

Joel Rayburn

Hello, everyone, and welcome to another edition of the Region podcast, which is a production of the American Center for Levant Studies. And we're happy to be joined today by Ambassador James Jeffrey, who's had a distinguished career in the American Foreign Service, one of our most distinguished diplomats over the last four decades. Ambassador Jeffrey's been involved in so many of the major foreign policy issues, major crises, conflicts, successes, some maybe not successes of US diplomacy over over the last several decades. Ambassador Jeffrey actually started his government career in military service. He served as a US Army officer in Vietnam and Germany for some years before transferring over into the Foreign Service, becoming a very distinguished diplomat who later served as US ambassador to Albania, to Turkey, and Iraq, and was actually retired from the Foreign Service and then was recalled onto active Foreign Service under Secretary Mike Pompeo and was the most senior diplomat in the entire the entire Foreign Service. Ambassador Jeffrey's last position in the US government was as the special representative for Syria, which is where you and I worked very closely together. Today I'd like to have a conversation about the strategic picture for the United States and our allies in the Middle Eastern region. We call this podcast and our newsletter "The Region," because we try to look at a comprehensive picture of the Middle East. It's very easy to get drawn down into one country or one issue, but you do that at your peril. Ambassador, first of all, welcome. Thank you for spending time with us today. I want to start by asking you this, does the United States have a national security strategy concerning the Middle Eastern region?

James Jeffrey

Before I get to the very short answer to that, Joel, first of all, thank you for having me on today. It's honor to be here. I won't spend as much time describing Joel's accomplishments as he did with mine. I'll just say that having seen the dynamic of the two of them working together, Joel Rayburn is General David Petraeus's Dave Petraeus. It's a pretty good summary of where Joel sits in the military, foreign affairs, security pantheon here in Washington, D.C.

James Jeffrey

The answer is no. And the follow up to that is that's tragic because the United States actually has a pretty good global national security strategy that the administration released last month, linked to the national defense strategy that has also come out. The big gap is the Middle East.

Joel Rayburn

Why is that?

James Jeffrey

There are two reasons. There is a superficial one, which involves going all the way back to the Obama administration: that we must pivot to the Asian theater, China, and now pivot also to Ukraine. But that's not the real reason, because this is not about Patriot missiles or aircraft carriers. It's about an understanding of what's going on both in the region and in the world. The administration has made it clear in its national security strategy, correctly, that leaving aside global issues like COVID and climate and so on, its job in foreign policy is to preserve global collective security and the international order against threats to that order coming from Russia, China, and regional opponents such as North Korea and Iran. So far, so good. The problem is, while the administration has an understanding of how to go about that--basically by alliances, deterrence, containment--in the European theater and in the East Asian theater, the administration doesn't have its act together in the Middle East facing the two challenges we have, the terrorism challenge is pretty much under control, though it needs to be watched. But the far more important one right now is Iran and its march through the region into Arab countries from Lebanon and Iraq to Syria and Yemen. It doesn't seem to really grasp that threat, even though its allies keep asking.

Joel Rayburn

Why is this so hard? The Biden administration is not the first to grapple insufficiently or prefer to spend its bandwidth on other problems. Why has it been so difficult for the United States, certainly since 9/11 or since the late 1990s, to grapple with this problem of the Iranian regime?

James Jeffrey

It's because Iran has found a sweet spot between all-out military aggression, such as Saddam against Kuwait in 1990, and the kind of asymmetrical combat that you see terrorist organizations trying to do, either those that try to gain and hold territory such as the Islamic State or those who simply try to have a wave of violence, such as al Qaeda. Iran has developed an all-elements-of-national-power approach based upon radical groups, many of them Shia, but not all (think of Hamas in Gaza and other groups in Gaza), to target vulnerable states in a collective approach that mixes military pressure, assassinations, terror as we understand it, economic carrots and sticks, diplomacy, intelligence, covert actions, the psychological and cyber operations in a way that is below the threshold of easy American response.

Joel Rayburn

I think you're right. Flying under the radar, coming right up to explicit red lines and not crossing them, or edging over them from time to time, seems to be the approach from the Iranian regime. So it is quite clever. It seems to me like they've departed from that now in a way that's going to redound to their detriment. But more on that in a minute. I will say this. It's not just previous administrations. I could pick out real instances in every administration since 2000 where the Iranians might otherwise seem to cross a redline. For example, the Iranian intervention into Iraq, during the Iraq war. The Bush administration, and you were deputy national security advisor at the time of that problem, never really came up with an approach to stop them. The Obama administration, certainly we can say all of those things were continuing. In addition, on the Obama administration's watch, the Iranian intervention in the Syrian war; the Iranian intervention into Yemen; an Iranian intervention in Afghanistan against our soldiers with not really much of a response. The Trump administration had a more forward leaning Iran policy. But still, when we got down to 2019 and the Iranian attack against Abqaiq and the Saudi vital oil energy production capacity, we didn't really have a response then. If you took one of those instances and you put them in some other continent, and some other country did any of those things, you would probably get a full-bore response. But because it's the Iranian regime, they always seem to get the benefit of the rest of the world saying, well, they're the Iranians, of course they're going to be provocative and aggressive and evil.

James Jeffrey

I think you've hit the nail on the head, Joel, as always. Let me put it this way. Having been in three of the last four administrations focused on Iran, we talk about, in military terms, capabilities and intentions. The capability of the United States to effectively, quickly, subtly deter, contain, and push back Iran is somewhat limited because, as I said, Iranians find the niche operations that fall below our military response or our diplomatic response. So even when we have a strong intention of contesting Iran in the region--and we saw that in the Trump administration quite forcefully, and we saw it to some degree in the Bush 43 administration, although the focus was primarily on Iraq--the capability challenges us not because we don't have enough aircraft carriers, but because it's hard to find the right approach. And I'll get to the Saudi incident in a second. But the second problem is, do we have the intention to contest Iran in the region? We did not, explicitly, in the Obama administration because, as he revealed in his interview for "The Atlantic" magazine, he felt that we and our allies, such as Saudi Arabia, should, quote, "share the region" with Iran. The only problem he really saw, that he put a lot of effort into, whether you like that result or not, was Iran's nuclear file. But the nuclear file for Iran is only one

of

innumerable ways that it approaches its march to regional hegemony, and the Obama administration didn't recognize that. On paper, the Biden administration lists the need to push back against Iran in the region; it lists it with the nuclear file, with the missile file, with the terrorist file, and with the regional file. But it doesn't really have a way to do that. Let's take an example. You raised the strike in Saudi Arabia, and this leads to a somewhat complicated problem we have with our own allies in the region. Just like most of you, when you buy car insurance, you have a deductible, which means that the big insurance company over the horizon, the insurance company, 911, will come and rescue you if you've totaled your car in a big accident. Or using medical insurance, if you are hospitalized with a serious illness, they'll come forward and pay the bills. But for many reasons, from efficiency to not running up the charge of this insurance too much, they leave it to you to handle the smaller problems. That's frankly how we look at various military operations in Middle East. We don't respond to every single strike, not this administration, not the Trump administration, the Bush administration, not the Obama administration. But there are differences. We did not respond in 2019 both to the shutdown of a very large American drone by the Iranians and then a few months later, the attack on the Aramco site. But eventually, when Iran kept pushing, we struck back and we struck back in a very powerful, dramatic, and strategically important way, taking out Qassem Soleimani. That led to an Iranian escalation, which fortunately we were able to contain without any killed Americans. But still that had a huge positive impact on the region and set Iran back, to quote its own Foreign minister Zarif a few years later, as much as killing an entire IRGC division. So that's how you can do this. I don't see the intention of the Biden administration to use national power, to find times and places where it can respond like that. Again, it won't be perfect. We won't respond to everything, but we should respond in a more powerful way to some things, be it the undercutting of democracy in Iraq, which is happening right before our eyes, be it the strikes on our soldiers in Syria.

Joel Rayburn

We've gone directly into discussing the problem of the Iranian regime. But if we were to zoom out from it, and if you were back in the



National Security Advisor's chair, or deputy national security advisor's chair, if the President said, okay. Mr. Jeffrey, Deputy National Security Advisor, I need you to pull together the team and come up with the principles or the pillars, to sketch out the main planks of a US national security strategy concerning the Middle Eastern region. And you were to sit down at the table then with your counterparts in different agencies and roll up your sleeves, and the end of that meeting, what would be the major planks of the national security strategy as you would lay them out?



James Jeffrey

We actually did this in the Bush administration. Other administrations have tried it, at that global level, because it starts everything at the global level. The Biden administration is doing it. It's deductive reasoning. You start with the underlying reality of the world today. The United States is running a global collective security system with many score partners, allies, friends. We've committed to their security. And this is embedded within an even larger international order that has monetary, economic, energy, values, legal, and other elements. It's the way of the world today, and it has been extremely successful, not only for us Americans, but for most of the rest of the world, in providing peace, prosperity, and freedom. In fact, those are the three goals of the current 2022 national security strategy for the entire globe. So therefore, you say, okay, what does this mean in the Middle East? It means that we work by, with, and through partners, as the military is saying now. The partners are in the lead; we're supporting them, providing those things they can't do, and that includes both diplomatic and military reinforcement, to preserve that order against countries that are trying aggressively through terror, through energy exploitation, through military threats, missile strikes, whatever, to undermine that order. Then you come to one level below: what are the specific goals in the region? Why is this region important? And in the Middle East, it's oil, it's partners, it's terrorism, and it's weapons of mass destruction, be they Assad's chemical weapons or the Iranian quest for nuclear weapons, or Saddam's quest before that or Gadhafi's before that, because this is a general pattern. It's a general operations program that you can apply against threats that go back from the 1970s forward. It's not just Iran. It's not just terrorists. For a while it was Saddam. For a while it was the Egyptians, in the 1960s, for example, and particularly in the early 1970s, that required containment, required contesting their march through the region. The end result, however, is always the same: a region that remains at peace, that trades with the rest of the world, including importantly, hydrocarbons, and with our help, can protect itself from hegemonic forces that are trying to take it over.

Joel Rayburn

I would add another one, which is that the United States has a vital interest in the free flow of global commerce, not just in the Middle East, but elsewhere, which is why we care about the Straits of Malacca. The Middle East has three strategic waterways that connect the Atlantic region with the Asian region, and connect Europe with South Asia and East Asia. You have the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab al Mandeb, and the Suez Canal. The United States has a vital interest to make sure that those aren't threatened.

James Jeffrey

And to the north the Dardanelles.

Joel Rayburn

And the Dardanelles to the north. That's right. Connecting the Black Sea region to the Mediterranean region and beyond. So you're absolutely right. So getting back to the original question, what's so hard about that? Why don't we do it? Let me interject that in the Trump administration we did go through the homework exercise of doing the national security strategy, which Nadia Schadlow did under General McMaster's direction with the Cabinet's involvement. But then getting down to particular strategies for the main national security problems under that. China, Korea, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and so on. We did go through that drill. I don't know that we implemented it. We wound up with game plans. I don't know that we fully implemented them or had enough time to implement them. Why don't we, as the United States? What becomes so hard about just implementing a national security strategy? You were able to sketch it out in about 5 minutes right there. So why can't we do it?

James Jeffrey

Okay, here is my explanation. There's a saying from the 19th century, great powers don't have permanent friends. They have permanent interests. I'll turn that around and say great friends don't have permanent enemies. They have permanent interests. And whoever is challenging those interests at time X becomes a permanent enemy. A good example is, who is one of our stalwart allies in the 1970s against Soviet aggression? The Shah of Iran, along with our allies Pakistan and Turkey at that time. And at times we have been in confrontations with Turkey over Syria. We certainly are in confrontations with Iran. Normally, we get this. On the case of Iran, think there was a view here in Washington, and particularly in Europe, that Iran is not really an enemy state. It's misunderstood.

Joel Rayburn

They're a friend in waiting.

James Jeffrey

They're a friend in waiting. They're aggressive because they feel insecure. Now, I thought that issue was answered, to be frank, in the 1970s, when a certain individual named Henry Kissinger, referring in another context to the Soviet Union, said, Oh, they're doing what they're doing because they're insecure? Well let me tell you, total security for the Soviet Union means total insecurity for everybody else. But we lost that idea with Iran, beginning, frankly, in the Clinton administration. The Al Khobar Towers attack was clearly the Iranians. We didn't react to it because they had pro-Western leaders and we wanted to see if there was an opening. So we let them get away with literally murder of American airmen and women in order to continue something that never proved itself. And this reached a high point in the Obama administration. I don't want to take that administration to task too much because it was only following what we had very much in the Clinton Administration.

Joel Rayburn

And you were in it. But so was I, as a military officer. We all have to carry our share of the blame.

James Jeffrey

Sure. But even in the Bush administration, there was a huge debate in the administration that could be summed up as Vice President Cheney on one side and Secretary of State Rice and Secretary of Defense Gates on the other about how--not whether, but how--to contest Iran in the region. And by and large, we probably tilted more towards what the Obama administration did than what the Trump administration did. So it's hard to do this, but the Obama administration in particular was not sure that Iran was really the enemy. I

think that's a problem today with the Biden administration. It's a residual, because many of these people are veterans of the Obama administration. It's residual, "well maybe they're really not an enemy." It is a residual effort, although it's pretty much dead on arrival now, to try to get a nuclear agreement, a return to the JCPOA nuclear agreement. A little bit "well the Middle East is messy," and it's a little bit, to follow the Jeffrey plan, as you have to describe it, "we need to deal with. yuck, the Turks, the Israelis, the Saudis, the Emiratis (with their head of state recently in St Petersburg yucking it up with Putin) and the Egyptians. They're all human rights violators. They're all bad partners. They all want to cut deals with Putin so that they can do what they want to do in Syria--that's both Turkey and Israel--or they won't be as aggressive towards Iran, or they'll be too aggressive, and we don't like to deal with them. So we're going to go off and worry about Ukraine and worry about Taiwan." That's a mistake.

Joel Rayburn

Now, to clarify, you're expressing the world view of these folks, not your own. Just so the audience is clear, it's not Jim Jeffrey saying this.

James Jeffrey

My belief is you defend Ukraine in part by what you do in Syria. You defend Taiwan by what happens in Ukraine. Because they're all looking at us, and collective security and containment is indivisible. You do it everywhere (and that leads to a whole discussion about Vietnam, because this can get very costly if you do it incorrectly or badly), or you do it nowhere because nobody will have confidence in you. Russia would not be doing today what it is doing in Ukraine if it hadn't been for what it did in Syria without us trying to stop them.

Joel Rayburn

And is still doing. It was just yesterday or within the last 36 hours that they had another massive bombing of IDP camps in northern Syria and killed and wounded dozens of people. The Russian air force, the Syrian air force still doing that.

James Jeffrey

But the difference is, Joel, if I may intervene, because this involves what you and I did, we put together, with the support of President Trump and Secretary Pompeo and the US military, we put together a containment program in Syria, political as well as military, that has blocked Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies from seizing significant terrain since then. We haven't stopped the Russians from bombing. Hell, we haven't stopped the Turks from bombing our own allies and partners, the Syrian Democratic Forces. There's still some fighting there, but it's low level. And we have provided a diplomatic-military platform that, if everybody wants to solve this thing, there's a way forward. Right now, as you know, our friend Geir Peterson, the UN envoy for Syria, has moved forward with what we used to call the roadmap. I wish the United States were doing it, but at least somebody is.

Joel Rayburn

The thing about the roadmap and the idea of a diplomatic resolution or a political solution to the Syrian conflict; I always felt we know enough about this Assad regime to know they're not interested in a political solution. They can only be compelled to go along with a political solution. And the compulsion has to come from a pressure strategy, which is what you and I were implementing with the approval of Secretary Pompeo and President Trump. It's not a unique problem, that you have a rogue regime that resists international diplomacy, an international diplomatic process to get to a political solution of a conflict or frozen conflict. The essential ingredient has to be for the United States, in most of these conflicts--I suppose there are conflicts where the US doesn't have a vital stake and really is just sort of in the background or on the sidelines--but in most of these conflicts, in my experience, if the United States is not involved in organizing international pressure on the warring party in question, then it's just not going to happen, and these conflicts aren't going to get resolved. And maybe they'll burn themselves out someday and maybe they won't. But, you know, they don't really burn themselves out. There's a lot of kindling to go.

James Jeffrey

And the complicated thing with Syria but I can go back to you mentioned and then I get Vietnam is that you have to come in at two levels. You have to have a specific, tailored approach that recognizes and deals with the realities on the ground that are very different in every scenario. And deals with the realities of the enemy. As I said, Iran has found a sweet spot. We have to deal with that. We can't decide, hey, we're going to fight the war we want to fight, when Iran is fighting the war, we're trying to stop Iran from fighting the war it wants to fight. We got to get down there and do it with them the way they're doing it. But that's at the tactical operation level. Strategically, you have to answer the question of what are we trying to do here? And that gets back to the idea of the global order and the threats to it. What we, you and I, saw, and Mike Pompeo and, in their own way, the White House, was that what was going on in Syria wasn't a bunch of Syrians on one side and a bunch of Syrians on the other, led on the bad side by Assad, fighting a civil war, but was a challenge to the regional order and indirectly, particularly with Russia involved, to the global system that we were trying to defend. Therefore the most important thing was they--not an inch more. They cannot gain territory. They can't win.

Joel Rayburn

Right. A lot of people I talked to and have worked with from the Middle East, I'm sure this is your experience as well, or from other regions, I would say Turkey, because you're the United States, you can put a man on the moon, you can do whatever you want, yet Assad is still there after 11 and a half years, so it must mean that you want him there. So there's this just dyed in the wool judgment, even among the closest allies we have, that the United States must have some kind of unspoken interest in Assad staying in power. Otherwise, you would have done something about it, America. How do you how do you answer that?

James Jeffrey

It's hard because we're dealing with people, say the Arab states, Turkey, Israel, who have all had experiences going back hundreds of years and diplomacy as it used to be done. And they they recognize that great powers sometimes go for 50% solutions, 70% solutions. And they would have understood colonial France keeping an unhappy, or allowing an unhappy enemy to stay in power rather than going to all of the effort to--

Joel Rayburn

Which was the French method. Including in Syria.

James Jeffrey

Right. Including in many places. Or the British or the Russians. They would have understood this. The problem is we march in with an absolutist, almost transcendental approach to policies where it's going to be democracy versus autocracy, and democracy is going to prevail. And that's a good talking point for a UN meeting and such, but it's not a good basis to do diplomacy. In fact, explicitly, the Biden administration's national security strategy, and it's fascinating, after they debate it, including the president in his introduction for several pages, kind of says, gee, we'd like to be democrats versus autocrats, but we're really not. It's got to be whoever's supporting the global system against whoever is threatening it. That's realpolitik. And what that means is maybe we won't do 100% solution against Assad. Maybe we'll do enough just to keep the situation under control until another day we get to fight on better terms.

Joel Rayburn

You know, and one thing that doesn't help, though, the conspiracy theory, when people say you must have a plan to secretly allow X to stay in power or you must secretly not be bothered, you must secretly have some see some kind of interest in the Iranian regime doing what it does because you don't try to stop it. Occasionally one of the things that worsens the problem for diplomats like you and I were is that in the not just in the US, in Europe too, and some other places, you have people pop up with the idea, you know what, the United States should just leave. You should just leave Syria as we really we're not doing any good there. We don't have a vital interest in it. We should just withdraw and, you know, whoever would come and fill our space, maybe they're actually maybe better off, etc.. That's not an argument on either the political left or right. It's on both, kind of on the fringes of both, which is a bit, on the one hand, it's more isolationist, I think on the right and on the left, it seems to be kind of more defeatist. But it's like, you know, the United States doesn't deserve to have its vital interests, kind of kind of thing. But what do you say? What do you say to that to that argument, the argument that the United States should just get out?

James Jeffrey

Okay. You've got to start with the idea that you have an overarching strategic existential interest in preserving a global order that promotes peace, most importantly, prosperity and political advancement, sovereignty, democracy, freedom, and that that can be threatened. Once you've come to that conclusion. And I think it's the right conclusion and been kind of there since Wilson 100 years ago with much of the world also there with us, you come to a very complicated result. Again for the fourth time we get to Vietnam and that is, that means you have to defend that system everywhere or you're defending it nowhere. Where did we learn that lesson most dramatically? In the 1930s. We, the United States, our partners, are victors. Magnificent victory in 1918. France and Britain. Italy, which then became an enemy. We looked at these funny faces we could hardly pronounce. Sudetenland. Manchukuo. Abyssinia. And said, it doesn't affect us if, respectively, the Nazis or the Japanese or the Italians are marching into these places because they're not really worth very much and they're very far away. And it would be hard for us to get our military to. So we'll just turn a blind eye to it. Maybe it was a bit of diplomatic fluff, such as the Munich accords. And then we discovered, Oh, goodness, by failing to defend our values and system in unimportant places, frankly, that would have been easier to do, with weaker enemies, we suddenly found Japanese bombers over Pearl Harbor and Nazi bombers over London. That is, we then had to fight existential battles in important places. That's the logic of this.

Joel Rayburn

Yeah. And since you didn't solve the problem of Iranian regime drones and missiles in Erbil and Yemen, now you've got them in Kyiv. And you know what? And you have them in the Western Sahara now, by the way. And you're going to have them in everywhere else you can think of, because the great powers didn't do much to deter them elsewhere. You know, one thing touching on great powers. So here's another--

James Jeffrey

The administration blew the best opportunity it has had in years, at least back to Qassem Soleimani. Imagine if there was a huge explosion in that drone factory, wherever it is in Iran, that is sending the drones to Ukraine.

Joel Rayburn

Yeah. Well, there might be still because the Iranians don't really do workplace safety very well.

James Jeffrey

That's true. We can only hope.

Joel Rayburn

There might just be a strange explosion. Unexplained explosion.

James Jeffrey

That would have been the right answer. And we all know that Iran was so--even its normal friends, the friends of Iran club in Europe, which has been a brake on our actions for decades, even they would be cheering that, if you will, industrial accident.

Joel Rayburn

Now, I want to ask you about that, but just just to clarify, you've been an advisor to a number of administrations. I think this administration still values your take on things. And is it your judgment that the Biden administration is going to stay committed to the Syria mission? I mean, it certainly seems that way to me, regardless of the voices that pop up saying "you should leave." It seems like they're pretty solidly committed.

James Jeffrey

As I said, their overall global strategy is OK. The national security strategy. And it's hard to do something 180 degrees contrary to that in the Middle East when it requires real effort like pulling troops out of Syria or pulling troops out of Iraq. So even if they have not organized themselves to have an active policy of contesting Iran, and Joel, you and I remember what happened: any leaf that fell in Syria, you or I would look at that and say, if it falls on this side, it would benefit the Russians. So we better act now to ensure it doesn't. And we had other people doing the same thing in Iraq on the missile file and everything else. That's how we dealt with it. We never let them get an advantage if we could do something to stop it. That is a persistent muscle management thing that has to be inherent and you know how to do it. We didn't get together and talk about it. We just knew and then we would find a way to stop it.

Joel Rayburn

Well, that's because we were both Cold Warriors, I think, and we instinctively understood it. I mean, it seems to me in the 1990s, in 2000, the United States took a bit of a holiday from history and we took the end of history too far, Frank Fukuyama's end of history too far. And and we forgot. Now it's come back because now one of the buzzwords is, it's not just a buzzword, it's important: great power competition. But we had kind of collectively forgotten how to do that, institutionally forgotten how to do that. I found a real difference in the instinct that people who had started their careers or had their careers during the Cold War, and those that didn't, there's real difference. Even now, I think. It seems to me.

James Jeffrey

Mike Pompeo was a front line tank officer with NATO in Germany during the Cold War. We didn't have to explain things to him.

Joel Rayburn

Right. And this gets to another point that I wanted to make, which is one of the critiques I have of the way, even in the Trump administration this was true: great power competition. We're now under the national defense Strategy and national security strategies

in two administrations where we're unfortunately returning to an era of great power competition. But then you have a lot of people, and it became the policy of the United States in several instances, to pivot away from or abandon the Middle East in the name of competing with adversarial great powers elsewhere. I never understood this because, as you just pointed out, what we were doing in Syria was great power competition. What we're doing with respect to Iran is great power competition because Iran is in a de facto alliance--well, they're in a straight out, explicit alliance with Russia, a de facto alliance with with China. So I always thought it was misguided to say, well, in the name of great power competition, we're going to abandon the competition field of the great powers in this central region. What do you think about that?

James Jeffrey

It gets to another issue in the Middle East that I should have raised earlier but didn't, because it's a very important one. There is a perception, deeply ingrained in the American public and into, again, the muscle movements of the people doing policy, that the Middle East drags you into quagmires with hundreds of thousands of troops. Decades of struggle with not very much to show for it, i.e., Iraq and Afghanistan, but also, even though it didn't involve the same number of troops, our intervention, for example, in Libya. And therefore, there is a sense of the region is just, as President Trump said, sand and blood, we shouldn't get involved there. We shouldn't get engaged. It's not going to do any good. No. What we shouldn't do is put hundreds of thousands of troops in for decades. That was a lesson that we learned when we put together the Syria--we were using, not just not using, we were exploiting and ensuring that our military presence in Syria to combat the Islamic State also had a strategic purpose for our other administration and global goals concerning Syria. And we did our best to ensure that the Turkish and Israeli engagement there, which had specific security concerns for both of them, was somehow melded together into a general approach. Because for all three, be it us trying to fight against the Islamic State, the Israelis trying to fight against Iranian strategic systems, or the Turks with a whole variety of targets that they wanted to go after, the one thing that was clear was if Assad kept gaining ground with his Iranian and Russian friends, all three of our efforts would be placed at risk. So therefore, we had to hang together or hang separately. We decided in that time to hang together and the result was we were able to basically work out what the Israelis think is a significant containment of Iranian capabilities. What we know is the still continuing suppression of the Islamic State, and the Turks, while they complain, basic security along the southern border, while at the same time those actions of the three countries have also stopped Assad, Russia, and Iran from gaining a victory. And that's the complicated way that things work in this world.

Joel Rayburn

Shifting gears a little bit. There are two things I'd like to ask you about. First is that, in addition to being a middle East hand and a Turkey hand, you also spent a lot of your career dealing with European issues, Mediterranean issues, Balkans, as well as NATO. Twice. You served as an ambassador in Europe/NATO countries. You were deputy National Security Advisor when the United States was having to address the problem of the Russian invasion of Georgia, for example, and the Russian, at that time a new Russian threat to the Baltic states and so on. You were you were front and center in that. How do you view the situation around the Ukraine war? Where do you think it's headed? And is the United States and others, are we responding to that adequately? Properly?

James Jeffrey

I think we are. First, a case can be made, and it's made by a lot of people right here in Washington, that we could have taken another approach to Russia, not in the Bush administration, because I think that approach was absolutely correct. But in the Clinton administration, where we put all of our eggs in the NATO expansion basket, that was a different approach than Bush. The reason I'm raising this is to say that regardless of whether that is a correct or incorrect analysis, the point is what we have today is a rough, expansionist, aggressive Russia and revanchist Russia. And we probably will always going to have that. And the difference in the policies that we did versus the policies we might have done probably would have had more to do with how we could have mobilized public opinion in Europe, how we could have modulated things a little bit earlier to deal more effectively with Russia, with the inevitable. That's the word, the inevitable Russian revanchism in a different way. But the revanchism is not something we could erase with a different policy. So we're stuck with it. What we have to do is just like we did in World War Two, just like we did in the Cold War, we have to deter, and if that fails, contain Russian advances. That's what we're doing very, very effectively in Ukraine. I give the administration and the NATO alliance, and most importantly, the people and soldiers and leadership of Ukraine very high marks for having done that. This is what we should have done and could have done with the Czech people who were ready to fight in 1938.

Joel Rayburn

I've always felt this, and have felt it more strongly since February, is that if you're looking for ways to increase costs to Vladimir Putin for his aggressive, revanchist foreign policy, that one of the top places you ought to be looking is Damascus. Damascus is his foothold in the Middle East. It's hugely important to his near abroad strategy. It seems like so far we're missing an opportunity to the temperature on the Assad regime as a way of imposing further costs, stretching Putin's bandwidth thinner. What do you think about that?

James Jeffrey

Well, first of all, we know we know indirectly you've been in many meetings with the Russians. I've been in meetings with the Russians, including Putin, and I've been with meetings with Russians since then. The Russians know that they're in a tough position in Syria because they thought we were going to give up because they had plenty of signaling from 2015 on that we're going to give up, but we turned out not giving up. And then they were hoping that the Biden administration would reverse the policies that we were responsible for carrying out. But the Biden administration, if they haven't embraced them enthusiastically, have not canceled them. And that's important because it means that they still have time and a platform to change. The first thing they need to do is stop nibbling at the edges. I'm particularly concerned, as you know, with this electricity, gas transfer that has roped in everyone from the Egyptians and Israelis to the Jordanians and the Lebanese supposedly to help Lebanon. It might, but the main thing is it could undercut sanctions, particularly the Caesar sanctions against Syria. So the first thing is ensure that the policies that we are on record as carrying out are carried out effectively and aggressively.

Joel Rayburn

Yeah, you can't really be opposing--you have to be disciplined and comprehensive. If you're going to oppose Russian aggression in one place, you need to synchronize that with what you're doing elsewhere.

James Jeffrey

And the synchronization has to be--you remember when we were first faced with the Russian threat to close these UN humanitarian corridors into Syria in the northeast, the north west. And initially in 2019 and 2020, around the beginning of 2020, our position was we're not compromising because the Russians wanted things like more assistance flowing under Assad's control. And we said no compromise, you want to close them, close them. So they went ahead and closed two of them. And then we call their bluff again and they closed another one. But they kept the really crucially important one in Idlib open. Because they didn't want to bear that. And that was a high risk--

Joel Rayburn

And they didn't want to alienate Turkey and create a backlash

James Jeffrey

But that was that was a high risk strategy because we could have bought another six month extension if we had caved and given a lot of concessions to the Russians. But our position of principle was it's bigger than even humanitarian aid, although that was important. It's bigger than our refugees and the Rukban camp. It's bigger than the fighting of the Islamic State in the area around Raqqa and all of the 50 other specific things we're doing in Syria. The main thing is the other side cannot score points. It's like a soccer game. They start scoring points, our side gets demoralized and then they score more points. And then at the end of the game, you tally it up and who has won? They do. We did everything. I mean, the most fun for us was their refugee conference that they organized in Damascus. We ensured that that was a total failure. Why? It wasn't that big of a threat, but it would have been a victory, however minor, and our rule of thumb was these guys don't get victories.

Joel Rayburn

We're getting waved by the peanut gallery to shift to some questions. There are a couple more things that I want to cover. First of all, we haven't discussed directly Turkey. You have a lot of experience dealing with Turkey as the ambassador there, as deputy national security adviser, and then from Baghdad, you were the ambassador, etc., on down into the Trump administration, you sort of were the Turkey whisperer, because we certainly had some crises to work through. But why is it so hard for the United States? Why is Turkey such a difficult relationship with the United States? And it seems to be, irrespective of the administration, it seems that we have for the last well, how long? 20 years? We've had a tough time having a smooth relationship, productive, constructive relationship with what is essential and vital ally. Why is that?

James Jeffrey

First of all, it's bigger than Erdogan. He brings his own unique tendencies, including a disdain for Western leaders and Western values.

Joel Rayburn

He's not Czar Alexander.

James Jeffrey

He's not the czar. And I encountered this. Three of my four stories in Turkey were before Erdogan and I saw a lot of the same. The first thing is the Turks are classic 19th century thinkers. That means that you never give, as I mentioned earlier, more than 85% of loyalty to your partners and allies. You always keep 15% for the other side. There's always a back channel to the bad guys. Well, the Turks do this, and we are shocked, shocked at what they do, that they talk with Putin, they trade with Putin. The point is, nobody has done more other than the United States--

Joel Rayburn

Actually they're at war with Putin. They'll never acknowledge that. But we saw it.

James Jeffrey

And nobody has done more to make Russia lose in Ukraine, apart from the Ukrainians and the United States, than Turkey. The Russians had a whole naval detachment waiting to try to get into the Black Sea that they just sent back to the Pacific.

Joel Rayburn

Idlib 2020, Libya 2020, Nagorno-Karabakh 2020, the Black Sea and Ukraine 2022. I mean, this is--

James Jeffrey

Sure, but but the problem is at the same time, the Turks believe that in their near abroad, where they have many threats in the Aegean, they have a long term bad relationship with Greece, the borders with Iraq and Syria, two destabilized countries with multiple threats from the PKK to the Iranians to Sunni terrorist groups and obviously to Iran itself and to Russia. Their near abroad is very, very dangerous. And they feel that they should have a lot of running room in dealing with that through a mixture of diplomacy and military power. We don't like our partners and allies to have that, be it France, be it Germany with its own special relationship with Russia (and that didn't work out very well, did it), or be it Turkey. The difference between Germany and even France and Turkey is the French and the Germans understand the United States well enough that even when they pursue policies that are not what we want (again, I'm thinking of Germany's one plus percent defense budget, the Nord Stream two, and on and on), they know how to play us. Turkey either doesn't know or doesn't want to know how to play us and reassure us that it's okay, we will be with you in the end or we're with you 85% of the time. The Turks don't make that message. When we say, hey, why are you doing something in that 15% when you're chatting with Putin, they get angry rather than finding ways to assuage us. And so we communicate past one another. And it's very, very dangerous because Turkey is playing a huge role in Syria, a huge role in Ukraine, a huge role in the Caucasus, a huge role in the Middle East. And by and large, it either is playing a role that is beneficial to us or we can find a way to make it beneficial.

Joel Rayburn

Also, within NATO there aren't too many countries that are investing in advanced military technology and who can actually have the capability of maintaining or expanding the capability to project power. France is one, you have to say. And Turkey really is the other.

James Jeffrey

Britain too.

Joel Rayburn

Well, I think militarily, Britain has sort eviscerated themselves to some degree. I mean, certainly in land power.

James Jeffrey

You're my Britain expert

Joel Rayburn

Oh, me? Well you're a little thin on it, then. As one last aside, you have a lot of experience with Germany. Have family in Germany. You've had a long connection with Germany. You know Germany very well. I was really surprised and pleased, to see, but tell me if I'm wrong, it looks like there's been a sharp change in German attitudes concerning the Iranian regime because of the Iranian regime's intervention in the Ukraine war with with the drones. And if that's true, if that's happening, that has all kinds of far reaching implications, including that that probably would do more to kill the prospects for the JCPOA than just about anything else, it seems to me. Am I right or wrong?

James Jeffrey

You're absolutely right. And this is part of a larger change in Germany. Germany accepted, and is one of the great beneficiaries of, that old global order to contain the Soviet Union that was trying to get first Berlin and then go to the Rhine. It also benefitted more than probably any other country other than Japan from the economic, trade, financial and other benefits of the global system. But it had an asterisk, which was on the Soviet Union and later Russia we have a different approach. A little bit, as I described with the Iranians, "they're aggressive because they're misunderstood. And if we get close to them and we trade with them and show them we're not a threat, we're not we're the opposites of Hitler"--

Joel Rayburn

Yeah, they'll feel more comfortable.

James Jeffrey

"They'll see us as friends rather than enemies." What they suddenly woke up with was, no, they don't see you as enemies. They see you as prey. And they don't want to be prey because they know the consequences of that. Because they all have memories of tragedy in Europe. So they made a flip that is dramatic. And then Iran ran into it, because the Iranians don't pay as much attention to the West as they should because they're ideologically fixated on their own worldview. So they missed that. And whatever they're doing to help Russia in Ukraine, this will not win the war for Russia and it will not make Iran's fate any better.

Joel Rayburn

And their lead diplomat, their foreign minister now, Amir Abdollahian, is a pale shadow of the very smooth, Western educated Zarif. Zarif would have known exactly how to plausibly deny the drone thing. He wouldn't have been able to pull it off, but he would have done much better than the guy they have now.

James Jeffrey

Zarif and his leadership that he worked for at the time probably would not have done the Russian thing. You notice China hasn't. And China has a lot more at stake with the Russian alliance than the Iranians do because these guys are stupid. And that's a good note to go to the questions on because that's a little measure of optimism. The Iranian regime right now is stupid. They're stupid on their population that's rising up against them. They're stupid on the Ukrainian war and they're stupid on what's going on in the region. All we need to put them back in their place hard is a conscious, well thought out American policy with our partners and allies to contest them in the region. And we'll see a different region.

Joel Rayburn

So we have some questions from some real experts who are friends of our team there, either on our team or friends of our team. So first, we have a question. And I anticipated it. So I didn't ask you. Mr. Ahmed Ayad is the chief editor of Marib newspaper, which is a Yemen based media outlet. His outlet has been tracking Iranian influence with the Houthis and so on. And his question is, Yemenis are now convinced, rightly or wrongly, that the current administration is actually friendly to the Houthis, especially after the way the Biden administration removed the Houthis from the foreign terrorist list. Meanwhile, the Houthis took that and they've continued to commit war crimes and so on. Actually, Ahmed says their war crimes that are actually larger in scale than even ISIS or al Qaeda in Yemen. The question is why? Is the Biden administration actually somehow friendly to the Houthis? How would you explain it?

James Jeffrey

First of all, our friend Tim Lenderking, the Yemen envoy, is definitely not a friend of the Houthis. 100%. Secondly, the administration is not friend to the Houthis. That's not the problem, Joel. The problem is they're not the enemies of the Houthis because they don't see the Houthis as the enemy. They see the enemy in Yemen as in the first instance, and this is pushed by the left wing of the Democratic Party, particularly in Congress, as the humanitarian disaster. And they see the main fuel of that humanitarian disaster, the efforts of the Saudis and to a lesser degree, the Emiratis to try to defend themselves on their borders from Iran and their Houthi allies in Yemen. They don't see the perception that we would certainly see if al Qaeda was along the Mexican border. They see this as, first of all, they think that the Saudis and Emiratis are going to lose to the Houthis in Yemen, and that was proven wrong. Marib has not fallen yet. Quite to the contrary, the Saudis and the Emiratis most days with our help intercept almost all of the drones and cruise missiles and rockets that the Houthis fire. And so, granted, it's a stalemate. But the administration keeps on, even when they acknowledge that it's the Houthis who are not continuing the cease fire and not accepting the terms. Their response is continually to double down on it: "Well, the Saudis have to make more concessions or the Americans have to make more concessions." And this isn't working.

Joel Rayburn

I always found it interesting that the Houthis have been able to fire off ballistic missiles, hundreds of them, if not more, at a G20 capital, Riyadh, and still, there's that attitude here in Washington that--.

James Jeffrey

Full of American citizens and military, no less.

Joel Rayburn

Yeah. And I've wondered, would we have the same attitude if some militant group in Belgium fired off ballistic missiles at Paris or even some or some other capital? I mean, it's a really strange attitude.

James Jeffrey

The problem is that the administration, because it really does not see Iran as a regional menace the way it sees, correctly, Russia and China, fortunately, then it looks at these issues, the Yemen issue, the Iraq issue, the Syria issue, the Lebanon issue, the Gaza issue as some kind of internal sui generis thing in and of itself that typically is driven by humanitarian and ideological things and dislike of our partners who are messing in that area. So they don't see this as all manifestations of Iran marching around the region. And again, that's thinking of the 1930s people didn't see Sudetenland and Austria and the Rhineland as parts of the same sort of thing.

Joel Rayburn

That's the same, you know, which was also the Reagan administration in the late Cold War, we didn't just say, oh, well, there's this local problem in Nicaragua or in Central America and South America you have these local conflicts--as though the Soviets through the Cubans or directly weren't involved. Same thing with the African conflicts. So I go back to, it seems like if you had some experience with the Cold War frame, then the Iran problem in the Middle East is easier to instinctively understand.

James Jeffrey

Sure, look, I named five places where the Iranians are. Those are five of the six areas of continuing conflict right now in the Middle East. The sixth is Libya. But of the six, the one--

Joel Rayburn

And they're also in Afghanistan.

James Jeffrey

Right. But keeping it within the Arab Middle East, of the six, the one most likely to be resolved is in the best shape, in relative terms, is Libya. Why? Because that's the one where the Iranians are not involved. This is crystal clear, Joel, and we saw this in the last administration. Why they don't see this, I just don't know. And I'm sorry that we can't give a better answer.

Joel Rayburn

So we now have a question on Iraq. It comes from a contributor to our website. Someone I'm sure you've never heard of before. His name is Mithal Al Alusi. But Mithal al Alusi asks: the new government that inherited leadership in Iraq is now saying they want to discuss the benefit of the American presence in Iraq. In other words, they want to reopen the question of the American presence in Iraq. How do you foresee where American-Iraqi relations are going with this new government after after the Sudani government made such a public request of basically wanting to reopen certainly the military component of the strategic framework?

James Jeffrey

I'm very concerned. Iraq has been a relative success, even with the pressure from Iran and even with the rise of the Islamic State and the other problems that you and I know so well from Iraq since 2003, going back to the 1960s, in part because the United States has always realized that it would have to play a role internally in Iraq through our partners and friends to counter the role that Iran is playing and to counter the role that extremist Sunni terrorist forces were playing. And because we played that role, Iraq was able to kind of move forward, deal with the challenges, be it the Iranian backed forces in 2004 or 2008, the Islamic State, and emerge not from total crisis, it still has many problems, but it's more a normal state than, say, Afghanistan or Syria is. But nonetheless, I have not seen us playing that role recently. We not only have a government that was basically hammered together to a certain degree by Iran and Iran's agents in the political system. We are seeing a tremendous amount of military, legal and

James Jeffrey

...energy pressure on our partners and friends in the north, in Erbil. And we're seeing, as you said, possibility of new threats like we saw in 2010 and 11 to have American forces withdraw. Again, I'm sure the administration has a policy, but they haven't enunciated it.

We haven't seen evidence of it. All we see is happy talk about how glad they are that they have a new government.

Joel Rayburn

Next, we have we have a questioner from Lebanon, Ms. Elsie Basil, who is asking, is the United States going to give Lebanon to Iran in exchange for the gas normalization deal with Israel?

James Jeffrey

The United States will not cut any deal like that. The United States believed that that gas deal was good for Lebanon and good for Israel. Not everybody in Israel, including the new prime minister, agrees with that, but we'll see what he does about it. But the intent was not to turn it over to Hizballah. People take that position, and I understand why they take that position, because the truth is there would be no gas deal if Hizballah did not give it a green light. But what I don't know is why Hizballah gave it a green light.

Joel Rayburn

Yeah, that's the question. Some people are saying, well, they're under so much pressure, Hizballah is desperate and they needed the cash flow along with everybody else due to the situation in Lebanon. Or who knows? I'm skeptical of that.

James Jeffrey

But if there ever is a cash flow it won't occur for years.

Joel Rayburn

Yeah. And so I personally I think that, I don't see Hezbollah sticking to any kind of agreements, respecting any kind of maritime boundary, if they get into a fix. Because they remain an arm of the Iranian regime's policy and if it comes down to it, the Iranian regime will just will pull the lever for Hizballah to be used regardless of the deal.

James Jeffrey

But I think Hizballah may be smarter than the Iranian government, and Hizballah may see how unsuccessful they were in Syria in building up a presence because of the Israeli strikes. And they have seen how dangerous their ally, Iran--I would say that it's not that Hizballah and Nasrallah are any better than Iran. They're just as evil, just as bad. But because they're in a more precarious position, you know, trying to dominate a country where most people would like them to go away and facing a very powerful enemy, Israel, a long way from Iran, they have to think more strategically. They can't afford to make as many mistakes. Right now they're at the end of a long supply chain that is being interdicted by the Israelis while their patron, Iran, is faced with an extraordinary domestic uprising and has hitched itself to Russia in a losing battle. I think this puts Hizballah in a position where they probably would have preferred not to go along with this gas deal, but they didn't want to pay the price of saying no.

Joel Rayburn

From among our Syrian experts now, we have Dr. Kamal Labwani, who had some interaction with the Bush administration way back when. And his question is against the backdrop of, the United States does not have a comprehensive strategy concerning the Middle East. And his question is, well, then how can you have so many forces in the Middle East if you don't have one? He's basically saying, so you're saying the United States doesn't have a comprehensive strategy for the Middle East, but you've got all these military forces there. Are you really a power that would have military forces deployed without having them part of a comprehensive strategy? I know how I would answer that question, but as background to that question, I would remind our audience that you

weren't

just the special representative for Syria. You were also are basically our ambassador representing the United States in the global coalition to defeat ISIS.

James Jeffrey

Yeah, I would like to say no, it's impossible for us to have 70,000 troops and a \$10 billion military assistance program.

Joel Rayburn

And a fleet. And an air force.

James Jeffrey

And a fleet in the Middle East and a NATO alliance partner in Turkey and major non-NATO ally status with a half dozen countries and security relationships with a dozen more countries without an overall strategy for the region. But alas, that is so, because it's on automatic pilot.

Joel Rayburn

Yeah, that's what I was going to say.

James Jeffrey

And that sounds like a bad thing. And to a degree it is. But it's also a potentially good thing because it means that the platform hasn't gone away. And this platform, as you and I know, if it goes away, it's very hard to put back together. The platform is still there. These guys can wake up down the street tomorrow and say, you know what, we actually should--and you saw some changes that were almost overnight in the Trump administration--we should take a different role and suddenly, bang, we can do that because we have everything in place to do it. So that's why I want to be optimistic.

Joel Rayburn

From Ms. Lama Atassi. She asks, what are the consequences, in your view, of the Congressional elections for US policy? And is it too soon to say, or what do you think?

James Jeffrey

My assumption is that the Republicans will gain the House of Representatives. And I would say if there's ever a 50-50 flip of the coin, it's going to be the Senate. This is going to be driven by a handful of voters in strange circumstances.

Joel Rayburn

And we may not know until sometime in mid December.

James Jeffrey

Well, we may know in a couple of days, because if both Nevada and Arizona go to the Republicans, or might go to the Democrats. The only way you have to wait till December in Georgia is if you get a Democratic victory in one of the two, and a Republican victory in the other. So it's up in the air.

Joel Rayburn

But how would it change? Are there implications to that, in your view? I have answered this question.

James Jeffrey

Sure. In my view, you will see more pressure on the administration to respond to Iran. A real reluctance to engage on the JCPOA with Iran, which is anathema to the Republican Party. And let's face it, it used to be anathema to the head Democrat in the Senate and the head of the Foreign Relations Committee as well. And so I think that the administration will not have the luxury of just ignoring Congress anymore on its Iran policy. It will have to explain that Iran policy, and that's a good thing.

Joel Rayburn

I think there will be more pressure on the administration to enforce the Caesar Act more energetically, as well as there will be legislative initiatives to increase the pressure on the Assad regime. Because frankly, from my own perch in the Congress last year, I saw that there were a lot of initiatives like that that the Republicans in the House wanted to move forward, but not having the majority, they couldn't get those measures very easily into--not that the Democrat leadership in the House was pro-Assad, absolutely not. It's just that the way Congress works is it's a matter of bandwidth. And does the leadership of the respective committees, do they want to devote the bandwidth to issues like that? And for the last year and a half, the answer has been no from the Democrat side. As that changes in the House, I think you'll see more.

James Jeffrey

And to, as well as you know it, to just add one thing: the bandwidth to do those things when the administration would have resisted it, and you'd have had to do a lot of calls and meetings and taken a lot of flak, whereas the Republicans won't care. And so therefore, I think this will be much healthier, unless we have to do dramatic things. There's a case to be made for divided government and United States.

Joel Rayburn

Well, that's what our system sort of leads to.

[James Jeffrey

You know, I just can assure everybody out there it's going to be okay. It turns out.

Joel Rayburn

It will be okay. We're not on the verge of a civil war. Last question comes from our own research fellow, Ahmed Mommar, who actually resides in Syria. He's right there in the zone that the Russians and Assad occasionally bombard. And he says, in light of the recent Russian attacks on the refugee camps in Idlib, do you think the ceasefire agreement which was reached in March 2020 between Turkey and Russia is a sustainable solution? Or is it merely a pause in the conflict? And what if the cease fire is broken? What would the United States do about it?

James Jeffrey

It's a very good question. I think the Russians toy all the time with the idea of violating one of the various ceasefires that are in place, either against the Turks or against us or in Al Tanf. And the Iranians as well. I think that every time they've looked at this, the other side has decided not to. But I'm nervous about this because back when you and I were doing it, they were also testing us. You remember the Russian convoys ambushing our convoys in the Northeast and such. And of course, the Turks lost a lot of troops from one battalion by a Russian strike in March of 2020. But they never really pulled the trigger on a major push because they were absolutely certain what the United States would do, because they were dealing with Americans on the ground and they were dealing diplomatically with you and me and the whole weight of the US government behind us. That's not happening now. There's room for misunderstandings here. And that's what makes me nervous. I would say that in the end, I believe that the United States would come to the aid of Turkey either diplomatically or in some other way if it was under pressure. Why? Because the Europeans would demand it because of the danger of three and a half million more people flowing across the border. But it would be better to make it clear in advance to the Russians and through the Russians to Assad and Iran that we will not countenance any violation of the ceasefires. To this administration's credit, it wasn't one of their early talking points, but it's worked its way in, is this "We want to see all ceasefires maintained" and that's a step in the right direction.

Joel Rayburn

I agree. The take I would have on it is slightly different, which is that in the bigger sense, I think the Russians would be really stupid to try to renew that conflict, upset that ceasefire, because we've already seen that movie once in February-March 2020, and Turkey defeated the Russians in a war back then.

James Jeffrey

Turkey defeated Russia's allies in the war.

Joel Rayburn

We always wondered, is there a ceiling on the Russians ability to project power into Syria? And we found--Is their ceiling higher or lower than Turkey's ceiling? And what we found in February or March 2020 is, yes, there is a Russian ceiling and it's much lower than the Turkish ceiling. Another way to put it. The Turks control the escalation ladder there. Now, what's happened since then?

James Jeffrey

The Turks have a ground game. The Russians don't. It's only Assad, and that's no ground game.

Joel Rayburn

Well, not just the ground game, but to stretch the metaphor, the Turks have an operational air game, which is how they won that. The same capability that they demonstrated in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh and now the Ukrainians are using to devastating effect against the Russians. And in Ukraine, that was a Turkish capability that they demonstrated in February-March 2020, and the Russians have no answer for it.

James Jeffrey

The Russians did not challenge them. Remember, it wasn't just drones. It was Turkish fighters shooting down Assad's aircraft and no Russians flew up to challenge those fighters.

Joel Rayburn

That's right. Because they didn't want to tangle with the full force of Turkey.

James Jeffrey

Well, they did it once in 2015, and you know who won.

Joel Rayburn

Well Putin won that one.

James Jeffrey

Diplomatically. Not militarily.

Joel Rayburn

Militarily, he didn't win it. But then he messed with--

James Jeffrey

Yeah, but he's not in the same position to do that now.

Joel Rayburn

He's not in the same position now. This is my point, is that the Russia of February-March 2020 is kind of gone for a long time, because they've they've flung away their military power.

James Jeffrey

Even more, the Russia of 2015.

Joel Rayburn

Yeah, it's gone. It's gone. You're dealing with a far weaker Russia right now. It may be weak for a generation, it seems to me, because of the absolute self immolation that they've done in the combat power, just the military capacity that they have lost.

James Jeffrey

A hundred thousand troops killed or wounded.

Joel Rayburn

And not to mention probably probably 10 to 12000 combat vehicles gone, the aircraft gone. I mean, it's astonishing that we've seen basically the collapse of Russia's military power projection capability. So to answer Ahmad's question, your view is it's dangerous because the United States needs to clarify its intentions concerning the maintenance of the cease fires and what consequences there would be. My view is I would hope the Russians aren't stupid enough to do it, but of course they've proven that they can be stupid in Ukraine. So I guess you have to say--

James Jeffrey

First of all, Ahmad, as we used to say before we started saying be safe: stay alert, stay alive. But secondly, essentially what we're saying is, OK, the credibility and the clarity of the American position when the Russians tried this last time in 2020 has been eroded significantly, which is why I'm worried. But what Joel is saying is, by the same token, Russia's ability and its capabilities and intentions have also been eroded because of its stupid policy of going into Ukraine. So therefore, while we cannot give you a final answer, probably it's about where we were before, and that means the Russians will not try anything really big.

Joel Rayburn

I think that's probably right. We have we have one last question. You've been very generous with your time. Here's a question from Rania Kisar. Ambassador Jeffrey, what is your final message to Assad?

James Jeffrey

The final message is you are never going to win your country. You're never going to be accepted back into the Arab world. You will possibly survive as long as Russia and Iran have the capability and the intention to keep you propped up. But it's not going to save you in the end from your demise. You're destined to go down sooner or later.

Joel Rayburn

That's a good one to to quit on. I second that sentiment.

James Jeffrey

Yeah. The only difference between Joel and me is Joel would have said, and I, Joel Rayburn, I'm going to personally do it!

Joel Rayburn

Ambassador Jeffrey, thank you. This has been a real pleasure to see you again and it's been a real pleasure to compare notes. I mean, we could go on and on. There's so much that we can learn from you. But thanks for your time.

James Jeffrey

And I from you, Joel.

Joel Rayburn

Oh, thank you! Okay. Well, anyway. All right. Thank you, everyone. And we'll see you next time on "The Region."

James Jeffrey

Okay. Bye bye, everybody. Thank you.