



# Dialogues on American Foreign Policy and World Affairs: Discussing the Future of the Liberal World Order with Robert Kagan

## TRANSCRIPT

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- Robert Kagan, *Senior Fellow at Brookings Institution, contributing columnist at The Washington Post*

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**Walter Russell Mead:** Welcome to Hudson Institute's Dialogues on American Foreign Policy Series. My name is Walter Russell Mead. I am a distinguished fellow at Hudson Institute, director of the Institute's Center for the Future of Liberal Society. Today, I have the pleasure of speaking with Dr. Robert Kagan, senior fellow at Brookings Institution and contributing columnist at The Washington Post. Robert Kagan served in the State Department from 1984 to 1988. That was a long time ago.

**Robert Kagan:** Tell me about it.

**Walter Russell Mead:** As a member of the policy planning staff, as principal speechwriter for Secretary of State, George P. Schultz, and as deputy for policy in the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs. Kagan is the author of a number of books, including *Return of History and The End of Dreams*, *Dangerous Nation*, *America's Place in the World From Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the 20th Century*, *Of Paradise and Power*, *A Twilight Struggle*. His most recent work, *The Jungle Grows Back*, *America and Our Imperiled World*, looks at the ways in which the post-World War II world order is under threat, the impulse in American society to withdraw from the world and the reasons why U.S. global engagement remains as important as ever.

So, Bob, thank you for joining me today. It's great to see you again. Obviously, at the time this is being taped, we don't know for sure how the election is coming out. But it looks reasonably likely that there's going to be a change of administration. I know at that moment, everybody says, "Yeah, remember I said that four years ago." And I was right, there was a change of administration.

But we have a new team coming in, presumably. How will the world have changed? What new challenges will they face? Are there any new opportunities? What's your view of the global situation now with a new administration coming in?

**Robert Kagan:** Well, thank you, Walter. It's great to talk to you again. I'm glad you're so confident that we can already talk about who the new administration is because at this moment right now, I'm going on record as saying I'm not at all confident that we will have a new administration come January, for one reason or another. But in any case, either administration will face the same world, obviously, to some extent. I do think that, as always is the case, the difference between the behavior of one administration and the next will not be as night and day as everyone thinks.

I think you might agree as a historian, our tendency to look at history or the world in four-year increments, as if that is the determining factor is the name of the person in the White House is clearly not true, especially for a democracy which has some very fixed attitudes about its place in the world. So, I would say truth, I'm always one of these people and it's probably my failing, but I think it's my nature as a historian to just be skeptical when people say things are about to be radically different. Either in terms of policy, but also in terms of the nature of the international situation.

I think that one thing Trump has demonstrated is that the fundamental geopolitical structure of the world that I would say probably came into being around World War I, certainly came to full fruition in World War II, which is the bringing in to the picture of the United States. That was the radical change and we're still living in that world, and I think that we really underestimate the uniqueness of the American position in the world. I could talk about the ideological elements of that, but the pure geopolitical aspect of it.

Which is to have, essentially, an island superpower that does not live next to other great powers in a world where everyone else lives in an incredibly crowded and competitive neighborhood. The fact that the United States can essentially send the bulk of its power overseas, thousands of miles away, without risking its home position, is such a unique situation and it has shaped the world and will continue to shape the world.

Why I bring this up is because it's clear that Trump is not in the tradition... He's much more in, as he would say, the America First pre-World War II tradition of what goes on outside America, we don't care. We don't care about why we have all these alliances, et cetera. Yet, he's made it clear how hostile he is to our alliances, but yet our alliances are still hanging there saying, "Please come back," and that is just a condition of the world. So there turns out there's a lot of ruin in the American security structure. Not to mention, to which I don't think Trump is actually pursuing an America First policy or anything like it.

So I think that what we have, therefore, is an enduring situation and the big question mark will always be how does the United States want to deal with it? I think that here, what's interesting is I don't think that a Biden administration is going to change the overall trajectory that the American people have been on, which is away from deep global involvement. I think they're going to cut the defense budget right away, which is going to have all kinds of implications for the rest of the world.

So for me, the question is, there's a tension between the basic structure of the international system, which does not change even with the growth of China. Then particularly, American desire to pull back from this world, and I think that tends to continue.

**Walter Russell Mead:** In some ways, looking back on it, it seems to me that the big break in American policy was not so much the shift from Obama to Trump, although obviously it was consequential. But sort of halfway through President Obama's time in office, between Obama one and Obama two, where I think in the first term, Obama was... There was a lot of continuity in certain ways and he had a different strategy for transforming the Middle East. But it was a transformational strategy, many of whose ideas had a lot of commonality with what Bush had been talking about.

But then in the second term, it did shift to a kind of a withdrawal agenda, pivot to Asia. But a pivot to Asia is in some ways an ideological withdrawal, only because an Asian policy is less institutionalized than a Europe-focused policy. Liberal ideas play a bit less of a role in State crap, I think, when you have an Asia-centric policy as opposed to NATO during the Cold War. So there was both an ideological withdrawal and something of a net geopolitical withdrawal. Would you agree?

**Robert Kagan:** There was definitely a shift in Obama and I think mostly it was when Obama came in, he thought he had to play by something like the old rules of the Cold War and then immediate post-Cold War American foreign policy, which wasn't just Bush, but it was Clinton as well, obviously. For instance, I think he thought he had to look like he wasn't going to lose in Afghanistan. That because he'd run against Iraq, he had to prove that he wasn't just... Then I think he discovered the American people didn't care and in fact, his initial instinct, which I think would have been to get out of everything and to pull back significantly from the world because I think his basic view was in America.

When America acts overseas, it does bad most of the time and it doesn't work. He thought he had to hide that or push against that, and then discovered that the American people were exactly where he was, or at least close to where he was.

**Walter Russell Mead:** That's interesting.

**Robert Kagan:** So I think that, therefore, when Trump comes along, aside from Trump's special qualities and the articulation of America First, it wasn't that big a shift.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Yeah. But I guess I look back at the Obama first term and some of these things endure, but there are aspects of the Obama agenda that are globally transformational. The seas will begin to recede. This sort of enshrining climate policy is a massive American act of intervention in a sense, if we [crosstalk 00:09:33]. Sorry?

**Robert Kagan:** If you believe that we actually enshrined it, I would say there was certainly more lip service paid to this than there were actual policy accomplishments.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, that may be true, but I'm not sure that that was his intention.

**Robert Kagan:** Sure.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Then I think the disarmament agenda was really quite large. But also, he did seem to take seriously this idea that the way to end terrorism in the Middle East is to cure the causes of terror. Which is to say reduce the perceived conflict between Islamic civilization in the West to promote democratization in the Middle East. I think he saw-

**Robert Kagan:** Really?

**Walter Russell Mead:** What?

**Robert Kagan:** Really, you think that was his strategy? I think-

**Walter Russell Mead:** First term. The Erdogan... One thing he and Trump have in common is that Erdogan seems to be the guy they both spent the most time talking to.

**Robert Kagan:** I think for different reasons, but yeah. No, I guess what I would say is if you really woke up Barack Obama in the middle of the night and said, "What is the cause of Middle East terrorism?" His answer would not be dictatorship in the Middle East. His answer would be, "U.S. policy."

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, they're not unrelated.

**Robert Kagan:** Well, but as you know perfectly well, there's a perfectly coherent sort of narrative that this all began because of the first Gulf War and the long presence of American forces in the region, and the apparent subservience of the Saudi King to American dictates, et cetera. That, would everybody be better off if we were just out? So I think for me, it's very hard to believe that he was seriously and personally committed to democratization in the Middle East.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Awfully, I guess we'll have to wait for all the memoirs to come out and the papers to out. It's interesting, I think maybe Obama has less leftist than you do. Maybe where we're seeing a difference.

**Robert Kagan:** Look, that position is not even that left anymore. There might've been a time when that was a special, whatever part of Chicago was from position. But I think that position has become much more mainstream. I guess the question is if you read, there are memoirs out. If you ask me who I think is closest to where Obama wound up, at least, it would be someone like Ben Rhodes. I think-

**Walter Russell Mead:** [inaudible 00:12:32] wound up?

**Robert Kagan:** Well, wound up in actuality. Again, I guess the difference, I don't even know if it's a difference, but how much of what Obama was doing in his first term was based on the perception of what a president had to do to make the American people feel like he was a good leader, and how much of the second term was him realizing that that's not what anyone was asking of him? So he was able to be more what he had intended to be.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Yes. So if true, that's another similarity between Obama and Trump, that both had very little respect for the blob.

**Robert Kagan:** Well, that's right.

**Walter Russell Mead:** As Ben Rhodes called it.

**Robert Kagan:** Right.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Gradually, perceived that they didn't have to pay attention to them.

**Robert Kagan:** Exactly.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Do you think that's right?

**Robert Kagan:** No, I think that what they don't perceive is their own... There are roots to their position too, in American history, they think they've developed something new. But of course, all kinds of, we call them isolationists now, that was the dirty word used against them at the time as well. But a lot of them, I think, fell under the category of being realists. Certainly, they take the world as it is, not as you want it to be. That is the Robert Taft position. That is the Charles Beard position. That is the the classic position.

All they are doing is restating 1930s. In some cases, left-leaning like Beard. In some cases, right-leaning like Taft. The war between that and the blob, which used to be known as the Eastern Foreign Policy Establishment, has been going on for a long time. Their views were badly discredited by World War II and were remained discredited until Vietnam, and then they enjoyed a resurrection. So it's just the old debate. It's just the Ben, because he's a kid or maybe he's not a kid. He doesn't really know anything historically. He thinks he's broken free.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, I have to say my reading in history have convinced me that one thing that people don't do is learn from history.

**Robert Kagan:** That's true, but they can learn from history having at least learned history. But then there's the not learning history, not learning from history part.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, that does seem to be another kind of right-left consensus in the U.S., that Henry [crosstalk 00:15:06]. History is bunk. Well, is the blob a lot weaker now, and do you think the realists, isolationists, or whatever you want to call them, have the upper hand looking at the next administration?

**Robert Kagan:** Well, this is what I think has been so funny because the professional realists, the self-described realists have been spending all these years just talking, "Oh, wow, it's me. Nobody's listening to us, et cetera." It probably is true, sort of, if the Foreign Policy Establishment is not where they are. The country is where they are, and I think that both Obama and Trump have been closer to being what realists claim. Now, the realists/restrainers and all of that, have turned out to have a really big problem that they don't have a good answer to, which is China.

I think a straightforward and defensible, America First restrainer policy would say, as Americans did say before World War II, "What do we care what's happening in Asia? What does it matter to us? That's not our problem. Why don't we say about Asia what we say about Europe, which is they're rich, let them handle their own problems? If China and Japan come to blows, well, then we'll see how we feel about it." This decision to say that China is a big problem that we really need to address, vitiates the whole America First restrainer position because the knock-on implications of that are you need to work with allies, you even need to work with the Europeans.

You got to pull everybody together. You have to make commitments to an Island like Taiwan. Is there any chance that a true realist would say that we care what happens to Taiwan? Certainly not a 1930s America First would have said that. So I think that the problem is the country is where the realists should be. I don't know if it's where the realists actually are.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Do you think Xi Jinping will save the blob, is that-

**Robert Kagan:** No. Xi Jinping, he has also changed the blog because now the blob... Which by the way, I don't think I'm a member of the blog because I'm disagreeing with so much of what they do, but I'm amused to see that the blog has now decided that we need to end the strategic ambiguity with Taiwan. That would have been an absolutely anathema, and was 20 years.

**Walter Russell Mead:** That is a really interesting shift.

**Robert Kagan:** Oh my God, to see Richard Haass in foreign affairs, I think that's where it was, obviously it had to be, calling for basically, didn't he call for an end to strategic ambiguity?

**Walter Russell Mead:** He has.

**Robert Kagan:** I was fighting that battle on the losing side literally 20, 25 years ago.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, as you recall, one could be prematurely anti-fascists, one could be prematurely-

**Robert Kagan:** That's been my problem all along. I was anti-China before, it was cool.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Yeah, it was okay. Now, it is a very interesting problem for realists and certainly the people I've talked to in that zone. Would be great things by the way, but being a columnist, I'm discovering you are too, is that you end up having to talk to everybody because-

**Robert Kagan:** Oh, you talked to everybody. I don't talk to anybody, Walter, but I'm glad you do.

**Walter Russell Mead:** No, well, you need to know what people think.

**Robert Kagan:** No, it's better not to. I find that depressing. I worked for Irving Kristol for a year, which was a great experience of my life. I remember so well, one of the things he always used to say is, "I don't read anything that I'm going to disagree with." That, I don't know-

**Walter Russell Mead:** He was a happy guy. [crosstalk 00:19:03].

**Robert Kagan:** A happy man. He would have hated Twitter.

**Walter Russell Mead:** No, are you kidding? My God, he wrote his editorials for the Wall Street Journal out on a yellow pad. It was unbelievable.

**Robert Kagan:** That would be an interesting thought. How would the Twitter feed of Irving Kristol look like? You should operate that Twitter for you.

**Walter Russell Mead:** So anyway, you were in the middle of saying that China is a problem, right?

**Robert Kagan:** For realists, because it does split the realist restrainer camp, I think, right down the middle.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Who's on the true America First position on China? Because even Barry Posen...

**Robert Kagan:** I think there's some people at the Quincy Institute who-

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, like who?

**Robert Kagan:** Well, I don't want to say when they're not-

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, you can't point to something people have written, is more of blank deans?

**Robert Kagan:** Well, yeah. These are based on conversations.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Oh yeah, okay.

**Robert Kagan:** But I would say there's a substantial faction at Quincy that even, it might be time to pull the chain on China, at some point. But there are a lot of people, I think, who would, as president Trump said in 2016, "Maybe Japan should just build their own bomb."

**Walter Russell Mead:** Right. Well, they can do that.

**Robert Kagan:** I know. I think they have enough plutonium for 6,000 bombs.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Yeah, tomorrow.

**Robert Kagan:** Yeah, and they're very aware of that. But then China is contained and America is off the hook, what's wrong with that? There is that school of thought.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Again, I think that is the coherent position. I think our narrative is that the isolationists lost the argument because of World War II, about whether America was actually invulnerable. But the truth is they didn't, and that issue is still, I think, is America truly in a relative sense sort of invulnerable to what happens around the world? I think is a question yet to be tested. I think we went into World War II for reasons that were not strictly based on the fact that we now felt vulnerable.

So I think it's a coherent position to say it's wrong. I think I could point out the failures of it, but it's a coherent position to say, "Hey, let them fight it out and we'll see where we come out on the other end of it."

**Robert Kagan:** Whoever wins will still want to trade.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Right. That was the argument about Hitler taking over Germany, that we will build trade, that actually turned out to be wrong. Hitler actually did not believe in trade, but that's another matter, you know. But I think that the people who, whatever faction that is that takes China seriously and says we have to do something, I think that blows up restraint.

**Robert Kagan:** Right.

**Walter Russell Mead:** The question is whether it does it politically, whether inside the beltway, I think it's safe to say and even on the Island of Manhattan, the consensus that we really do need to think hard about China and actually do some things is reasonably solid and reasonably bipartisan.

**Robert Kagan:** As long as you don't spell out what the things are.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, and then there are questions like, "Well, what if they promise to close all their coal factories in exchange for Taiwan?" Seriously, I'm exaggerating a bit, but there are contingencies that make that consensus less robust.

**Robert Kagan:** Well, but I think that what would also make it less robust is if we faced the reality that I think we're trying desperately not to face, which is that it's really fun yelling at them. It's really fun using

our superior economy to push them down, et cetera. But they have cards to play that we don't want to sit down and play with them.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Yes, exactly.

**Robert Kagan:** We're so far away from thinking about military action, because apparently that's all OBE. But at some point, they're going to test us militarily and that's where I think the Manhattan consensus, whatever that may be, falls apart.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, I think the other problem is I'm not sure that public opinion out there in the country at large would, the next president goes to Congress and say, "We need to up the defense budget by 10%." I'm not sure that the response to that would be an overwhelming groundswell of public support.

**Robert Kagan:** No. Again, if you took a poll on, "Should we go to war with China over Taiwan," what do you think the bowl would say?

**Walter Russell Mead:** Yeah.

**Robert Kagan:** Look, the great thing is, this is what America does over and over again, actually. I said this to some Chinese businessmen recently, but basically the history is now littered with the carcasses of autocratic regimes who became absolutely confident that the United States would not do anything to them, because we ourselves were convinced that we were not going to do anything, only to discover that at the end we do. That's true of Germany twice, it's true of the Japanese in spades. I wonder whether the Chinese have learned enough history not to fall into what I'd like to call the America trap.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Yeah. I do want to, because it does seem to me there are forces driving them that they're not fully in control of either.

**Robert Kagan:** Well, I think that in China, there's the usual problem that comes with a rising power, which is, there's obviously a division between those who say, "You're going to get us off this." This is true in Japan in 1941, too. There was a real active debate, and some of these people, including Admiral Yamamoto said, "Ultimately, they're going to kick our ass and this is a mistake. Okay, you're underestimating what America is capable of."

**Robert Kagan:** But then there's other people saying, "Oh, look how they're behaving. They're retreating left and right. By the way, we have to do this or will be under their thumb forever, right?" So I'm sure that debate has been going on in China. I think that we, in our way, and them, as you say for their own reasons, are much more in the, to heck with it, rule, now's our time.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Exactly. Now, I actually think that may be one of the changes is that it's not simply the China sees the United States as less focused and strong than 10 years ago, but the China also is less optimistic about its own future. Because I think there was a time when an argument in China was, "Look, in 10 years, five years, 20 years, we can come back to the same question and we'll be in a much stronger

position. So why do this now?" Looking at the demographics, the economic trends, some of the pollution issues and other things, that's not as clear, I think.

**Robert Kagan:** Do you feel like we have a read into Chinese thinking that suggests that they're in that mode of, things are going to get worse, not better as the years go by?

**Walter Russell Mead:** I actually think there's... I think if you look at the way that they've been tightening, basically battening down the hatches in every possible way, it generally seems to me that that authoritarian regimes are lazy. It's actually kind of the more secure you feel, the more you let people publish op-eds that are a little bit off center or whatever, you just don't care. But as you worry, you really try to tighten everything up, get control. There's been so much energy behind that push.

**Robert Kagan:** There's always an interesting question is what is the relationship between internal politics and foreign policy? When Stalin consolidated his position, he nevertheless was conducting a very cautious foreign policy.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Right. Again, but Stalin did believe... First of all, Stalin thought, "I'm actually weaker, Germany is, I'm behind and maybe I'll catch up in 20 years," but actually Stalin's game is survival. China had been playing the game of, "We're on the right track. We're going to get what we want." So that it wasn't Stalin's patience based so much in fear as a calculating patience based in confidence about a better future.

**Robert Kagan:** Yeah, I know. It's interesting because there really are incredible parallels between this debate and the Japanese internal debate in the '20s, '30s. Then obviously, which is that there was a whole school of Japanese who said, "We're doing fine in this Anglo-American runs system, and we're going to do fine. All we need to do is keep our cool." Then for whatever reason, which was related to a lot of internal anti-liberal politics. But for whatever reason, ultimately the people who said, "No, no, no, we can't wait anymore," came to the fore.

**Robert Kagan:** That happened in Germany to, right, from Bismarck to Wilhelm, they transition from, "We're good," to, "No, no, no, we really need to push." It could just be a natural progression for rising powers.

**Walter Russell Mead:** But for the Germans, it does seem... Fear of Russia seems to have been the thing. They saw Russia much the way some people in the West see China, and they didn't want to wait.

**Robert Kagan:** It was Russia, but it was also their own objectives which were looking at Britain. They felt that as long as Britain controlled the oceans, they would never be a great world power. Then Russia becomes a problem because you can't deal with Britain unless you've already dealt with Russia. So I think, again, it's partly your ambition or your self-perception of where you should be. Of course, the Chinese have what the Germans didn't have because they had no history abrupt to call back on.

**Robert Kagan:** The Chinese, they have an active memory of the time when they were hegemonic in their world, and that's what they think is the normal situation. So they're always trying to close the gap between what exists and what they think ought to exist.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Let's flip to Russia because it's certainly one of the persisting ideas in American foreign policy, and you heard it with Obama and you hear it even more, I think, with Trump is that, "If we can just peel Russia off from China, then that helps us with China and helps us with everything else. Let's find out what the price is and figure out how to pay it." Do you think that's realistic? What should our approach to Russia be?

**Robert Kagan:** I think that's a mistaken approach for two reasons. One is that Russia and China are always going to be fundamentally at odds. It would be a very strange universe in which they are not. If I really believe that if you're a Russian and you wake up sweating bullets at 3:00 in the morning, what you're sweating about is the fact that China is going to take over Siberia in one way or another. China is a big, and by the way, the racist feelings on both sides are enormous. They both think the other one is a monkey and have always felt that way.

So I think that they have all kinds of common interests and their number one common interest is us, but I don't think they will ever be real, work together allies. The irony is even Hitler's Germany and Japan were not actually allies. They were both pursuing their own goals. They had common interests. That turned out to be a problem for us, but it wasn't like, if only... We would have been happy to pull the Japanese away from Germany, but they had their own reason for doing what they were doing.

So that's the first thing. I don't really think they're that tight, Russia and China. The other is though, the psychology of Russia is so interesting. It's a Western looking psychology, and Russia judges itself against the West. It judged itself against Europe, now with judges itself against the United States. Their policy toward the West of them makes no sense, except a psychological point of view. They don't actually have to worry that Poland is going to invade them or Lithuania is going to invade them.

They certainly know the United States is not looking to invade them. So they create a security crisis for themselves that doesn't even exist, because it's part of their psychology. I don't think we can do much to change that, honestly. If we wanted to give them half of Europe again, I think we could probably work out a settlement that we could live with, just as we lived with it during the Cold War, right?

**Walter Russell Mead:** I was about to say, you were sounding very Kennan Ash, but Kennan was saying, "Actually, the more you give them, the more suspicious they'll be."

**Robert Kagan:** Well, that could well be true as well. I just think that their natural sense of themselves is that they control central Europe, right? That they control Poland and they control the Bol, et cetera. They don't have a natural sense of themselves dominating all of Europe.

**Walter Russell Mead:** There was that great moment at Potsdam when, I think, it was Churchill still there, congratulated Stalin for reaching Potsdam and Stalin just grumped, so Alexander got to Paris.

**Robert Kagan:** Oh yeah, right. But even the Russians know that it's artificial for them to be in Paris.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, to control. But even so in the 19th century, if the Royal House of the arch Duchy of Parma died out, the Tsar got a vote in who was coming in.

**Robert Kagan:** True.

**Walter Russell Mead:** The European Union is basically, so far as it's anything at all, it's an organization to keep the U.S. and Russia from having votes in those matters.

**Robert Kagan:** I guess, although they themselves can't vote on those matters.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, they can't. But keeping other people out of the way while we did that endlessly, nothing wrong matters, that as an objective.

**Robert Kagan:** That's true. There were worse foreign policy objectives than that, Walter.

**Walter Russell Mead:** But when I look at the EU agenda in the East and at Russia's agenda, I do wonder where's America's role. What role, whether it's in Ukraine or Belarus, what makes sense for us to do there? What would be your read?

**Robert Kagan:** I think this has been a series of own goals on our part. We have the capacity, if we chose to make Ukraine off limits to Russia, even if it hadn't been admitted to NATO yet. I never felt there was any danger that if we looked serious, that the Russians were going to say, "Well, that's okay, we'll go to war with you anyway." I don't think that the idea of getting into the war with the United States, with Russia in the condition that it has been in. So this was classic case of Putin pushing to see how far he could get.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Then he guaranteed Ukraine's-

**Robert Kagan:** Yeah. I think we could have guaranteed Ukraine, I think we could have guaranteed Georgia if we'd chosen to. If this had been the early Cold War and we were taking stuff seriously, instead of thinking that the whole world is coming together and everything's going to be fine and Oh my God, why did they do that? We would have definitely said, "No, no, no, no, those are off limits. Just because they're not in NATO, doesn't mean they're off limits." Then Russia would have been pissed and yelling, and screaming, and doing little nefarious things, but they would not have done as the blatant, cross border regression that they did. So this is totally us just letting it happen.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Now is Crimea reversible, do you think?

**Robert Kagan:** Well, I don't think that's on anybody's agenda really to reverse it. So you'd have to have... I have a hard time imagining that unless you had some, if the most liberal segments of the Yeltsin government took power and had the kind of internationalist idea that someone like Andrei Kozyrev represented the foreign minister, one of Russia's foreign ministers in that period, who really just wants to become part of the EU. Yeah, then I could see trading again with Ukraine.

But absent that, I would say any normal Russian leader is not going to Crimea, and I don't know that the West is demanding that anybody can back Russia.

**Walter Russell Mead:** So what's the point of the sanctions over Crimea if they no longer really represent a serious policy?

**Robert Kagan:** Well, because there's an ongoing conflict in Georgia, in the Donbass and elsewhere. I think that if Russia would get out of the rest of Ukraine, I would imagine the sanctions might be-

**Walter Russell Mead:** So that would be the deal, is piece in the Donbass for no sanctions?

**Robert Kagan:** Yeah. I I'm sure that that deal, in some form or other, is on the table. I'm sure we would have all kinds of, how do we save face on Crimea, et cetera, but I think that the Russians started playing ball in the rest of Ukraine that we would make that deal. I think they know that too.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Will the Germans go along with that?

**Robert Kagan:** The Germans will go along with anything as long as it's... Because they would love to have a rapprochement with Russia, and-

**Walter Russell Mead:** But I though international law was sacred.

**Robert Kagan:** The Germans are not loonies, they're very pragmatic.

**Walter Russell Mead:** That's a settlement that could happen?

**Robert Kagan:** Pardon?

**Walter Russell Mead:** That's a settlement that could happen?

**Robert Kagan:** Absolutely. But Putin doesn't want that settlement for whatever reason.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Right. Do you think Biden would like it?

**Robert Kagan:** Yeah. I don't think. Whatever is the case, I don't think Crimea, as horrible as this is, I don't think [Mensturia 00:38:20] was a hangup even though we made a big deal out of it either. So it was more about what Japan was going to do next, that was the problem. So I don't think Crimea is an obstacle if Putin would have actually interested in solving these problems.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Should we be promoting revolution in Belarus?

**Robert Kagan:** I don't know whether we actually have the capacity to do that, but it would then of course, immediately beg the question, what do we intend to do about it if Russia sends in the tanks? I think that this is one of those cases where, while I think Ukraine was something we could have prevented, I don't know exactly. Our relationship with Belarus has been so, almost non-existent for so long that it's just hard to imagine us taking our stand there.

So should we encourage them? It's their decision. When you're saying we shouldn't encourage people to rise up, it's their decision whether to rise up or not. You just have to be clear that you're not going to be sending in the 82nd Airborne to help them out when the time comes, which they know.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, we now have a complicating factor that bridges Eastern Europe and the Middle East, that is to say Turkey and [Nakhchivan 00:39:51]. We have this war going on with Armenia and Azerbaijan. You got Armenia, which is certainly the country that has the deepest support in the United States of the two, is a sort of ally of Russia and Iran more or less. Azerbaijan of Turkey with a chunk of Russia, but has been very helpful to us, I think, and to Israel and Iran. So how would you construct a policy for all of these?

**Robert Kagan:** We got to go through every frozen conflict, is that where we're going-

**Walter Russell Mead:** It strikes me that when thinking about the boundaries of the West or placing boundaries of American power and influence, the caucuses matters.

**Robert Kagan:** The thing is that and I don't mean, this may sound like a cop out and I'll try to come to an answer. In an earlier world, this was something we could have done more about than now. There's a whole sequence of events that have occurred over a 20-year period, which has put us in a worse and worst position to be able to do anything. The first being, I think, the crack-up between the EU and Turkey. I really do believe that that was a very unfortunate event when the EU made it clear that they didn't want to take in Turkey. I think that helped set Turkey in a different direction and we've been paying the price for that, to some extent.

Then circumstantially, because of the Iraq war that messed up our relationship with Turkey. So our ability to have a useful influence on Turkey is as low as it's ever been, I think. So if you can't influence Turkey and your other options are how to influence Iran and Russia, you have a problem, right? So I have tremendous empathy for Armenia, although Armenia has its own problems. But I just don't know at this point, we would have to get ourselves back in the game in so many different fundamental ways.

We would have to be playing in the EU in a much more active way. We would have to have a different kind of relationship with Turkey, which may have something to do... On the Turkey relationship, we also blew it in Syria. We made it clear, we were completely unreliable for them. We did things they thought were directly aimed at them. So you have to rewind a lot of history in order to get to a place where you feel that you could do some good.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, I'm just thinking that if you look at the military developments so far, it's not unlikely that the Azerbaijanis are going to continue to advance into Nagorno-Karabakh. It's not unlikely that you're going to have a massive refugee flight in the winter, in COVID, of a people whose earlier genocide is a significant political fact. Not just in the us, but in Europe as well.

**Robert Kagan:** You know what we'll do? We'll say, "Oh my God, this is terrible."

**Walter Russell Mead:** Okay, does that have implications, do you think? Are there consequences of that? Because I agree with you, that's the most likely thing that will happen.

**Robert Kagan:** Yeah, it will have. All of these, again, you know so well, history is not a kind of... Then this happens and then this happens because there's a hundred things happening, right? So will this contribute to the general breakdown so that when you hit your next problem, will your failure on this

problem impact your ability to deal with the next problem? Yes. You know what I mean? But there were so many intervening factors in history.

This could turn out to be irrelevant compared to what the next thing is, but I think we have been over the past 20 years, probably, been gradually, if you want, pulling out the Jenga things. You know what I mean? That we've gradually been creating or allowing to proliferate more and more of these kinds of problems. Then it's a kind of a chaos theory question; at what point does the whole pile tip over? That certainly is the analogy from the '20s and '30s, because we really let some things happen in the '20s that seem fairly trivial, but their consequence collectively was to take us to the '30s.

I don't want us to talk about the '30s because then people say, "Well, you're always thinking about the '30s and that [inaudible 00:44:53]."

**Walter Russell Mead:** Right. But I've actually been thinking a lot about... I'm calling it the Lodge consensus of American foreign policy after World War I, which was not nakedly isolationists by any means, and it's actually a more sophisticated vision of the world and founded on a certain view of history. It has a certain kind of intellectual integrity to it.

**Robert Kagan:** Well, I'm writing about that right now, and I'll get back to you when I can show you. I think that that's overstating Lodge's vision, but I understand what you're saying.

**Walter Russell Mead:** A Lodge consensus, it's the way you would call the post-Cold War, the Clinton consensus. He didn't embody every piece of it.

**Robert Kagan:** Right. But I think even the sort of allegedly clever new form of internationalism in the 1920s, was not in fact clever and actually led to disaster. So that's-

**Walter Russell Mead:** I would say the same thing about some of the post-Cold War consensus. That's the comparison I want to make.

**Robert Kagan:** It's the opposite consensus, is the only thing.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, some of the things that interest me is similarities, they both rest on a kind of an unearned optimism about where history is headed.

**Robert Kagan:** Absolutely fair.

**Walter Russell Mead:** In both cases, what that does is it papers over the gap between what the American people can be persuaded to do and what the international system might require them to do, and their own interests might require them to do.

**Robert Kagan:** Absolutely. But I think that is a perennial problem and I think that's the normal American problem, which somehow the fear of communism broke us out of.

**Walter Russell Mead:** It's actually interesting that after World War II, the first snap back was essentially to Lodge too. We were getting out very, very quickly, and it was really hard to turn that around and without Stalin, we could have never done it, I think.

**Robert Kagan:** It's hard to say, obviously the experience of World War II and the '30s was such that the minute anybody popped up, who could remotely look like what those [inaudible 00:47:05], and Stalin was that guy.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Except when Churchill made iron curtains to Churchill, Mr. Anton Munich makes his speech at Fulton and Truman applauds. He has to apologize all over the place for that applause, "I was applauding the man, not this gentleman. My goodness, iron curtain."

**Robert Kagan:** Pretty well. Absolutely. Obviously, Truman was going to try to cut the defense budget as much as he could, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. George Kennan said at the time that we shouldn't be staying in Europe because we're incapable of doing it. That was his-

**Walter Russell Mead:** And that was clearly in Roosevelt's mind at Yalta. He's not going to be able to keep troops in Europe for a year after he made the deal you can make.

**Robert Kagan:** Right. Now, there's a whole phenomenon which somebody like you should write about or eventually, which is the phenomenon of Americans willing to keep troops in places forever, as long as you don't continually remind them that they're there. When Dean Anderson was asked, I think by Senator Hickenlooper of those days, "How long troops were going to stay in Europe," I think he said two years.

**Walter Russell Mead:** There's also process of acclimatizing Americans to that. I've always thought the album that Elvis Presley cut when he was drafted into the army, he actually cut an army album and it's got... I don't know if you've heard it, but I probably on some Amazon streaming or something, it's got numbers like the occupation GI blues, and he's complaining about... This was a very popular album and it's Americans occupying-

**Robert Kagan:** It was part of life in those days, right?

**Walter Russell Mead:** I tried it with the draft, but I think the sense was that you probably not going to fight, but still they were there.

**Robert Kagan:** The thing that I'm always interested in and we always talk about people say we're overstretched now with our troop deployments. I just think back on the 1950s, post Korea, so a time of absolute peace under Eisenhower, we had something like a million troops deployed overseas out of a population of 180 million. Today, we have a population of 330 million and we probably have under 200,000 deployed overseas. But today, we feel like we're overstretched.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Right. So what's you're really looking at then, from your point of view, is we've got the cycle of American delay inconsequentialism while things gradually get worse. Then one morning we wake up when they've bombed Pearl Harbor or whatever, or they've attacked the World Trade Center,

whatever it might be that wakes us up. Then on the other side, you have the cycle of people progressively saying, "The Americans are so..."

They start out scared of the Americans and they don't do things, but then they get more and more comfortable. Then finally, they just do something that crosses the line and wakes us up, because they have become so convinced we'll do nothing, and that's the cycle of history.

**Robert Kagan:** That's the America trap that we play on everybody, including Saddam Hussein, including Slobodan Milosevic, et cetera, et cetera. We're very convincing because we mean it that we don't want to do anything.

**Walter Russell Mead:** I know. It's great. One of the things I wrote about in *Special Providence* is that American democracy can't be consciously hypocritical. But we can do things that actually manifest the most perfect hypocrisy. Everyone in the American process being sincere the entire way through. [crosstalk 00:50:58].

**Robert Kagan:** Well, look, I'm trying to figure this out and think it through, but where I am right now is that we have also, again, in America, it's a unique situation. You talk about what China's perception of where it ought to be is, which is bigger than where it is now, and that's normal. Countries, especially rising powers have a view of what they should be, that is bigger than what they currently are, or they have a memory in history. The American self-image is actually to be smaller than we actually are.

We still revere the fact that... I think that the Quincy people don't really understand John Quincy Adams at all, and they just have just jumped on this phrase, [crosstalk 00:51:42]. Even that speech is like he's also urging people to rise up against monarchs in Europe, et cetera, but okay, fine. But even if John Quincy Adams actually meant what they think he meant, why are we looking to a guy in 1820, three or four or five to guide our foreign policy? It's crazy. The fact that we go back to Washington's farewell address and the Monroe doctrine, we're a completely different country now.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Yeah. Yet we go back in the same way to the Federalist papers. This is, we venerate our national past in history. Now, we're less interested into that. I'm not sure it will be better when we lose that.

**Robert Kagan:** Well, I'm not sure. I think that the interesting thing is, of course, from our constitutional perspective, I think it's very important that we continue to revere the declaration in the constitution and the founders views. But first of all, I don't even think the founders thought that when Rossington gives us farewell address, I don't think he thought he was controlling American foreign policy 200 years in advance.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Again, I think what people do is they take a kind of superficial sloganeering proof texting approach. So they get a quote but they'll forget Jefferson congratulating Monroe on his alliance with England.

**Robert Kagan:** Right. But anyway, the conflict, therefore, is that unlike other countries whose ambitions outstrip their capacity, Americans ambition is less than their capacity. America has the capacity to continue dominating the world if it wanted to, as it has shown repeatedly, and yet Americans don't think

that that's what their role should be. I think we are been witnessing for a hundred years, at least, the bizarre tension between the self-perception of Americans and the capacity of America.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Right. Well, I remember in some of the earlier rack days, I was hearing a good deal then. Well, what the Americans need is a British style, Imperial civil service that will go out and govern these places. I'm thinking, that's the last thing we'll ever come up with.

**Robert Kagan:** Of course, it is because we would never admit to ourselves that we wanted to be that.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Right. That would require us, right?

**Robert Kagan:** We're not that, by the way, and this is where I've always thought that Neil Ferguson has just been dead wrong. We are not the British empire. The British felt that they had a inborn vocation for ruling. The empire was everything to them, it was their identity. Whereas America, it's the opposite of that. Our global strength is not even part of our identity.

**Walter Russell Mead:** No. Well, I think our self-image is we are the liberating country, not the conquerer.

**Robert Kagan:** May be, but in any case, it is not our vocation to be ruling other people.

**Walter Russell Mead:** No. Well, of course, what we do is we want them to spontaneously, we would have them do if we were ruling.

**Robert Kagan:** Exactly.

**Walter Russell Mead:** We want to cut out that middle step and not rule.

**Robert Kagan:** Exactly. That's why whenever we intervene, we have a foot out the door, as soon as we have our foot in the door. That's why-

**Walter Russell Mead:** But also when we intervene, we both put a foot out the door and then start giving a long list of things that we want the people to do.

**Robert Kagan:** Exactly. Even though we're not going to actually force them to do it right away.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Now, we're leaving Afghanistan, but we really want to make sure that the Women's Literacy Program in the hill towns is moving forward.

**Robert Kagan:** And that the Taliban keep fighting ISIS for us.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Yeah, we have a list, but we don't want to make... Only as a last resort. By the way, the book that when I teach American foreign policy history classes, I always start with, I don't know if you know, it is Benito Cereno by Herman Melville.

**Robert Kagan:** [inaudible 00:55:43]?

**Walter Russell Mead:** It's a novella. I think a lot of it is just American foreign policy in one incident. It's based on a real life thing that happened in the early 19th century of this American captain, a new England sealing ship comes across this Spanish Hawk and it's in bad repair, it's carrying a bunch of slaves. They don't seem very discipline, it's bad. So first thing that the Americans think about is, "Let's help them out. Let's send them humanitarian aid." So they send them like food and fresh water.

"The ship is still not working right. They need technical assistance," so we send them sails and ropes, and all that. "That's only good, we're going to put our helmets on to help them steer." Well, ultimately that starts to fail them, and the next stage is regime change. Move right up the ladder and I won't, there are a lot of spoilers, which I won't-

**Robert Kagan:** Well, I will read it now. Thank you, Walter.

**Walter Russell Mead:** But at the end, it's a very unusual book because books are things where characters have experiences which changed them. At the end of the book, neither the American captain nor the Spanish captain has changed in any way. The Spanish character understands everything, but can do nothing. The American character can do everything, but understands nothing.

**Robert Kagan:** No, we're a very peculiar country to have found ourselves in this position. Our reaction to it has been the central drama of the world really now for over 110 years. The other wonderful thing about that is we're also completely unaware of that, that we do not realize that everybody in power in the world wakes up every morning asking what the United States is going to do. At least they have been, they may get used to not doing that. When we talk about Armenia now and I was just thinking, watching what's going on in the Mediterranean now is really fun because it looks very 19th century.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Yes, it does.

**Robert Kagan:** There's less America. It's like Russia is here, France is there, France and Turkey, what's going on in North Africa? It's all these sort of medium and larger powers, picking sides.

**Walter Russell Mead:** And amazingly, it doesn't seem to be more peaceful.

**Robert Kagan:** Well, it's not more peaceful. The question is, and there were a lot of people who would say, and I probably would be one of them, "This is the consequence of America pulling out is." But I think it's a perfectly reasonable thing to say, "Yeah, good. So what? Let them deal with these problems." Even if they can't deal with them, I'm sure a lot of people would say, "Are we that much better at dealing with them?" I think that's wrong and I think it's wrong, not because of what's happening right now, but because of how all these things ultimately build on each other. But it's hard to prove that's wrong. You know what I mean?

**Walter Russell Mead:** Yeah. I know, exactly. All right. Well, let's do this again sometimes, it's been a lot of fun.

**Robert Kagan:** I agree.

**Walter Russell Mead:** Well, fun is maybe the wrong word. You're not exactly giving us lots of cheerful thoughts about the future, but you do it in a very cheerful way.

**Robert Kagan:** Well, it's just analysis. You can still hope. Hope is not analysis. You can have hope.

**Walter Russell Mead:** There we go.

**Robert Kagan:** But I do think that, as I say, put it this way, America's not out of business and I think we're capable of recovering. I just don't think we are going to choose to do so anytime soon.

**Walter Russell Mead:** All right. Thank you, Bob. Great to see you. See you again soon.

**Robert Kagan:** Thanks, Walter.