "You know, I didn't have this exactly right earlier in my career. I have a different way of looking at that now than I did before."

Michael Kimmage: Wow, that's a really good question. I'll go back to the time when I served in the State Department. I was there for two years at the Office of Policy Planning and worked on Russia-Ukraine, and I thought that the whole question and problem of Ukraine could be solved through creative diplomacy at that time. I think that that was something of John Kerry's view of the situation as well. He was the Secretary of State at the time, and I thought that there was

enough give and take that we could work out a kind of deal or arrangement with Russia that would bring peace to the region.

And I don't think that that's entirely impossible in the future. I think it's fine to pursue diplomacy. I think it's good in many ways that there are all these negotiations going on about bringing peace to Ukraine at the present moment. But I'm just a lot more skeptical that give and take with Russia and sort of listening to their side and granting certain concessions as is typically done with diplomacy, I don't think that that was the solution to the problem then, looking back in retrospect. In other words, I was wrong at the time.

But that mistake that I think I made informs my thinking about why the war breaks out in such a big way in February 2022, why Russia invades in such a big way. And it's why I would want our diplomacy, our negotiations now to be informed by a spirit of caution, skepticism, making sure that you test everything that the Russians say and just not going too fast and doing things too soon, because it's definitely a question that you can get wrong. And I know it personally because I got it wrong myself.

Phil Bredezen: Thank you very much. This has been very informative, and it certainly is an on-time topic right now.

Bill Haslam: And Michael, you bring the unique perspective of being both a historian and somebody that's actively engaged in the real issues we're talking about. So thank you very much. We really appreciate. It's been very helpful.

Michael Kimmage: Such a pleasure. Thanks so much for the conversation.

Phil Bredezen: Well, this is a complex topic, and unfortunately, I think there's nothing about being governor for eight years that gives you any special expertise in it. But I've come away, I think, with a new appreciation for just how important our role in the world and the leadership we can provide and the alliances we can support can be. It's been an education for me.

Bill Haslam: Yeah, I think both of our guests made a point of, "Hey, you can ignore the world, but the world won't--"

Phil Bredezen: Right.

Bill Haslam: "--Ignore you." Kimmage said that, Emanuel said that about the Middle East. It'll, "You might not follow it, but it'll follow you." I'm convinced that the investment that we make overseas actually does play to our long-term benefit, whether it be in economic development and trade, in foreign direct investment.

Again, Emanuel talked about Japan being the lead at foreign direct investment. Tennessee is their second-biggest state for investment. So we see that, and I also believe in that idea, like if a vacuum is created, somebody's going to come into that, and it's probably not going to be the

good guys.

Phil Bredesen: Right. One of the things that struck me, and you and I have talked about this before, is that one of the things you can do as governor to support economic development in your state and create a good business environment is just some stability, that people know what to expect. They know that when you change administrations, the world's not going to turn upside down, and inside out.

And that has to be true as well in terms of these foreign alliances, that they need to be things that people can count on, irrespective of whether there's a Democrat or Republican in charge in the United States. And I think the importance of that, providing a stable a rock that people can rally around is missing in this discussion about changing the nature of these alliances.

Bill Haslam: Chaos does not encourage investment. I think that's safe to say. And people say, "Well, it's not America's job to patrol the world." I would say that the world that's been created, the post-World War II world that's been created has ended up being pretty good for America.

Phil Bredesen: Right.

Bill Haslam: Economically, you look at how we've grown in that period and the role we've taken on. While we have invested a lot, I would argue we've gained even more.

Phil Bredesen: Right. And the warnings from people that in places like China, even more so than Russia. I mean, when I first took a trip to China, I think you and I may have been on that same trip—

Bill Haslam: We did.

Phil Bredesen: —One of the things I came away with is this is a country that I'd always thought of as a kind of a slightly backward Third World country. For the last 2000 years, it was the dominant economy in the world, and in the last couple of centuries, that hasn't been the case, but it's clear in my mind they have every intention of going back to their historical role. And I think we need to treat it as a serious threat to things that we consider to be important about our country and our role in the world.

Bill Haslam: Agreed.

Marianne Wanamaker: Thanks for listening to "You Might Be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating and reviewing the show.

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