



REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE FORUM

PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

People's Perspective: Public Opinion on Defense and National Security

Moderator:

Abby Phillip, CNN

Panelists:

Senator Deb Fischer, Nebraska

Morgan Ortagus, Founder, Polaris National Security

Ranking Member Adam Smith, House Armed Services Committee

Dr. Alex Karp, Co-Founder and CEO, Palantir Technologies

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Abby Phillip:

Okay, a very good morning to you all. Thank you so much for being here. My name is Abby Phillip. I'm an anchor at CNN, I anchor Newsnight with Abby Phillip, which this panel is very much not what our normal panels are like. We're here bright and early this morning to have a conversation about the Reagan National Defense Survey. And as you all know, politics and policy are both downstream of public opinion. So that's where we start today. I have the honor of introducing our esteemed panel, Nebraska Senator Deb Fischer, who serves on the Armed Services Committee, also with us, Dr. Alex Karp, the Co-Founder and CEO of Palantir Technologies. Morgan Ortagus, former spokesperson for the U.S. State Department, and a reserve member of the U.S. Navy, and Congressman Adam Smith, the Ranking Member of the House Armed Services Committee. I want to also remind you all in the audience that we will be taking questions. So if you go to your app for today's conference, you can submit questions through the app. I'll receive them here and we will take them at the end. So please don't be shy and you can begin including your questions at any point during our panel. So to start us off, Senator Fischer, I want to start with I think the biggest picture

question of the survey, which is what direction does the American people want for the United States' engagement abroad? We find this year that there is something of a high watermark, 57% of Americans say they want the United States to be more engaged and to lead in this what seems to be increasingly chaotic world. What do you make of that senator?

Senator Fischer:

Well, first of all, I think the American people are focused on kitchen table issues. They're focused on taking care of their families, but they've also, I think become more and more aware of the threats that we face as a country. And that's something I know that I have been trying to get out there and be more open with Nebraskans so that they have that understanding of the threats that we face. I always say if the American people have a good understanding of the threats that we face, they will be more supportive of what we need to defend this country. And so I think as Americans are looking around the world, they see what's happening in Ukraine, they see what's happening in Israel, they understand that China is becoming not just an economic threat anymore, but a military threat as well. They are a peer nuclear adversary to the United States along with Russia. They watch the Chinese work with the Russians, they watch the North Koreans send 10,000 soldiers to Russia. They watch Iran sending missiles and drones to Russia as you follow that in the news. And so I think it's just a realization that yes, Americans are focused on their daily lives, but they also have a broader understanding and more support, I'm happy to say for the United States and our place in the world to keep the world a safer place

Abby Phillip:

Ranking Member Smith, I am not going to shock anyone by saying that your party did not prevail in this last presidential election and Americans narrowly but still voted for an America First policy. So when you see that survey that says even still with America First being the platform that the incoming administration ran on, Americans do want the United States to be a leader abroad. What do you think is the lesson for the country and also for your party going into this new, this next four years?

Ranking Member Smith:

First of all, I think it's a little bit of a misinterpretation to say the American people endorsed an American First agenda. There were a lot of issues on the table in this election, and I think dissecting exactly why they made the selection they did, I have a different take on why they made that selection. Second of all, I substantially agree with Senator Fischer about how the American people are looking at this. Number one most important thing they're worried about is the economic insecurity in this country that has got them uncertain, upset and concerned about the future. And then when they look broadly, same thing. We have a world that is in conflict. We're not sure where it's going. And I think the encouraging thing is that they still look at that and say it's going to be better if the

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U.S. chooses to engage. I think the reason that the numbers are higher now is they see a world in need of improvement and they still believe that the U.S. can be a positive player in that.

Now I will say this probably later in the conversation, rest of the world, not so sure about that. And I think that's job one on the foreign policy stage is to try to get the rest of the world to frankly see America the way Ronald Reagan was talking about it in the intro, because too many people in the world right now, they don't see America as playing a positive role in the world and only being interested in peace. I disagree with them. I think we are. I think that's still our focus, but that's going to be, I think the number one biggest challenge for the Trump administration make that case to the rest of the world that we can play a positive role.

Abby Phillip:

Dr. Karp did I see you want to get in there?

Dr. Alex Karp:

Oh no, just so everyone, I apologize. The acoustics are weird. So I, if I don't address what you said, it's because we can't hear it. But any case as an unhappy Democrat with maybe one Rep that I agree with in the whole world besides Senator Fetterman, I don't think these things, the interpretation of these stats is, well, America voted is in contradiction with these stats. I actually don't see it that way. The way I see it is Americans are the most loving God-fearing, fair, least discriminatory people on the planet. And they want to know that if you're waking up and thinking about harming American citizens or if American citizens are taking hostage and kept in dungeons, or if you're a foreign power sending fentanyl to poison our people, something really bad is going to happen to you and your friends and your cousins and your bank account and your mistress and whoever was involved.

And when Americans are spending a trillion dollars on defense, what I want and what I think my peers want is why are these people keeping our citizens hostage, torturing our people, attacking our allies, maligning us in what was once called the United Nations basically a discriminatory institution against anything good. We need to stand up and those people need to be scared. And that's why this conference is so important because we have the best products in the world and we cannot have parity, our adversaries do not have our moral compunction if it's even they will take advantage of our niceness kindness, our desire to be at home in Nebraska or New Hampshire or wherever we live in our peaceful environments and they need to wake up scared and go to bed scared. And if you give that to the American people, the American people will go back and say, and honestly probably shouldn't say this, this is why I thought the Democrats are going to lose the election.

Why they did. Because people want to live in peace. They want to go home. They do not want to hear your pagan ideology. They want to know they're safe. And

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safe means that the other person is scared. That's how you make someone safe. And the average American person understands this. Unfortunately, many of the intellectually captured institutions funneled and intellectually owned by the Berkeley faculty do not. And that's what they want, but serves hell what I want. And that's what Palantir and all the people in this room, I hope we are here to serve the American people. And my version of service is the soldiers are happier, the enemies are scared, and Americans go back to enjoying the fact that we're the only one with a real tech scene in this country and we're going to win everything. That's how I see it.

Abby Phillip:

Would you like to respond to that or

Ranking Member Smith:

I substantially agree with it. So Alex and I have talked a lot in my interpretation.

Abby Phillip:

I want it to be fair to give.

Ranking Member Smith:

I don't disagree with that, but I do. There's one point that I think is important to make in there. I think he's absolutely right. And when you talk about if Democrats look at this election and say, we lost because America wants America First, they're fundamentally missing the point. I think we lost because the Democratic coalition is fundamentally broken, primarily because folks on the far left have a disproportionate amount of influence in the policy and a complete unwillingness to adjust their message. But the one point that I want make is I don't just want people to be scared of us. Okay? I love Alex. I think that's part of it. But if we go to the rest of the world and say,

Dr. Alex Karp:

Our enemies

Ranking Member Smith:

Fair enough, but broad sweeping statement like that is going to make a fair number of people in the world ever so slightly nervous about who we interpret to be our enemies. So I think part of the message, well, no better friend, no worse enemy, right? That's what the military says. We got to focus a little bit on the no better friend part, not just on the no worst enemy part. I would say we need to balance those two. That's the main point I'd like to throw out there.

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Abby Phillip:

So I want to move into one of the main areas of the world right now where there is conflict, where that conflict has been grinding on now for some time and where the next year could be very critical. That's Ukraine. Morgan, this survey question asked, do you support the United States sending us weapons to Ukraine? And you can see there, there's a slight downtick. But to me what stands out about these numbers is that both Democrats and Republicans, there's been a bigger drop in the ideological sides of the spectrum here. Ukraine is grinding out this war with Russia. At what point do you think that it will have to end and with this incoming Trump administration, what do you think is the most likely prospect for a resolution?

Morgan Ortagus:

Yeah, thank you for the question. So I think we have to frame it. First of all, I do think the American people voted for an America First foreign policy. If you look beginning in August of 21 through every year, actually, if you just look in the first three months of the Biden presidency, we saw Hamas attacking Israel. We of course saw Kabul fall to the Taliban, Russia and Ukraine. Again, Hamas attacking Israel, Iran behind it last year and still holding American hostages as Alex pointed out. So I actually think that the American people do want an America First foreign policy. I don't think an America First foreign policy is isolationism. And I've written on this extensively. What Americans are concerned about is entanglement abroad, overextending ourselves and not having a clearly defined goal. So when you look to Ukraine, this is something that's very frustrating that this war even happened in the first place.

So at President Trump's State Department in the last two years of his administration, we focused on deterring Russia from evading. We provided that lethal aid. We produced more sanctions and more actions against Russia than any administration since the Ronald Reagan administration we're very focused on deterring Russia from evading, they did not do it on our watch. So we do have to look comprehensively at why we had that deterrence failure and almost every major theater around the world because if we don't tell ourselves hard truths, if we don't learn the lessons of why we have had these massive deterrence failures around the world, we'll repeat them. So when you look at how, I mean ultimately how does a Russia and Ukraine war ends the way every other war ends, which is a negotiated settlement the way that doesn't necessarily make all sides happy, but Americans have to ask themselves hard truths.

We've seen in the INDOPACOM Commander talk about this. When you look at these polling results, I believe it shows Americans want to be more engaged, but they don't want to be overextended and giving Americans platitudes and saying that, well, we're in it till the end, or whatever the Biden administration platitude was. I don't think that works for the American people because it wasn't a clearly defined end game. It didn't provide measurable steps and a path towards success. So I don't speak on behalf of President Trump right now, but I would say that he made clear to the American people in the campaign that he wanted to help see an

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end to the war between Russia and Ukraine, between Hamas, Lebanon, Iran and Israel. And that's his commitment to the American people. And in the '16 campaign, he really worked to actually deliver on those campaign promises. I suspect that's what you'll see in a second Trump term, that he will be working and negotiating again from a position of strength. And I think that's where he would take issue and do it differently than this current administration.

Ranking Member Smith:

Two quick points on that. One, the reality of actually governing and making those decisions I think is going to prove more difficult. But the second is a real plea. If all of that is true that Donald Trump and the Republicans should support funding Ukraine's defense, the fact that Donald Trump and his campaign did not support the supplemental aid package that went to Ukraine and it was delayed for six months had a devastating impact on the war. So yes, negotiated settlement, we're not going to get to a negotiated settlement if the Trump administration position is no more money for Ukraine. Okay, I get the whole America First thing, but you're not going to stop Putin by telling Ukraine we're not giving you anything more. So I just hope, and I know a lot of Republicans in this room, a hundred percent agree with that. I'm just urging the incoming administration, keep supporting Ukraine if you really want them to survive. Crucially important.

Abby Phillip:

Senator Fischer, I mean on that very point, the incoming Vice President JD Vance has said he does not think the United States' focus should be on Ukraine. What is the Senate going to say about that?

Senator Fischer:

I think Morgan made an excellent point that we have to communicate better with the American people. I have asked the question early on with the war in Ukraine, what's the end game? What are we trying to achieve here? And to my colleague in the House, I would say that the administration didn't act, I think soon enough in sending what was needed in Ukraine for them to be able to address the threat that the Russians brought in to give them the needed munitions. I raised questions early on about munitions and sending munitions to Ukraine, and we need to make sure we have in this country what we need as well to protect our homeland. But this all goes to being able to have a policy that is understood by the American people and to be able to communicate that policy to the American people. The first question about the support that we have for the United States to be involved around the world, we only have support like that if the American people, first of all, understand the threats and secondly understand what the strategy is, understand how we're going to achieve goals. In order to do that, I am worried about being able to translate support for policies that are clearly understood and translate support for our military into funding it.

We see a lot of members in Congress overwhelmingly vote for the NDAA, how many vote to fund it, how many then follow through on the appropriations

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process and vote to fund it. That's where the rubber meets the road. You have to be able to translate support for our military, which is what a vote for the NDAA does, but then step up and fund those programs, fund those needs, and make sure that we can follow through on the policies that are set and achieve goals, achieve victory. So I'm looking forward to see how all that translates in this administration and in Congress.

Abby Phillip:

Dr. Karp, I do want you to jump in here because I think that you do this very well. So can you make the case?

Dr. Alex Karp:

Thank you. What else do I do well?

Abby Phillip:

Make the case you go don't absolutely nothing, right, but make the case for if you were to do what the senator is asking, how do you explain what the policy in Ukraine is for the purpose of it?

Dr. Alex Karp:

This is just as a general macro thing. More is like a boring business lesson. Palantir I think is the largest by market cap defense startup in the world. And many of the people in this room are former Palantirs. We just did an announcement with Anduril and then we have Doug Philippone and basically your future is powered by us, maybe not directly. And we were the most hated, most pariah, most disliked. We used to do meetings like in the backyard of the backyard of the backyard because you couldn't be seen with Palantir. And the reason I'm mentioning this is not just because I'm proud, we succeeded and quite frankly the people hated and us didn't, which makes me happy. But is that when you're dealing with skeptics, what we have in this country is a legitimation crisis. There is no one in this country, no expert that where they say something and the American people are going to say, I a hundred percent believe that's true.

You said it. We didn't have that in the fifties. In the fifties there was a famous professor, Ken Arrow, if he said You were smart, you got tenure because who would know better than Ken Arrow? And this was in every area. We do not have that in any area. So this is why I think the Doge and is the crucial stuff we have to measure. What is it being spent on? What is the output? Is the input less than the output? And then you have to explain what is that output. The only thing that will cure a legitimacy crisis is measurement. And that's where we are in this country. And anything else is a platitude. Because honestly, and I tell this with great respect to experts, no one's listening. Everyone's thinking you have an agenda, everyone thinks you're working back from who you like. My favorite example of this are analysts on Wall Street. The whole methodology they have is just a way of telling you if they like you. So what would I do in any of these cases? This is what

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we're spending. This is the outcome. And in a legitimization crisis, you got about six months. And this is true for everything in our country, whether it's Ukraine, Israel spending, lethal systems, healthcare, we need to prove there is no one who can stand up. We don't have Ronald Reagan now.

Abby Phillip:

Well look, I think you're right. I think we're well past six months. I do want to just follow up on that and ask you, we're well past six months, right? So we've passed the window of opportunity in

Dr. Alex Karp:

No, I mean you make decision. Look, the reality is that we have an incoming administration. I believe

Abby Phillip:

They have six months.

Dr. Alex Karp:

They have a massive mandate

Abby Phillip:

If you believe that Ukraine should continue to get weapons, how do you make the case, given the facts on the ground that it is worth it? The value proposition for Americans is worth it.

Ranking Member Smith:

I can take this, I dunno, Alex if you want. No, look, not a bipartisan agreement. I was very frustrated at the Biden administration's communication strategy. And believe me, if you sat in a lot of the classified rooms when they came in and would say things to us, I had some very substantial arguments with can you just clearly state the policy? And from the very beginning, Colin Kahl clearly stated, the policy which is sovereign democratic Ukraine, don't get into a war with Russia. That was our strategy. And yet it bounced all over the fricking place and was not clearly explained. So I agree with you. Okay, now you say, okay, it's not clearly explained, so therefore we're just going to abandon Ukraine and let Russia take them. That's the part where I had a little bit of hard time disagreeing with it. It's like we're not going to vote to fund them.

I don't know. I just don't think Biden really explained that one part very well. I mean that that was not going to do it. Ukraine was going to be taken over by Russia. Why is this important to Americans is because if you allow autocrats to believe that through force and violence, they can take what they want, they will take more. And also JD Vance's point that we should be focused on China, not on Ukraine also made me insane because Xi's watching and if Putin's able to take Ukraine and it works, that opens up the door to him that yes, this is a possible

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way to do it. And then you've got more war. Look, it's sorry, Ronald Reagan, Peace Through Strength and deterrence. If autocrats think that they can take what they want, then it is going to be bad for all of us. And right now, the one place in the world where that is most clearly happening is Russia and Ukraine.

Granted there's a whole lot other stuff going on. Civil wars been a problem. Russia basically looked at Ukraine and said, yeah, we want that. We're going to take it and we're going to take it because we're strong enough to do it. There's nothing you can do about it if we don't stop that I mean That is the absolute definition of failing at peace through strength. And yes, I agree, Biden administration did not do a great job of explaining all of that. But I also think that a lot of Republicans took that as an excuse to not support Ukraine because for some reason Trump didn't want to support Ukraine. He didn't want more money going to Ukraine. And that really also undermined our ability to show strength.

Dr. Alex Karp:

But there's also, the counter example is Israel and my sometimes former party, it's like Israel's done very well. And it's like my version of it is that's how you roll. And it's like why don't we learn from that? And we don't learn from it because we have way too many people in this culture who are living in the faculty lab of their own ideology and the rubber meets the road for the west and you're attacked and massacred. You have to fight and you have to fight to win. I don't disagree with that. I know we're brothers in arms on these things. I'm not saying, and honestly the acoustic is so you can assume I didn't even hear, but I'm not saying that I disagreed with you, but I'm just saying again, business 101, what worked and we're not allowed to learn and from what worked because we quite frankly, half the people or a lot of people are committed to an ideology that will not allow them to win. And I think the American people notice that. And again, I think a lot of this comes down to legitimation. Like if you have to prove that one of the blessed things about this country, and I spent half my life in Germany, a wonderful learned, very pro-European culture, we're not that ideological. We want to know it works and we want to know that Americans are being put first. And if you're getting in the way of that, the American people aren't happy. I think there's a lot of that in these discussions.

Abby Phillip:

So you're bringing up the next big conflict that's on the minds of the American people. And as with so many of these, the responses that we got in this survey, they suggest that there's some complexity here. So let's take a look. First, the preference for the future of the Middle East conflict. This is between Israel and Hamas. The country is basically evenly split on whether the Israel should continue the military operation or whether it is time for a ceasefire. And then on a second question, whether there's support for the United States sending weapons to Israel, you see just a narrow majority, 54% supporting that. Obviously the partisan split is much more lopsided, but when you look at that number, 54%, that's actually just about where the number is for Israel or for Ukraine. Excuse

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me. That surprised me a little bit, Morgan, in the sense that you would think that there was more support for the special relationship that the United States has with Israel. But it seems to me that this data suggests that A: the American people are ready for some kind of resolution to that conflict, and B: that the partisan divide is kicking in when it comes to Israel where perhaps it had not been before.

Morgan Ortagus:

Yeah, I would say October 7th was the darkest day in my career and my life after 9/11, especially being a part of the Abraham Accords team in the last administration. I sat at the White House just a few weeks away from giving birth to my daughter to a beautiful Jewish baby girl named Medina. And I remember at the White House thinking, my goodness, we've brought peace to the Middle East. What a different life she's going to have. And then to fast forward just three years later to see these horrific attacks, to see the worst killing of the Jewish people on any single day since the Holocaust was gut wrenching to me in so many, but especially to me having worked on Abraham Accords. So, and what we've seen play in the United States is horrific. And this is where I think getting to Senator Fischer's discussion earlier about communicating to the American people.

When you talk about why deterring Iran and not capitulating to them matters and has real world consequences, look no further than our college campuses look no further than our major cities where we have seen more cases of antisemitism than in any other time in modern history. Jewish parents like myself around this country have to think about where we can send our children to school so that they can be openly Jewish. I mean, it is so disgusting. It's so frustrating that we've gotten to this place in America, I think how do we pull back from this antisemitism? We've of course seen allegations from the Biden administration that the Iranian regime is behind funding these antisemitic protests around the country. We know that they were meddling in the election. We know they're still trying to kill the former president, my former boss, Mike Pompeo, Brian Hook and other Robert O'Brien, other of my colleagues.

We have to think about how ridiculous this is that a foreign enemy state has the capability and intent to assassinate American officials on U.S. soil that has to end. And that one of the ways I think that we get to this negotiated settlement between Israel and Hamas and whatever ends up happening is by getting our American hostages home. And I know that so many people were encouraged by President Trump's statement within the past week. I've been away at training, I've been down away for a month, so I've been out of the news. But I think it was in the past week that President Trump made it unequivocally clear to the terrorists that they must bring our Americans home. I know that he's working with the Biden administration on that, but we have had devastating lack of deterrence in the Middle East. So we have to restore that peace through strength in the Middle East and how do we do it?

We do it by holding the Islamic Republic of Iran accountable. We cannot go back to business as usual with them. President Trump has stated clearly and unequivocally that they will not obtain a nuclear weapon on his watch. He did

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that in the first term. I believe he has reiterated that policy. So we have to get our Americans home. We have to hold the Islamic Republic of Iran accountable for their involvement in all of this. And we have to stand up against the rise of antisemitism in this country and around the world. And we simply cannot tolerate the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, trying to kill American officials on U.S. soil. We're not going back to businesses used on January 20th. All of this has to end.

Abby Phillip:

The IC released a report just on Thursday saying that Iran was now closer to attaining a nuclear weapon. To your point about that becoming a major agenda item, when you look at the survey, there was a question about where the United States should focus its military forces in this year. It seems like the American people understand it's going to be in all three fronts, essentially East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Senator Fischer, that is a lot for the United States to handle at once. I'm not saying that they can't, but it is. And I wonder what needs to happen from this point forward to be prepared to deal with crises in all of these fronts?

Senator Fischer:

Well, I would say we can't have three fronts. We have a National Defense Strategy that prioritizes one front. We're dependent upon our allies. We're dependent upon diplomacy. We're dependent upon economic tools that are available in order to meet more than one front and still be able to address terrorism and other issues. We don't have the capability to have two major conflicts at the same time, let alone three that has to be looked at that the reality that we face is that we have two peer nuclear adversaries. I focus a lot on nuclear modernization of our weapons and our platforms. And in order to maintain deterrence which maintains peace, we have to be able to do that. But when we don't invest in our military at the level it needs to be invested in the resources that are needed there. We need to be honest about the fact that we cannot address major conflicts all around the world. I also believe as President Reagan did that the world is safer when America is involved. So we have to be able to figure out how to make it work. And again, how do we translate recognizing the threats and recognizing the needs and being able to have Congress work with an administration to fund those.

Dr. Alex Karp:

Somewhat unrelated to a lot more about this than I do, but I would say one thing that gets somewhat lost in these results is America is in the very beginning of a revolution that we own the AI revolution and we own it. It should basically be called U.S. AI revolution. Every single relevant company in the world is in this country. The second tier of those companies are in this country. The JV of these companies are in this country. There is no other place to do technology really at scale besides America right now. And Europe is basically decided to regulate. It's

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basically anemic and non-existent tech scene out of production. All those people want to come to America. The American tech community is booming. And so behind all of this is a macro backdrop of this is actually a revolution. It's very hard to see now because it's kind of the beginning innings and a lot of these large language models incorrectly applied are just science projects.

But if you have the right layer to implement them, you can actually transform your business in days. And this is happening across America and it's not happening anywhere else. It's not happening in Europe. Who wants to build a company in China, Russia. It's happening right here. And that macro trend is going to change everything that we do. Everyone in this room, every trend, war and peace, how we fight, where we fight, are humans fighting? Are they not fighting? How do we code those decisions into code? It's too quick. How do we get ahead of our adversaries? And this is actually maybe the first time since we had the bomb and our adversaries before they stole it from us where we have a massive structural advantage. And when you look at all of these things, like every single question, what the American people are reacting to is often what their space. But this is going to change every single thing.

Senator Fischer:

I want to follow. Can I ask question?

Abby Phillip:

Yeah, go ahead. Please do and then I'll jump.

Senator Fischer:

Alex, how do you calm the fears of people when they hear AI and they think we're going to see technology take over our lives and it could be in a very negative way. How do you calm the fears? How do you change the conversation to all the benefits that you have with AI and how we can use it in our military in cases just to do administrative work and things like that?

Dr. Alex Karp:

First of all, you can be happy that we're asking this question because a question they're asking in Europe is basically, why is this not real? So first of all, this question is the right question because half the world and everyone else is like, oh, it's not real. I'm just going to sit on my soft cushion of yesterday's technology and some contract. That's not going to work because I'm going to ignore the tsunami. So this is the right question. And then these are very dangerous technologies and quite frankly, if we didn't have the world's worst enemies, I would be up here saying we should regulate this charge energy, slow this down, and we do have to have a real conversation about who controls these technologies. Well,

Abby Phillip:

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Can I ask you that? That was going to be my question. Is it too early in your view for rules of the road, we are already in the realm of talking about AI and warfare. So should there be rules to the road established now?

Dr. Alex Karp:

Well, there obviously have to be rules to the road, but remember our job, my version, no one else's, no one, people didn't adopt American values. They thought inherently they were superior. This is kind of the German version when you live there. They adopted them because they worked we have to win. We have to be ahead of our adversaries and we cannot have rules that are only for us and not for China because then we will get rules, their rules and we will not like those rules. They're not meritocratic, they're not in favor of gender, race, harmony. This is a culture that does not believe in freedom, does not believe in all the things that bring people in this room and they will set the rules just like we did. So then, but of course you have to have a real discussion. That discussion again has to be transparent because what was happening recently is you had ideological capture of certain companies preventing the rest of us from working, and then we do have to have a discussion.

Also, people I think like Hugh's doing it are these people, people we believe in and yeah, it's going to be very hard conversations, but do not forget we need to win so that we can dominate the hard conversations because we could lose. And one of the ways we lose is it's very easy to lose when you're ahead. You just get lazy. I'm constantly yelling at Palantirs, get off the soft sofa of your share price and get back to work. We got to win. And that's the problem we have in AI right now. We own every company and we have to actually dominate in the war space and then build transparency and people like political leaders like the two of you who are people basically believe they want the best for our country and they're willing to talk to each other, have to be transparent. This is what we're doing, this is how we're doing it, these are the benefits. By the way, the other big question Americans have is, well, with all this ai, how do I have a job? Who's going to pay my bills? How is that going to work? Most Americans don't want to sit in a matrix like pod and get a payment from some large tech company for dreaming all day about some illusion that doesn't exist. They want work, they want to do things, they want to know that they're going to have healthcare. So all those things are going to have to be addressed and can be addressed.

Abby Phillip:

Yeah, I mean I think that that is going to be, that's where the intersection of defense and domestic issues collide here, ranking member. I wonder if you have a view on this discussion about how AI is already changing the way that we think about how much can the United States handle, what does warfare look like in the future? Do you think that technology will make it more possible to "fight"? I put that in quotes because I think when we talk about fighting, it might change what we're really talking about, but we're talking about cyber, we're talking about

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actual warfare. Does it change how those conflicts are carried out and will it allow the United States potentially to handle more?

Ranking Member Smith:

Yeah. Yes. There's no doubt about it. In fact, it's the biggest thing in a bipartisan way that Chairman Rogers and I are working on the committee is to Alex's point, how do we make sure we win that fight? How do we make sure that we take advantage of the new technology to the absolute best of our ability over our adversaries? I mean, the history of conflict is all about, well, who figured out how to use the horse better? Who figured out how to use the machine gun better? Who got there first and then used it and technology, AI, but beyond AI, drones, missile defense, cyber warfare, all of that is crucial. That's why from a policy perspective, the most important thing collectively in this room that we need to do is to get the Pentagon in a better position to rapidly acquire new innovative technologies that are crucial to war fighting.

And everyone in this room has heard the Valley of Death speech, so I won't go through the whole thing. Bottom line is we take too damn long to buy things and we incentivize process over problem solving and winning. And I've said this at this forum before, and I'll say it again, the person who wrote about how the Pentagon is built to be the 1950s Ford Motor Company when it needs to be built to be 2022, Apple, no offense to other tech companies in the world. That's what they said. It could be Apple, it could be Amazon, it could be Microsoft, it could be Palantir, it could be any number of different ones of you. But to have that sort of creative thinking, that is a major problem. I do want to make one Middle East Point because we kind of left the Middle East behind.

Abby Phillip:

Yeah,

Ranking Member Smith:

The Abraham courts. I think it's a great thing. The real challenge for the Trump administration, Saudi Arabia is the crown jewel of the Abraham Accords. Getting them into it is absolutely crucial to having a secure Middle East. We do not get there if there is no future for the Palestinian people. I do not say that out of weakness or out of desire. It's just the simple fact of where Saudi Arabia is at and how crucial they are. And I know Israel's fighting to defend themselves and they absolutely have to, but at some point there has to be a future for the Palestinian people or Jordan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, all these countries that could be partners to stop Iran. They're just not politically in a position to do that. So I hope we will focus on that piece of the question as well.

Abby Phillip:

One of the things that the survey found, we asked a question about this issue of malign cooperation. Basically the American people, they're all on the same page.

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They understand that this is a problem, that perhaps it's not going to be multi-front going to be a coalition of our enemies. Morgan, I know you have a phraseology. I'll let you tell everybody what it is. You could call it the axis of evil, whatever it is. But this is going to be the future. How concerned are you about it?

Morgan Ortagus:

Well, I didn't coin axis of evil. I think I was in college when someone famously said that, but I've actually been referring to the quartet of evil. Yes. When you look at DPRK, Iran, Russia, and China of course, and when you look at what's interesting about what they've created is essentially a supply chain of terror. And I wrote about this in the Wall Street Journal of September of 22 when we saw the Iranian-made drones that were in use in the battlefield. Russia was using them obviously with Ukraine. And you see, of course, Iran's ability not only to resupply the Russians but their terror proxies around the Middle East, which only continues the war between Israel and Hamas. And of course they're all crucially supplied by China. So listen, this stuff is not insurmountable. These are all challenges that we could take on at the Treasury Department, at the Commerce Department with the Department of Defense and the State Department as well.

But we do have to realize that we essentially have allowed the supply chain of terror from these maligned states, from America's enemies to work to coordinate in multiple theaters around the world. And we have learned, as you sort of said earlier, there's no Vegas rules in foreign policy. What happens in one theater doesn't just stay in that theater. And so they've been working and coordinating together. So you have to look at where can we pinpoint all of this coming from? And it's of course principally coming from Iran from a weapon perspective, but from the Chinese Communist party as well. I think everybody in this room certainly agrees on the threat from the Chinese Communist Party to America. But we have for too long operated, in my opinion, the past four years have been in a position of operating out of fear of escalation. Well, if we give the Ukrainians the high Mars, what is Putin going to do?

How is he going to react if we support the Philippines? How will Xi Jinping act? And I think fundamentally what we have to get back to is not a place where we are making policy decisions based off of the fear of escalation and the fear of what our enemies will do, but instead, our enemies need to start fearing America and what we will do and until they get back to a place again, I take note of what you said earlier, Congressman, that you want our enemies to fear us and not our friends. But I think through a robust policy at the Treasury Department, at the Commerce Department in coordination with the national security agencies, we can disrupt the supply chain of terror. But it's operated quite proficiently in theater after theater over the last three or four years. And it's deeply concerning to me,

Ranking Member Smith:

And I'm sorry, I think the problem is actually much broader than just the military aspect of it. That axis of chaos, whatever you want to call them, they have built an

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international anti-US message. It's not just on the military side, it's economic. It's the BRICS countries coming together to try to create alternatives to the U.S. economic dominance in the world, which undermines the ability of our sanctions to be as successful as they could be. It's not just about those four countries, it's also about, if you will, the undecided vote. It's India, it's South Africa, it's Brazil, it's Argentina, it's the Middle East countries. It frankly, we are losing that message war right now for a couple of different reasons. One, because the other side is much more aggressively prosecuting it. At our dinner last night, General Fenton was talking about how he was in Indonesia and Indonesia was deeply concerned that the Philippines was out there ramming into Chinese ships.

Why do they believe it? That's not happening. But that's what China's telling them, and they're winning that message war, which is undermining our place in the world, but also because we still stand up with the rest of the world and say, Hey, we won World War II, we defeated communism, therefore we're the good guys. You just have to accept that. And the rest of the world has moved on to a whole lot of other more troubling conversations. They do not just fundamentally believe that we are the good guys because we get together at these forums and tell them that we are okay, they don't. We're losing that message war, and we're losing it in part because of arrogance, because we believe that we're just so much better than everybody else that every other country in the world ought to just see it. And in part because we are not engaging in that broader message war, and that's what all filters down to make Russia, China, North Korea and Iran more effective. Because they get the economic support. India is buying all manner of different Russian energy. So we have got to figure out what the message is and then go win the message war as well as the deterrence war.

Morgan Ortagus:

I agree with you totally. But it is not just a messaging war whenever, when you have sanctions on the book in Iran that you don't enforce and they're able to export their oil with impunity, when you do a great, fantastic sanctions package on Russia and they never follow up with it, no secondary sanctions never make a serious effort to stop their energy exports, their minerals and mining exports. We have a lot of effective sanctions measures, but whenever you don't implement them in one theater, every other theater sees that you could get away with it.

Ranking Member Smith:

If a country like India is with us on that, then we're in a much better position to be successful. Whatever we do, if you start throwing secondary sanctions around then India and China, all these other countries who you are now sanctioning are going to go, we better make a deal somewhere else.

Morgan Ortagus:

And you know where we did that already and maximum pressure, India stopped buying oil from Iran. It was hard. We had to do it at the State Department, but I've been there, I've lived it. You're absolutely right about India. We did it once

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through the max economic pressure campaign. We could do it again if we're serious about enforcement. We just haven't been serious about enforcement.

Abby Phillip:

Ranking Member, you make an interesting point that maybe the rest of the world has stopped believing that the United States is just better, that we are the good guys in the world. How do you change that? Because it sounds like what our adversaries are doing is changing that by also just giving those, I think you call them undecided nations, things that they need. So how does the United States combat that at a moment when the American public is actually talking a lot about pulling back financially, about spending less and all of that?

Ranking Member Smith:

Well, first of all, I don't think there's any maybe about it. Okay. I think we have in fact gotten to the point where we don't have that sort of universal, well, we're not as popular as we used to be. Lemme just put it that way. You can quantify it in a whole bunch of different ways, but how do we do it? I think you did a pretty good job of outlining some of the pieces of it, but also I think we are not really engaged in the messaging war. And I think one of the best ways to do it, I can make a thousand different points here. I don't want to go on too long, so I'll just make one. If we're going out into the rest of the world and saying, you need to be with us, it's just passing a piece of legislation ok?

When I figure out I want to pass something, first question is who do I need? Okay, who's going to need to vote for it? And then I don't go to these people and say, here's what I want and here's why you should give it to me. I go, okay, what does that person want? I've able to accomplish quite a bit by figuring that out. We need to think, okay, if we want India on our side, if we want South Africa on our side, what do they care about? Not just, okay, we're better than the rest of the world's, so they have to be with us, or here's what we want and we can help them and we are in a position to help them in a variety of different ways. So I think the number one biggest thing is to really engage in it. And I don't disagree with your formulation.

I think it's a good formulation to say, we got to look at this problem. And right now I think we're still, I've said it five times, so I will try not to say it too many more times. Again, I think we're just, we're living on our past laurels, and I love Alex's point. I think it was, who was it, Avis. And when you're number two, you try harder. And I always said the corollary to that is when you're number one, you get lazy. And it's just absolutely true and we have to fight that. I guess part of it is let's stop assuming that we're number one, let's get back to being number one and let's go earn it.

Dr. Alex Karp:

I think a lot of this, a counterintuitive stat is roughly between 60. I'll give you two counterintuitive stats between 61 and 92 roughly. France, GDP was growth was

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significantly better than the U.S. Okay, just, and then another kind of counterintuitive stat is 85% of the top 50 companies in the world adjusted by market cap tech companies are American 85%. I would bet that's going to be roughly above 90% next year at this time. So you have a lot of complexity in the world, like I suspect our GDP is going to grow in a very different way than our allies. So some of this, and that's going to adjust a lot of perceptions about us for good and bad. I also suspect one of the things we're going to end up having to do in Europe is how do we do a tech transfer so that they can have GDP growth?

And so a lot of these things are going to be really defined by the fact that you could imagine America healthy and strong in 200 years and 200 years people up here disagreeing about a lot of things, but in a narrow spectrum actually, because we all basically believe in fairness winning values that America is the greatest nation in the world. You could have that same room here and that's in 200 years, but you can't really imagine that in a lot of other Western cultures. And so we're going to have to navigate this, and I think a lot of what we're going to be navigating over the next year is actually going to be different and new. And some people, again, without going country to country, don't like us. They didn't think we had a future. Some people like us a little too much. They didn't think we have a future.

There are player haters and what is it? I'll give you an AI trend that I don't quite know how to articulate, but I think is really, really important. And so excuse the roughness of this, but it was the case two years ago that the tech was not really strong enough to take your company and reduce it to its essence. So the strength of reason why Palantir and these newer companies and others, we are essentially essentialist. We reduce everything to the core principle, but now a country and a company and a nation can do that. So the core function of defense is to be lethal for our adversaries and safer for our soldiers. It's very hard to implement that at this scale. The core function of an automotive company is to produce the cheapest, best car so you get a better product. We can actually now do these things and the fact, but then the counterintuitive thing is the most valuable thing for a company, a country, a nation, is to be have an individual idiosyncratic bias.

What makes a company great now is it's unique insight. It's creativity. What America gives America a structural advantage now over every other country is we are actually very different than any other country in the world on any parameter. But the fact is that that just allows us to do something completely unique and different and this uniqueness and ability to express in the world. We did not have this a couple years ago and we do have it now, and that's going to change a lot of how people view us inside and outside the country, and it's going to be different. I think you're going to see real alignments outside the country in other countries where people are like that and some people hate it, and it's okay. Now again, I suspect our GDP is going to grow significantly and many of these countries are not. So just think

Abby Phillip:

About, and we are

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Dr. Alex Karp:

Pain of that.

Abby Phillip:

We're already seeing the United States outperforming our adversaries like China in terms of economic growth. It's already happening.

Dr. Alex Karp:

I'm thinking is we're going to outperform our friends

Abby Phillip:

and our friends as well.

Dr. Alex Karp:

by a lot.

Abby Phillip:

Yeah. I want to take a moment for DOGE here because I know there's a lot of chatter in this room about what that will entail. Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy are planning to propose cuts. Senator Fischer, I wonder, do you think that Doge ought to come for the Pentagon as well?

Senator Fischer:

I think there number of areas in the federal government we can look at, but we have to be very careful about it and make sure that Congress leads it,

Abby Phillip:

Make sure that Congress

Senator Fischer:

Leads.

Abby Phillip:

Yes. Which Congress is the, That's the way that the law works. I wonder though, ranking member Smith, do you, frankly, this seems to be an area where there could actually be quite a lot of bipartisan agreement. I think everybody understands the American people want

Dr. Alex Karp:

Something this, and then I'll shut up. We have a splendor of riches in this country. We have the world's most successful builder ever looking at our institutions. Americans want to know that the institutions are efficient, safe, and correspond to their purpose. And there'll, I'm sure there'll be some rough patches,

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but I don't know how you do better than Elon looking at these things. And I'm pretty supportive. And again, obviously we all live under the predicate that we have a constitutional republic,

Senator Fischer:

But Americans want us to set priorities just like everybody does in their own life. Federal government should set priorities. We should have core duties, core responsibilities. Those are laid out, and we cannot be everything to everyone. Defense is the number one priority of a federal government, and the more we say that, and the more that the people of this country agree with that, the easier it will be to be able to fund the core duty of the federal government, and that's the national security of this country.

Ranking Member Smith:

The problem with DOGE is it's two separate conversations that are being blurred into one. And the difference between those two conversations is profound conversation. One is how can you make the government do whatever it does better and more? And gosh, that's important, and there's going to be a ton of bipartisan support for that. And I think, I don't know anything about Ramaswamy per se, but Elon Musk, I know what he did at SpaceX. I think he's a well-positioned person to have that conversation. How can you do things more efficiently and more effectively? The mistake is everyone's assuming that that is going to do anything to help us with our fiscal crisis, and that's the truly insane part of this conversation. Okay. It is just you have to sort of forget basic budget math in order to believe that that is true. Okay? You can run the place more efficiently, you can run it more effectively, and you can maybe save tens of billions of dollars maybe.

But to get to fiscal responsibility, you have to do what Senator Fischer just alluded to, and that's a great statement about how defense has to be first, but 60% of the budget is mandatory spending. That's Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. And I haven't heard a single solitary word out of a single solitary Republican, at least not recently, about how they want to cut mandatory spending. Sure as hell haven't heard it out of Elon Musk or Ramaswamy, and maybe they gave the two of them something that they never give us when we get elected to Congress, because the American people want us to balance the budget while cutting taxes and increasing spending. They never give us the magic wand in order to make that possible. I've been looking for it. I don't know, maybe Elon Musk got one and maybe he's going to save 2 trillion without hurting absolutely anything. No, he's not. Okay. Sorry. I can stop that. Speculation. I've heard it's just not going to happen. I hope they make government more efficient. The fiscal conversation is a hell of a lot more difficult to

Abby Phillip:

I've heard people suggest that there should be a return of pay as you go.

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Ranking Member Smith:

I'm sorry, but we can throw whatever gimmick you want out there. Gimmicks aren't going to get you there. It's a very, very straightforward math problem. Okay. We want to spend one hell of a lot more money than we want to pay for. Okay. I mean, that's what the polls show over and over and over and over again. It's why even to this date, I haven't heard anyone say one specific thing worth any money whatsoever that they're actually going to cut. And there's a reason for that. It's politically popular and God bless Donald Trump's ability to go out there and promise that he's not going to cut anything that people care about and that he's going to cut every conceivable tax you can think of and everybody going, yeah, that's awesome. Okay, now reality will come crashing in on the fiscal side. But what I hope to put a note of positivity on this.

Abby Phillip:

Yes,

Ranking Member Smith:

I hope we don't lose the fact that just because all of that fiscal stuff is pure fantasy, that it's not really important to try to make government more efficient and more effective. It is. And we need to do that. It's just not going to solve a 34 trillion debt or a one plus whatever trillion dollars deficit.

Senator Fischer:

I think when you look any kind of efficiencies or cuts to any government program, any government spending, each and every one of us, each and every one of you needs to propose a program that you personally benefit from that you'd be willing to cut.

Abby Phillip:

That's a great idea. That would be a very interesting exercise. One thing I will say though is that I think a lot of Americans would probably like to see more of the government run like Global Entry, just a little bit more efficiently accomplishing a task in front of them. I have two questions from the audience. I'm going to try to get through them in the last couple of minutes that we have here. Morgan, could you take this one for me? How can the U.S. government effectively counter misinformation that undermines public support for its national security objectives, especially when it comes from foreign malign actors?

Morgan Ortagus:

Great question. It's interesting. Throughout my career, I've been in the intelligence community. I've been in policy positions, and my last position was a communications position. So I've done all three. And at the State Department, I used to have people come in and say, well, Morgan, we're losing X, Y, Z argument. We need a better communication strategy. And I would often say to them, you do

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not have a communications problem. You have a policy problem. So when it comes to misinformation around the world, you best counter that with the truth. And I think we need to get back as a country to telling our citizens, read the hard truths. Why do we have a recruiting problem, a recruiting crisis for many years in this country, we didn't solve it. We actually just lowered the standards in order to paper over the problems. At this core of our military recruitment, it's time to bring the standards back up.

It's time to put the number of people that we need on ships, for example, not to cut the number on ships, but to bring the numbers back up and not to paper over our problems, to change the statistics to make it appear as if we solve the underlying problem when all we've done actually again is just paper over it. So you start telling the American people hard truths about where we are. I think the message, again, coming out of INDOPACOM was so important. As Senator Fischer pointed out earlier, it's not just three theaters. We also have our own theater here at home. If you look at this election, immigration and border security was the top three voting issue in most of the public polls. The American people know that the fentanyl crisis is killing their neighbors, their friends and their communities. If you get outside of the beltway, it's a huge, massive problem where you can find almost every family has been affected by the fentanyl crisis.

Communities around this country are affected by our border security issues, by the immigration problem. All of these things need to be solved. And while we're trying to figure out how to prioritize three theaters, I would argue the Trump administration needs to prioritize our southern border and the catastrophe that we've seen happening there. And the American people clearly went to the polls and voted on that across ideological spectrums. So I think you counter misinformation by not papering over our problems, but by telling hard truths, we're going to solve the military recruitment crisis not by lowering standards. We're going to take the standards back where they are and we're going to figure out why we have a problem getting young people to sign up and fight and die for this country. If you tell young people around this country that this is an awful racist nation that has a terrible history, why would any of them sign up to fight and die for this country?

That's not who we are. And if we can get back to not only in our military recruitment, but if you look throughout our national security organizations, through the intelligence community and others, we have to be honest. Do we have the resources? Do we have the capability to fight in multiple theaters and to protect our border? We know we don't. So let's tell the hard truth to the American people. Let's be very clear. Let's not give open-ended commitments around the world that we can't keep. I think the American people can accept those hard truths. They can accept reality. What they don't want is chaos around the world. To me, this election was about restoring order around the world and was about getting rid of the chaos that we see in multiple theaters. You're only going to get there. We're only going to deter Xi Jinping if we're serious about where we are. If we're serious about rebuilding and improving our Navy, and if we're serious about restoring our economy, you only get there by telling those hard truths. And

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I think the incoming administration, I certainly hope and pray for the security of America's future that they get those hard shoots. Right. I think they will.

Abby Phillip:

We are just about out of time, but Dr. Karp, can I give you a quick challenge? This is our last question from the audience. And if you were to try to say it in one or two words, what is the biggest gap between policy makers and the public?

Dr. Alex Karp:

I think policymakers, we're talking about the difference between A plus in tech and B is the difference between a helicopter that flies and doesn't basically. And this compounds into every area. And this is where America and California, it's like we're really, really focused on the best of the best of the best, of the best, the best, and building things. And then downstream from that, they've all played around with AI for the sake of our country, I think we should expose policymakers to Maven. And this stuff is determinative for life and death and it's not a play toy. It's going to change everything. And just because the large language model you have on your kind of is, that's like uranium in the ground. It processed correctly, it changes the world. And again, people understand this intellectually, but it's not in our heart yet. It's not emotional. And so that's where the big, there's still a lot of disconnect.

Abby Phillip:

Alright, well it was a pleasure talking to all of you, Senator Fischer, Dr. Karp, Morgan Ortagus, Ranking Member Smith. Thank you all very much and thank you.

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