

Are We Headed for War with Iran?

Jeffrey G: Thank you. Good morning. Good morning. Good morning. Good morning. You know, just like you, there's nothing I like to do better than at a resort town than wake up super early to talk about Irfan. Uh, so, uh, we have a lot in common. Um, uh, so I, I don't need to do any introductions. Bill Burns is the, uh, is the greatest diplomat of his generation. Cause that's, that's fair. No, no, that's not fair. Uh, you have his bio in, in, in the app. Um, most recently, uh, before taking on the role of leading the Carnegie, uh, institution, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, he was the Deborah Deputy Secretary of state. Um, I first met you when you were the ambassador to Jordan 20 years ago, 20 years ago. I met you in Jordan when, um, uh, the State Department and many, many different administrations, uh, always gave bill the hardest jobs, including ambassador to Russia.

Jeffrey G: Um, and we're not gonna limit this conversation this morning just to the urban crisis or that we can spend all day on it. Uh, we're gonna range a little bit and talk about, uh, talk about American foreign policy today. Talk about where we've been and maybe where we're going, um, before I, um, the wonderful thing about covering this administration is that there's always something new. Um, and just a few minutes ago, I wanted to read a quote to you, um, from the president of the United States, um, who said in advance of the [inaudible] summit quote, this is on, he said it on a live on TV. Um, you have a woman in Europe, I won't mention her by name, she hates the United States. Perhaps worse than any other person I've ever met. Um, know, obviously he's talking about the queen of England. Um, the, uh, what is the obsession with Merkel and, and, and you are, I mean, the, the expression is a cliché, but you are the consummate diplomat. What, what, what happens in, in diplomacy, in American diplomatic circles and in the foreign policy, national security apparatus, when the president attacks in brutally personal terms, um, the leader of the most important country in Europe.

William Burns: Nothing. It's just part of, I think on the part of the president who has been incredibly dismissive of our closest allies to biggest asset in many ways, if the United States has on today's international landscape. There's a little bit of misogyny in this, I think in his view of women leaders. I think there's a little bit of dismissiveness and suspicion of elected leaders as opposed to, you know, what oftentimes opposed to what he is. He'd know his audit, his autocrat, NVA. I think, you know, you look at a lot of the relationships he has with other leaders, you know, he seems easier in some ways with autocrats as well. But it's a general dismissiveness of alliances. I mean, I think the president's view from his inauguration is that we're kind of Gulliver tied down by the lily potions, you know, all of the alliances and institutions that we built our own light and self interest over decades and at American power is best served unilaterally. And that's reflected, I think in his view of a lot of allied leaders, but particularly [inaudible].

Jeffrey G: Cool. So, um, imagine maybe this is hard to imagine. Imagine your the United States ambassador to Germany this morning. What, what, what happens following this kind of statement on a practical level,

William Burns: investor in Germany is kind of a cheerleader for stuff like this. So I'm not sure exactly what he would do, but you know, in general you're trying to clean up, I mean you're trying to explain what the president really meant to and in this case, I'm not sure how you'd go about doing that. So you know,

Jeffrey G: he says hate, he means love is that you have to style Gia for diplomacy under control. So got it. Got It, got it. Got It. We'll come back to America's status in the world because of things like this in a, in a minute. But can you, um, I want to ask you of course, where we are at the moment with around, we almost had at least a mini war or a, some kind of a strike, uh, in the last, uh, couple of weeks and we didn't at the last moment. I want to ask you about that, but, but since we have a little time, why don't you walk through your own experience with, around and tell us about the, the secret channel, uh, among other things because, uh, bill along with Jake Sullivan, um, in the previous administration, uh, they were the two, uh, representatives of President Obama who made the very first, uh, approach to, to the Iranians that ultimately led to the, the now semi defunct or in trouble nuclear deal, but, but talk about your own experience with them and, and, and, and bring us to those first meetings.

William Burns: Sure. Well, you know, I mean, my whole Iran in a way is a challenge for the United States that hung over my whole diplomatic career. I mean, I took the written exam for the foreign service in November of 1979 at our old embassy in London. The same week that our embassy was overrun interferon. And you know, my future diplomatic colleagues were taken hostage and then serving in the Middle East, the attacks on our embassy and be rude on the marine barracks in the early 1980s, you know, by Iranian sponsored groups. Um, and so I didn't ever need to be persuaded of the threats and the challenges that this Iranian regime poses to American interests, the interests of our friends. But I became convinced as I got to more senior jobs in the State Department, that number two jobs, first program for Hillary Clinton and John Kerry. That

Jeffrey G: so do you want to use a mic issue, isn't it? Sorry, is that any better? Oh, hold it up there like that. Yeah. He's, he's well known for being a soft spoken diplomat. But this is a, I don't mean to be that spoken. Anyway, what I was

William Burns: saying is, you know, there's a long build up to the secret talks that we launched with Iran on the nuclear issue at the beginning of 2013 and I should say that, you know, in diplomacy, this is not a profession about talking nicely to people. You got to build up leverage. And so, you know, we spent most is that better? We spent, there you go. Um, we spent most of the first term of President Obama's tenure, um, basically building leverage on Iran. So it's no coincidence that when we began the secret nuclear talks and early March of 2013, the minds of the Iranian leadership were focused because their oil exports had dropped by

50%. The value of their currency dropped by 50%. But you know, you have to match that kind of pressure with a willingness to engage directly connected to realistic goals as well. So through the Omani government, which had helped orchestrate the secret talks, since we don't, we didn't have and don't have today formal relations with the Iran and was assault in himself.

William Burns: And I'm one of his closest aides whom we'd actually gotten to know. Some of you remember, may remember the incident where there were three young American hikers who were on the Iraq, Iran border, not the place I would have chosen to hike, but were taken captive by the Iranians and held in really terrible conditions in Evan prison. And Tech Ron for a couple of years and the Omanis proved very resourceful in helping us to obtain their release. So that's how they establish their credibility. Anyway, we had about nine or 10 different sessions with Iranians over the course of almost all of 2013. It surprises me to this day that we kept it quiet as long as we did. I don't think we would've gotten very far if we had done this in the glare of publicity. Um, I vividly remember the, you know, the first trip we made to a mind and an unmarked US government aircraft leaving Andrews air force base outside Washington 17 hour flight to Oman.

William Burns: We meet in this vacated Omani military officers retreat right on the Arabian Sea. The temperature outside was about 120 degrees Fahrenheit, so there wasn't much to do other than talk to the Iranians. But you know, we made fitful progress over time and eventually by the end of November, 2013, um, we're able to help produce an interim agreement with the Iranians that froze their nuclear program and rolled it back. It still left a whole range of issues dividing us and Duran ways in which the Iranians threatened our interests in the Middle East. Um, but at least in my view, it started the path toward the comprehensive nuclear agreement, which was concluded a year and a half later, which removed the most imminent risk that this Iranian regime post, which was unconstrained nuclear program. Um, and so it left us with the wider strategic challenge of continuing to push back against the Iranians. But it was a good step in a demonstrated, in my mind at least the diplomacy backed up by military and economic leverage can actually produce positive things to the United States.

Jeffrey G: Do you, do you credit the critics of the deal with, um, with anything in terms of, uh, the, the primary criticism, uh, in, in let's say more hawkish circles is that the deal is two time constraint. It's unrelated and it does not, it does not deal with any of Iran's other, uh, malevolent actions in, in the Middle East. Um, Trump says that these are the reasons that he wanted to get out of the deal. Put Trump aside for a minute. Um, do you think that the deal was tough enough?

William Burns: Um, I think it was the best of the alternatives we could produce at that time. If we could have done a bunch of more comprehensive deal that included, you know, all of arounds threatening behavior in the Middle East, we would have done that. But you weren't going to get or closest European allies as well as the Russians and Chinese to agreed a really strong international sanctions if the aims were that wide, at least right at the outset. Like any arms control process

I've been involved in over the years with the Soviets and with the Russians, these aren't one off agreements you build on them over time. And so our expectation always was with this nuclear agreement with Iran that we were then going to have to build on it to try to extend the timelines in terms of some of the constraints on, you know, Iranian capacities to push back in other areas in the Middle East. We were just in a better position to do that. When we had United most of the international community around that set of goals, we were in a better position to deal with all of those other threatening Iranian actions.

Jeffrey G: Why do you think Trump pulled out?

William Burns: I think partly it's just because it was a legacy of the Obama administration. I don't think president Trump had ever reported over the 150 pages in the agreement. I think this was about, I'm doing something that had been done before. There were a lot of cheerleaders amongst, you know, our closest allies and partners in the region and an Antonia Hook government in Israel and Saudi Arabia and, and other Gulf states who were kind of encouraging Trump in this direction as well. So I don't think there was any great mystery. The only surprise to me was that he took until May of last year to pull out of the agreement. Right.

Jeffrey G: Is this then the crisis of the last couple of weeks? Is this self created?

William Burns: Um, I think the crisis of the last couple of weeks is something that we've had a very large hand in, in helping to create. Um, I'm not trying to suggest that, you know, threats from Iran, uh, or you know, something that we caused. I mean, as I said before, ANA's threatened our interests for a long time. But I think by pulling out of the nuclear deal and then embarking on this policy of maximum pressure, untethered to any clear or realistic goals or even coherent goals, because the president from time to time, I'll say, well, all I want is to ensure the Iranians don't have nuclear weapons, which is precisely what comprehensive nuclear agreement did while others, like as national security advisor, as secretary of state, suggest goals that are much more connected to either the capitulation of this Iranian regime across a whole range of issues or its implosion. And so there's a kind of incoherence in the strategy and approach where, you know, we, you know, professional diplomats always talk about coercive diplomacy. And the problem with this version of course, of diplomacy is it's all about the coercion part. And not at all about diplomacy. If you don't connect that kind of pressure to realistic goals, um, you know, you're creating, um, a lot of trouble

Jeffrey G: or put the contradiction here, or the, the core contradiction is Trump pulls out of the deal, giving around an opportunity. They ran in leadership and opportunity to restart the nuclear program, which would then axiomatically almost trigger an American military response at the very last moment in the current crisis, very, very last moment. According to the president himself, 10

minutes before a strike was supposed to happen, uh, he stops a strike. Um, one of the Iranians taking from this behavior.

William Burns: Well, I mean, I think they're there watching a pattern in the Iranians as we were discussing earlier. I'm pretty savvy about the world around them. They're not cut off in a sense that today's North Korean regime is, for example. And so, you know, I think they see bluster, they see a certain element of bluff in this. And I'm afraid what happens is that encourages miscalculations too. One of the things we always forget, and I think president Trump forgets, is that you know your opponent, your adversary gets a vote, and these kinds of episodes too, and the Iranians are not going to sit back in the face of this maximum pressure. They're going to demonstrate that while we can inflict significant damage on their economy, they can inflict damage and create dilemmas themselves. That's why they've started to edge away from the nuclear agreement and they're trying to calibrate this so they don't yell, urinate, all the other parties to the agreement. Europeans, the Russians and the Chinese were in many ways more sympathetic to them right now than they are to the Trump administration, but you know they're going to edge in a direction which ultimately could cause that agreement to unravel and lead us right back to the dilemma we were in a few years ago.

Jeffrey G: The piece of this, one of the pieces I don't understand is this, and we were both watching very carefully, the red line debate around Syria. Obama says there's a red line, doesn't enforce the red line around, shot down a u s drone according to American intelligence over international water. Uh, that usually triggers a proportionate response of some sort. Um, Trump has been immensely critical of Obama for not enforcing the red line. Um, one could argue that that the current behavior of this president makes Obama's behavior back then and look like general patent. Uh, one could not, not one of us, but one could. Um,

William Burns: are you breaking your head on these contradictions? I mean, it's not in, there's, there's, there's something to be said for unpredictability and diplomacy. I get it, but, but what is the, what is the entire world taking from this? Are they, are they looking at Trump now as feckless and unwilling to use force to advance American goals? Well, the problem is, you know, there was always this madman theory that people use to discuss about President Nixon that sometimes, you know, if you're unpredictable enough, you know, you can improve your leverage in the world. But that only works when that unpredictability is actually part of a strategy. And that's what's missing here right now as far as I can tell. And so the impact, to answer your question is a lot of corrosive damage to our influence in the world. A lot of our allies are starting to hedge.

William Burns: You know, we talked about Chancellor Merkel before, I was in Germany a couple of weeks ago and saw a public opinion poll in which Germans were asked how much they trusted certain foreign leaders. 24% said they trusted president Trump in the United States, 36%. These are Germans trusted the Amir Putin and Russia. And you know, that's a sign of the erosion. I think of America's not just a

image, but our practical influence in the world. So not only do allies start to hitch, but then you get rivals and adversaries who are going to try to take advantage and are prone to miscalculation when they're not sure you know exactly. Sure. About whether this is a flaw for not. I'll come back to a, a rant in a second, but, but stay on this, uh, what will happen to America's role in the world if Trump is reelected? If we have six years, not two more years.

William Burns: Yeah. I mean, I'll say this, I've never been a particularly partisan person. You know, I worked for five presidents and 10 secretaries of state. I proudly served administrations of both parties. Um, but you know, I do think there's a big difference in terms of America's stature influence in this, on this international landscape between four years and eight years. We're digging a hole for ourselves right now in the world at a time when the landscape itself is in the midst of profound transformation. This is one of those plastic moments. And you know, the history of American foreign policy comes along once or twice a century. You know, it did after the end of the Second World War. It did in 1989 at the end of the Cold War. There are a lot of things in flux right now. We're no longer the only big kid on the geopolitical block, but the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, huge existential challenges like climate change that are beyond the power of any one state to deal with what that calls for is a United States, which can exercise disciplined leadership in the world.

William Burns: You know, we're not the singular dominant power we were for the first 20 years after the end of the Cold War, but we still have a better hand to play than anybody else in my view, any of our major rivals, not just because of our military and economic leverage, but also because of our capacity to draw on alliances and mobilize coalitions of countries. That's what sets us apart from lonelier powers like China and Russia. We're corroding that asset today rather than taking advantage of it. And so the problem I think is we're digging a hole for ourselves today. Eventually we're going to stop digging. I hope it's four years, not eight years, but when we climbed back to the surface, to the top of that hole, we're going to look at in a landscape that's hardened against our interest and in some ways against our values. So that's the difference.

Jeffrey G: The Chinese right now are taking every day that goes by as, as an opportunity to, to solidify their position.

William Burns: I think that's right. I mean I think for Tsujing paying who doesn't lack for self assurance or ambition, I think he's accelerated, you know, China's plans to, you know, establish itself. I think this is his hope as the, the preeminent player in Asia as a global economic pure of the United States and he sees kind of open terrain in front of him. I mean, I think that was the big mistake that we made in abandoning the Trans Pacific partnership, the big trade agreement, which would have been together 40% of the global economy. It's not a perfect trade agreement. Perfect is rarely on the menu in trade agreements or at diplomacy. But that's the kind of thing when you take advantage of allies and a coalition of countries and you set high end trade and investment standards, that's how you

shape the incentives and disincentives of, of the Chinese leadership, you know, when they aren't faced with those kinds of challenges, you know, are going to continue to try to expand their influence. So oftentimes at our expense,

Jeffrey G: which Trump, right? Not The strike last week.

William Burns: Yeah. I think he was right not to strike. Um, but I think what's missing now as I said, because I don't think that would have ended well I think you could have ended up in a, you know, with kind of mutual enablers on both sides. Hardliners in both Washington Chevron and there was no shortage in either capitol going through quickly up a very shaky escalatory ladder. But the problem is, well I think he was right not to strike. I think that was an opportunity to try to actually create a strategy for dealing with Iran. Use the leverage that we have built up to try to see if there aren't ways in which we can first deescalate the situation. But then see if we can at least improve on the margins. You know, some of the elements we've talked about before on the nuclear agreement.

Jeffrey G: What does a round want?

William Burns: It depends on which Iranian. Sometimes, I mean, I think the supreme leader and the heart guys, and they're all guys, I'm around him in the regime and to run, are deeply suspicious of the world around him. Um, I think there are core goal is survival of their regime. I think they see a world of both threats and opportunities around them in the Middle East. They're, you know, they're counter punchers. They take advantage of vulnerabilities that they see. So when you know, the Saudis help escalate the big strategic and humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, for example, they didn't invent the Hutu rebellion in Yemen that the Europeans didn't, but they're going to take advantage of it as well as a way of getting back at the Saudis as distracting them and other areas. So, you know, there's, there are longstanding Persian ambitions, I think, too, to be, you know, if not the principal player in the Middle East, at least one of the major players in the Middle East.

William Burns: And that's continued through the Iranian revolution on this theocratic rejuvenate as well. So now there are a formidable, um, you know, leadership to deal with and I don't underestimate them on the other end. They're not 10 feet tall and you know, not only economically weak today, but not a military superpower in any way. Um, and it's a regime that doesn't have answers for what's on the minds of a very young population. 70% of the population of Iran are under the age of 30. So I've always thought that in terms of American strategy, the best way to deal with all the challenges posed by this around Iran regime is a form of the old Cold War doctrine of containment. You know, I'm not trying to, you know, there's not a perfect analogy between the Soviet Union and Iran. Iran isn't a global player, but in the sense that just as we did what Ronald Reagan did with the Soviet, so the 1980s is you do arms control agreements to limit some of the risks that they pose. You push back on regional issues just as we did then your honest and forthright about human rights concerns. Um, but

you have a certain amount of confidence that over time the seeds of contradictions, the scenes of the erosion of that regime were already built in because it's a regime, as I said, that doesn't have answers to what's on the minds of a lot of Iranians right now.

Jeffrey G: W which country plays a more negative role in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia or around,

William Burns: I mean I think today probably Iran is the honest answer in terms of the way that it threatens our interests. But you know, the Saudis are very difficult friends and allies, especially on to its current leadership at Mohammad bin, some on the crown prince and the effect of leader. And I think, you know, while the US Saudi relationship remains important for the United States for lots of reasons. I think it's becoming too much of a one way street. And I'm not trying to suggest we had a pristine record and previous administrations of dealing with authoritarian allies or partners. We didn't. And I was a part of that too, but I think we're way too indulgent right now of this Saudi leadership. I mentioned Yemen before. Um, a clear illustration in my view anyway, of overreach and we're gonna push back hard against that.

Jeffrey G: What do we get from a relationship with Saudi Arabia?

William Burns: You know, right now I'm in the president always points to the arms sales, which I think is not a good measure of the business relationships or anything else, which is significant. I'm not trying to downplay that, but I think at this stage, you know, it's a, it's a really complicated relationship and I think, you know, as I said before, we have to push back not just against external overreach but against internal overreach to the kind political repression that you know, took its ugliest in most graphic form in the murder of democracy. Shoji you know, one of the most mild mannered journalistic critics of the Saudi regime. In a Saudi diplomatic facility and Turkey, you know, that's something that we've in the administration at least is turned a blind eye to. And that's something that we should push back hard against, not just publicly, but also privately and use it to try to produce the release of, you know, Saudi peaceful oppositionists who had been detained in Saudi Arabia. Push back on the issue of Yemen as well.

Jeffrey G: How do you think the Obama administration or another administration you worked for would have handled the Khashoggi killing?

William Burns: Well, firstly, I mean, I, I suspect that a Saudi leadership wouldn't even want as impulsive and arrogant as Mohammad bin some mine. Um, you know, would've hesitated before trying to do something like that. Um, just because it would have understood that the u s reaction, I think not just in the Obama administration, but in prior administrations I've worked with would have been much shorter.

Jeffrey G: Do you think they actually took the measure of Trump and said, we could probably get away with this?

William Burns: I don't think that was the main factor in their thinking. I mean, I think it's, um, it's a regime that's paranoid in some ways about critics like cause show g's and fairly mild mattered ones like could show g, but I think that was probably a factor in their thinking in the sense that they didn't at least have to worry about a sharp American response to actions like that. Right.

Jeffrey G: Um, one of the interesting things that's happening in Washington is that is the hyperpartisan ization of foreign policy in a way that, that, that, that uh, Democrats are so polarized on the issue of Trump that any foreign policy initiative he takes is almost automatically seen as, as suspect. So if he is anti Iran, some Democrats seem to be moving toward a, Iran is not the malevolent actor in the Middle East. It's Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, and so on. Give us your broad analysis of, of how the parties are changing in terms of their own foreign policy. Out of like we're heading into, uh, a couple of debates, uh, this week. I'm not sure foreign policy is going to play a huge role yet, but inevitably always does.

William Burns: Yeah, I wouldn't think so. I mean, China is one of the most obvious examples. I mean in the sense of the center of gravity and terms across party lines in Washington on China I think has sharp that has shifted sharply in a harder direction to the right in a way. Um, and I think, you know, we were all guilty, I think of a kind of lazy fatalism, you know, over much of the last 30 years or so in assuming that, you know, China's economic evolution was ultimately going to make it, um, you know, evolve politically and become, you know, a part of an American led international order. But I think we gotta be careful today across party lines and not falling into the same kind of lazy fatalism and thinking that, you know, we're shifting abruptly to a kind of state of permanent confrontation with China too and talk of decoupling our economies and lots of things, which I do not think are either practical or serve American interests over time. But you do see a distinct shift in thinking both in the democratic and Republican Party Sunshine.

Jeffrey G: Right. Let me just bring the, before we go to questions, let me just bring this back to, uh, uh, ran for a second. Where do you think, where, I mean to the, to the, to the extent that one can predict, uh, the behavior of an unpredictable White House, where do you think we're heading in this conflict? Does Trump's, uh, kind of ultimately dovish instincts win out over pump peo in Bolton? Or do the Iranians miscalculate and force a decision on Trump that he might not want to take?

William Burns: Yeah, I mean, I worry that we're drifting. I'm generally an optimist, but I'm more pessimistic on this issue. I worry that we're drifting in the direction of collisions, which can escalate very quickly. And I say that for the following reason. I think this, even though you're right, president Trump I think is not a military

interventionist. I think, you know, his approach on Iran right now is consistent with the formula he uses. He's used on lots of different issues, which is that you bluster, you throw around American power, you bludge. And um, ultimately you know, your opponent, in this case, Iran sort of sees the light and agrees to sit down in a big public spectacle of diplomacy with Donald Trump at the center of it. Um, and then you get what you want. And I'm just not sure that emo, um, fits the Iranians today because this is, uh, the Iranian leadership is one that's not comfortable with public spectacles.

William Burns: It's averse to trying to know love letters are going to be exchanged. Now that's not going to happen with this supreme leader in Iran. And, and so, you know, I just worry that we're talking right past each other. We're in the process of boxing ourselves in the Iranians are entirely capable of boxing themselves in to, um, this is an Iranian machine that thrives in a sense, sometimes by its animus toward the United States. The supreme leader all throughout the nuclear negotiations was just waiting to say, I told you so. You can't trust the Americans. And so we keep saying the president keeps saying he's interested in diplomacy yet we're about to sanction around chief diplomat, their phone minister. So rather than expanding our options to get to a serious diplomacy, I think we're actually foreclosing them over a time. And you know, the Middle East, as you know very well, Jeff, is the land of unintended consequences where you know, you have collisions which can escalate very quickly. And that's what I'm worried about with it.

Jeffrey G: Do you have personal hopes for regime change? And by that I don't mean sending in the Marines to change the regime, but do you hope that around, uh, we'll find a more progressive form of government and, and do you think it's even possible? Um,

William Burns: yes and yes. I mean, I think Iranians deserve a different kind of leadership. I'm not underestimating, you know, their sense of national. And I think what we've been doing in the Trump administration in a way strengthens the grip of hardliners in that regime rather than weakens it. But I think over time, I think Iranian certainly deserve at different and far less repressive leadership. A more open one. It's not going to change arounds ambitions in the region in a spectacular way around. Still gonna want to be a significant player in the Middle East, but it might be a player that's more willing to play by rules of the road that others can live with too. Um, and I, and I think to answer your second question that over time that's likely to happen. As I said, this is a regime that doesn't have answers for what's on the minds of a lot of younger Iranians, but it's going to have to move at a pace that's set by Iranians. If there's one thing we should have learned I think in the experience of the last 15 or 20 years is that, you know, American inspired, American orchestrated, um, you know, American led regime change efforts through force or through other measures don't inquiry well in the Middle East. And so now it's going to require the kind of patient longterm strategy that was in some ways consistent with the old containment strategy in the

Jeffrey G: one last question before we go to your questions, um, is a bit of an essay question but try to answer it and then in a in tweet form, um, what is the Trump foreign policy doctrine?

William Burns: Um, you know, I'll try to do this in 280 characters. So, um, you know, if with all the mistakes we may go over the course of the three and a half decades, I was a diplomat. What animated American foreign policy, at least at our best, was a sense of enlightened self interest. You know, that our self interest as a country, which always has to come first. Um, was it vanced by widening the circle of countries who shared the same basic interests. What president Trump has done is turn that on its head. It's a lot more about the self part than the enlightened part. As I said before, it's born of a kind of unilateralist impulse, um, that, you know, American power is best served unilaterally. Um, and I think, you know, that's a view that's not unique in American history. We've seen it at different times in the past.

William Burns: I think it is exactly the wrong prescription for a new era on the international landscape and era when we multiply our influence, our ability to get our way in the world by working with others, by adapting institutions, you know, that have to be adapted to fit this new era. We have a window before us within which we can accomplish that cause we still have a strong hand to play. But that window isn't going to stay open forever. And my fear is that, you know, the Trump doctrine, it's not a doctrine or a strategy, but it's definitely a world. It's impulse, impulse. It's right. It's born of his own experiences over the years of how you get your way by bluster, by bludgeoning people. And that didn't work very well in my experience in a way on today's international landscape. Right.

Jeffrey G: Um,

Speaker 3: we have Mike runners, if you just raise your hand, I'll try to point out a, there's one right there. Mine's, we'll start there. Thank you very fast. Question in light of the fact that it was so extremely difficult to have a

Jeffrey G: review of what was going on without a long procedure in terms of their proliferation of weapons and the payment of \$150 billion. I just didn't understand how much sense it, what we got out of it because the procedure to go and inspect were so cumbersome and time consuming

William Burns: with the Iranians were actually the verification procedures. I honestly thought, and I had been through this and other arms control agreements over the years were as tight as intrusive as any of s I've seen. Um, because, you know, we, we needed to put ourselves in a place where the Iranians had committed indefinitely not to develop nuclear weapons. We needed a set of inspection procedures, which were also indefinite, not limited in time, which would help ensure that we could catch them if they cheated. And I think, you know, that set up procedures is a, is a quite strong one compared to other arms control agreements that I've seen. Um, and so I, I actually think, as I said before, the

Iran agreement was not a perfect nuclear agreement. I've rarely seen a perfect agreement, but it was the best of the available alternatives yet, you know, took a situation in which, you know, 2013, the Iranians were about two months away from being able to develop a nuclear weapon, enrich enough material to that level so they could develop a nuclear weapon in about a couple of months. Um, and the agreement put them, you know, well over a year out into the future and their capacity to do that, um, for a considerable period of time. So it sharply constrained their ability. And I think that was a positive thing and it was a good foundation on which to build, um, over the years to try to stretch those timelines out over time.

Speaker 3: Okay.

Jeffrey G: I've come down here for camp.

Speaker 3: Okay.

Audience Member: Oh, thank you for your talk. I hear it. It's a very intellectual discussion happening here, but my friend served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yep. And I haven't heard anything yet that really lays out the fact that there's 85 million people there and war is not intellectual once it breaks out. So I hope everybody takes seriously what it means to unleash weapons onto a population on them, to cities. And Iran is very progressive society compared to his historically. This is, this is a, I think we're getting lost in intellectual ism. It's good that we discuss things and we're calm, but we must remember that war is hell. And my friends fight this war. And your, your just, your kids fight this war and we're a pretty wealthy room here and we should remember we're talking about lot of small communities suffering. So can you please, maybe just give a moment of what you think we know what will happen. What have you seen in Iraq? Can you give me a moment? Just reflect on what will happen if we unleash this kind of thing on a, on a place like Iran, a place with advanced weaponry of war. We have never fought.

William Burns: Yeah, I do. I think it'd be a catastrophe for the United States. I mean, I lived through, I would brand in the Middle East Bureau for Colin Powell and the State Department in the run up to the war in Iraq in 2003 but that's, I think the biggest foreign policy mistake that the United States made in a long time, which huge consequences in terms of American blood and treasure, but also in terms of, you know, what it did to Iraq, the way in which it helped open up the landscape in a way for the expansion of Iranian influence too. Um, so no, I think you're absolutely right to think of this in human terms, not abstract phones either. And you know, that's why I think again, it's always important to try to employ diplomacy as your tool of first resort. It's not always gonna work. It has to be backed up by the leverage that comes with the potential use of force. But it's, it's the overused, the premature use, I think, of American military power of which I'm very proud that gets us into a lot of trouble in the world. And so I

hope we've learned some of the lessons of our experience in the post nine 11 period.

Audience Member: Okay.

Jeffrey G: Oh, there was a woman down here, right in the front row. We'll come over here.

Speaker 3: Yeah.

Audience Member: I would like you to put something finally, finally the bed from me. Is it really impossible that our president did not know the collateral damage that he did that we would have caused had he done? Had he continued to plans for the rate for the a rate? If, if you tell me he could, he could not possibly not have known then why hasn't the military spoken up? And if the military did tell him, I am so really confused is how this just note, if you listened to MSNBC, he didn't know if you, I mean he did know, you listen to Fox News, he didn't know what is the truth with this. Right.

Jeffrey G: This is actually, this is a great, is a great question and let me just broaden it out a little bit. I mean, this is the, the, the confusion of understanding how this administration operates. Uh, Eh, it seemed, Eh, I, as someone who covered two presidents, uh, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, it seemed impossible to me when I heard that, that the president would not have been told early on in the process. These are the potential immediate consequences of a strike. How did it, how did it strike you? Um, wait, when the president says, I learned 10 minutes beforehand that people could die in a rage.

William Burns: Yeah. No, I mean I just don't buy that. I mean, to answer your question, which a really good one, I mean I think, you know, any kind of military briefing at the very early stage of this when they were just laying out options would have addressed that question. It's an imperfect set of estimates that people make, but I'm sure that would have been a part of those early briefings. I mean, one of the problems I think in this administration as Jeff suggested, is that some of the typical processes of kind of thinking through options and decisions like this seem to approach than down. You have a president who, you know, is so confident in his own judgment of things that, you know, he doesn't, you know, often take the time to really go through a lot of those issues. But in this case, you know, I, my strong assumption is that that was laid up pretty early on in the process. It wasn't something that, you know, he just came across 10 minutes before his ultimate decision to pull back.

Jeffrey G: I think this would be so fascinating for all of us if you would, from your own experience. Walk us through the, the, the, it briefly if you, the, the process, uh, that, that leads to a dis presidential decision making moment to use force. I mean, what, what are the stages and what are the safety valves in that, in that process, in an ordinary administration?

William Burns: I mean, I think in any administration I worked for over three and a half decades and they all have their own styles. But the first thing you would have done is, is, um, a tread to ensure that you have the facts straight about this particular attack on the drone. You know, where was it? International waters was an Iranian waters. What was the nature of the attack? Second, you'd want to ensure the security, cause you're not sure whether this was just sort of a first salvo or more to come of your military people, your diplomats in the region. Third, you would have started to, you know, you would have, you have started to ask the question. So if the Iranian shut this down, if that was your conclusion, you know, what, what was their motive? What was their thinking behind this? Um, how, and then you began to look at the practical options for responding, not only to respond to that particular attack, but to deter future attacks.

William Burns: And then the military typically would provide a set of options. You know, they, our military is very professional about making sure that they have on the shelf lots of different options in dealing with Iran. You'd lay them out usually from the modest to the much more ambitious kind of attacks. Then there'd be discussions both at the level of sort of deputy heads of cabinet agencies than at the level of cabinet secretaries with the president himself to sort of lay these out. People would ask questions about second and third order consequences. Well, what if this happens that asks questions about collateral damage? You know, how many civilians might be killed and what might the Iranians do in response? How do we prepare for that? I mean, it's a pretty exhaustive process at the end. It, you know, it leaves you with some very hard judgements because this is much more an art than a science, but you do very thorough preparation.

Jeffrey G: How do you feel about Jim Madison not being in the White House anymore for this kind of,

William Burns: Oh, it worries me a lot. I've known Jim Mattis over the years since he was a colonel and I was at med level from service officer. He's been through, not his first Rodeo. He's been through this kind of things many times before. As a military officer working in the Pentagon and then a secretary of defense. I think his would have been a very sober, sensible voice on issues like this.

Jeffrey G: Where are the hands? Um, there's some in the middle here. We can come over here to this gentleman. I can't see very well with the lights. I'm sorry. But I see hands

Speaker 3: [inaudible]

Audience Member: what role, if any, does diplomacy play in Afghanistan?

William Burns: Well, I mean I think it needs to play a particularly significant role right now. You know, you've got a US special envoys, Almay, colonials that I was talking to the Taliban right now to try to produce a situation in which, you know, the Afghan government and the taller bond can agree on a future in Afghanistan, which

isn't going to threaten us. You know, that it's not again going to become a platform for attacks on the U s homeland. But then you've got a really important regional diplomatic dimension to this where it's important to talk to all the neighbors of Afghanistan, including some pretty creepy neighbors, whether it's Iran or Pakistan, you know, Russia, China, India as well, because they all have a stake in the outcome in Afghanistan and all of them to one degree or another have an ability to effect that outcome for better or worse. So we want to help encourage a more stable outcome in Afghanistan after we withdraw our troops, then we need to talk to all of those players as well. And so it's, you know, it's a complicated diplomatic challenge, but I think diplomacy plays a huge role. Um, especially as you look out over the next six months or a year.

Jeffrey G: Creepy neighbors is a great description of much of the world. Right? Yeah. That's the, that's the, that's it. That's a veteran diplomat talking. Um, there's another question right in the middle over here. This gentleman is raising his hand, I think, and I'm just trying to see in the back over there. If you can find people for me, that'd be great.

Audience Member: Uh, I'm wondering, do you think Iran might be disappointed that we did not strike back? I mean, Distro, they must've known or figured that actually exactly what we're going to do and it was a setup.

William Burns: Yeah, I don't, I don't know. I think they were probably a little bit perplexed too. I think they probably assume that there was going to be some, you know, military reaction to that. Um, I don't think the Iranians, I mean the irony here is that neither president Trump nor the Iranian leadership, I think at least right now is looking for a full scale military confrontation. Um, but my concern, as I said before, is that we can back into that into a series of collisions. So I, I don't think they were welcoming an American counterstrike, um, but I think they were probably a little bit surprised that there was a military reaction.

Jeffrey G: There's somebody back here, I guess. Oh. And then and then

William Burns: over here, if you don't mind,

Audience Member: earlier in the conversation you mentioned that it was a good thing that we at one of the benefits of making nice with a Saudi Arabia was the preservation of the arms sale.

William Burns: Oh yeah. I mean I just said it's one of the things that people point to.

Audience Member: Okay. Or do you feel that it's an art interest is a, as citizens of this country to preserve arms sales to countries like that?

William Burns: No, I mean, I mean I think, you know, if there's a little bit in the congress right now pushed by Democrats to cut off arm sales to Saudi Arabia that are used in the war in Yemen. I'm actually quite sympathetic to that cause I think Yemen is

becoming a strategic as well as humanitarian catastrophe. And this is one way to help influence Saudi behavior there too. So I think there's a reason to support Saudi security in the face of legitimate external threats. But I think we have to be careful in, you know, the kinds of armaments we sell. And I think in cases where that gives us a little bit of leverage like Yemen, we should use that leverage not just in only in our self interest but in Saudi Arabia as longterm interest too.

Audience Member: Sure. Yes ma'am. Um, given that diplomacy is so critical, I live in DC and I know, um, that the state departments lost a lot of talent. What's the prognosis moving forward for that to rebuild? You know, that those people that are like in their fifties that had lots of time,

William Burns: it's going to take a lot longer to fix than it's taken to break. And to be fair, Donald Trump didn't invent the drift in American diplomacy. I mean, ever since the end of the Cold War and especially after nine 11, um, you know, it was hard to build a lot of support for resources for the State Department or fruit development assistance after nine 11. It was almost natural down besides military and intelligence tools too. But what I think the Trump administration has done is taken that drift and accelerated it and made it a lot worse. Um, so you have a huge number of senior vacancies and the State Department and embassies around the world today. You have, you know, at for 20 years applications to the u s foreign service rows every year it's dropped by 40%. Over the last two years. We made painfully slow progress over my 35 years as a professional diplomat in trying to create a foreign service that looked more like the country we represent.

William Burns: You know, when I came into the foreign service beginning of 1982, nine out of 10 American diplomats looked like me. They're way, I'm only a quarter of American diplomats were women. We made significant if too slow progress over the next three decades to create again a foreign service that looked more like a country. Cause we always get farther overseas through the power of our example. Then the power of our preaching. Those trendlines have been reversed too. And there's also a particularly pernicious practice in the last couple of years of going after individual career officers just cause they worked on controversial issues in the last administration. That's how you got an, there are a lot of good people who as we're sitting here today are doing hard jobs and hard places around the world. Um, but you know, it's, it's hollowing at an institution and a profession at precisely the moment when it matters more cold bloodedly to American interests in the world. And so one of the big challenges I think for, you know, whomever succeeds this administration is going to be to sort of face up to that reality and to try to not only renewed diplomacy but rebuilt the State Department.

Jeffrey G: If you were 25 right now, would you go into the foreign service and the Trump administration?

William Burns:

I would if I were 25 and have this conversation with lots of, you know, university audiences around the country in part because of what I just said, I think there's a huge opportunity to renew American diplomacy and it'd be kind of exciting to get in on the ground floor. What's hardest, I think is for senior officers because then you're in a position, you know, where you're publicly defending what, at least in my view sometimes is the indefensible. It's hard sometimes for mid-level officers. And what pains me the most is to see some of the most promising of the mid level diplomats who've been at this for 10 12 14 years. The best in film, have a lot of options, you know, outside diplomacy who start to leave or thinking seriously about leaving. Structurally, that's a big problem because those are the people you want to be your ambassadors 15 years from now too. So that, that worries me as well.

Jeffrey G:

Um, I know that there are a ton of questions, but we're really out of time. I just want to thank bill for an excellent presentation. Very, very thoughtful. Thank you all very much.