

# H.R. McMaster on American Strategy during a Presidential Transition

Featuring Kimberly Kagan and Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster



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*The United States holds enormous power and responsibility in the world. With the US presidential transition underway, ISW President Kim Kagan sat down with Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster (US Army, ret.) to discuss the many challenges facing the United States, including the pernicious effect of Chinese military diplomacy and the threat from Iran. McMaster argues that US troop deployments, and other forms of engagement abroad, “are immensely important to sustaining our security and prosperity” and that the US must savvily modernize its armed forces. McMaster outlines his view of the strategic successes and failures of the Obama and Trump administrations and his recommendations for President-elect Biden and his team. H.R. McMaster served as national security advisor from 2017 to 2018 and is the author of the recently published book *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*.*

## **Jacob Taylor:**

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War.

## **Kimberly Kagan:**

Good day and welcome to the Overwatch podcast. I am Kimberly Kagan, the founder and president of the Institute for the Study of War. With me today is former national security advisor, Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, (US Army retired). He is an extraordinary soldier scholar. He has recently published the book, *Battlegrounds*, a superb look at the national security challenges of the United States. He is also a superb historian and author of *Dereliction of Duty*, an impressive study of the dynamics between civilian and military leaders that led to America’s deepening involvement in the Vietnam War. He has led American troops in combat in Afghanistan, and overseen some modernization efforts of the US Army. He is also a wonderful and dear friend. H.R., welcome to Overwatch.

## **H.R. McMaster:**

Hey, Kim, it’s so good to be with you. And gosh, I continue to learn so much from you and Institute for the Study of War. Thank you for having me.

## **Kimberly Kagan:**

We are delighted to talk today about some of the issues you touch on in *Battlegrounds* and to talk about the national security of the United States. At the moment that we’re recording, right before Thanksgiving in 2020, we are watching President-elect Biden putting together a national security team that has ample experience. But, of course, the world has changed since they last served in office. What are the most important changes in the global order that the incoming national security team must account for in their policy?

## **H.R. McMaster:**

Well, Kim, I’ll say what you’re alluding to is it would be a big, big mistake for them to try to turn the clock back to 2016 because I think there have been some advances in our foreign policy since then, certainly and, as you’re alluding to, the world has changed. I think if they went back to 2016, their impulse would be to re-establish an approach towards China of cooperation and engagement. Again, under this assumption that China, if we just welcome them in a little bit more warmly into the international order, we’ll play by the rules, liberalize its economy and its form of government. That’s just not going to happen, Kim. So, I think it’s really important to maintain the competitive approach to the Chinese Communist Party.

I think if they turn the clock back to 2016, that we would be much less adept at countering Russian new generation warfare and especially Russia’s sustained campaign of political subversion and cyber-enabled information warfare against us. There’ve been some very significant changes under the Trump administration that make us

much more adept at competing in cyberspace. And, of course, I think they want to retain those authorities and push those authorities down so we can be much more agile in that very important competition. I think recognizing that space as a competitive domain was a very important advancement under the Trump administration. The space strategy is very sound. I would like to continue to support that, but there are some policies I would love to see them reverse.

My concern is, however, that I think the worst aspects of the Trump foreign policy are those in which he essentially doubled down on the mistakes and flaws of the Obama strategy. And this is particularly in connection with Afghanistan and prioritizing withdrawal over our very important interests there of preventing another terrorist attack, on the scale of 9/11. And in so doing, President Trump has precisely replicated the withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011. It was not only military, but it was also diplomatic. And, of course, that set conditions for the rise of ISIS and one of the most destructive terrorist organizations in history that found itself in control of territory the size of Britain. I think, Kim, that there are aspects of the policy that needs to change, but they should not try to turn the clock back to 2016.

The final area that I think will be mostly immensely important is the area of nonproliferation broadly and then specifically what to do about Iran and North Korea. I think you could say, and I don't mean to be unkind here, but I do think perhaps the greatest achievement of the Obama administration was to empower Iran across the greater Middle East, and to do so mainly by focusing only narrowly on this very weak agreement that was aimed to block Iran's path to a nuclear weapon. It didn't really do that effectively but what it did do is alleviated sanctions. It involves some very big payoffs to the Iranian regime, which they used to infuse cash into their four-decade long proxy war against the great state in the United States, the Little Satan, Israel, the Arab monarchies.

And so I think going back to that will be a big mistake. And then on North Korea, the policy of strategic patience, of course, failed. I think it would be a mistake to try to rush toward a multinational format for negotiation with the North because what that would likely do is just return to the failed pattern of previous efforts at denuclearization. So what I'd like to see there, I hope, is a continuation of the maximum pressure campaign. But Kim, these are smart people who are coming in to the administration. They're certainly smart enough and adept enough to learn from our most recent history and I hope that will be the case.

***Kimberly Kagan:***

One of the issues that I think will remain very important, in fact, perhaps even become more important, is the issue of allies and partners, who are, of course, important to the United States and its security and to American economic prosperity. There is a growing argument that the United States should rely on allies and partners to address potential threats with very limited US military support. What are the risks of that approach?

***H.R. McMaster:***

Well, oftentimes, it's that they just don't have the will to do it and don't have the capacity to do it. Oftentimes, for allies to have the will, they need to partner with the United States to be effective. And, of course, this is not new. This goes back to really our desire for Europe to take care of the very severe humanitarian crisis in the Balkans in the 1990s. Well, it didn't happen really until the US got involved. And I think what's paradoxical about it, Kim, is that, the United States can get others to do more, just by doing a little bit more ourselves and sustaining an effort ourselves. There is this kind of conventional wisdom that, "Hey, if we disengage, then others will have to pick up the slack." Well, actually they oftentimes lack the will to sustain the effort without us.

We've seen the sudden announcements of US withdrawal from Syria and in Iraq and then now in Afghanistan. Once we say we're on the way out, our allies typically try to beat us out the door. And, so I think it's important for us to recognize that we have to work together on these problems. All of these problems that we're facing, these

challenges in the world require multinational cooperation and a multinational effort. We need our allies to share the burden, especially if these sustained commitments are abroad. But, to do so, we have to have a sustainable long-term approach to these long-term problems ourselves. I think really what really diminishes our ability to access the tremendous capabilities of allies and partners is our tendency to take a short-term approach to these long-term problems.

**Kimberly Kagan:**

I would like to talk more about these long-term problems. Successive presidential administrations, Republican and Democrat, have continued American military presence in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, without effectively convincing the American people that America needs to participate in those wars. How would you explain to the American people why American troops need to be in the Middle East?

**H.R. McMaster:**

Well, I'll tell you, Kim, I think that this is a big failure of leadership. And, of course, I don't blame anybody who buys into the mantra these days of ending endless wars, even though that the casualties we're taking are at very low points. Of course, any loss of our courageous service men and women is a terrible thing. But I think it's worth pointing out, for example, that in Afghanistan, we lost 10 of our courageous soldiers this year, but about 30 Afghan soldiers and police give their lives every day fighting to preserve the freedoms that they've enjoyed since 2001. And two, again, to prevent the Taliban and the terrorist organizations with which the Taliban is intertwined no longer control of territory and resources and therefore become a much more significant threat to us as Al-Qaeda was on September 10th, 2001.

And so, it's not a theoretical case, Kim. I think what the American people need to know is why do we care? So what? Why is this commitment important to our interests? And again, mainly it's because it's not a theoretical case. We suffered the most devastating terrorist attack in history on September 11th, 2001. There have been other planned and inspired attacks against us and especially against Europe, but across the Middle East and beyond into Asia, because of these organizations' ability to use a safe haven support base to resource and plan and organize and train for and then ultimately direct attacks against us, against all humanity.

So, I think an explanation of the stakes is in order. And then, secondly, I think what the American people need to know is what is the strategy that will deliver a favorable outcome at a cost that's acceptable? And Kim, we are at a sustainable level of commitment now in the Middle East. I mean, the numbers of troops that are often talked about are really minuscule from a historical perspective in connection with US sustained military presence abroad since the end of World War II. So, I think it's important to recognize that we have to really talk to the American people about what our commitment overseas is preventing.

And, of course, it's tough to prove a negative, but we have historical examples, obviously in the form of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks. But we also have an example in the form of COVID-19, which I think ought to help us recognize that, problems that develop abroad can only be dealt with at an exorbitant cost once they reach our shores. So, sustained commitment abroad, not just military commitment, but diplomatic and economic commitments abroad, are immensely important to sustaining our security and our prosperity.

**Kimberly Kagan:**

Increasingly, there are those on both sides of the aisle that say our domestic economy and society are America's strength, and that we cannot afford to engage abroad before we have rebuilt our strength at home. Do you agree?

**H.R. McMaster:**

No, I disagree with this, because if you look at really the size of the America's budget, the defense budget is minus-

cule compared to the nondiscretionary spending that's already in the budget. So, I think that the other argument that I would make is that there are less tangible benefits to our strength that are important to maintain. And this, of course, foremost among them, is the prevention of war. And we know from many historical examples that the best way to deter conflict is through denial, which means really convincing a potential enemy that that enemy cannot accomplish its objectives through the use of force.

And what we see today is an increasingly aggressive China and increasingly aggressive Russia. It is our forward positioned, capable joint forces that I would argue, since 1946, have prevented great power conflict. I think it's important for us to sustain that effort. If we don't, I think we know what will happen. China is already becoming extremely aggressive across the Indo-Pacific region. You see that with a bludgeoning of Indian soldiers to death on the Himalayan Frontier, you see that with what would be the greatest land grab in history in the South China Sea, a sea through which about one-third of the world's surface international trade flows. You see it with the threats toward Taiwan and a range of other aggressive activity in cyberspace, for example, massive cyber attacks on Australia recently, the use of various forms of economic aggression and the setting of debt traps so that China is able to create servile relationships with countries in the region.

Much of this is aimed, Kim, at excluding the United States from the region and in a way that would be to our profound security disadvantage, but also our profound economic advantage. And then, of course, Russia has not shown any signs of abandoning, essentially, Putin's playbook, this campaign of disruption, disinformation, and denial. Russia's theory of victory is a less ambitious one, but it's a pernicious strategy that they're employing, which is essentially to drag everybody else down. Russia knows it doesn't have the economic power in particular to compete with the United States and Europe and others head-to-head. So, what Russia wants to do is to polarize us, to reduce our confidence and our common identity across the free world and as Americans here in our country, and to pit us against each other and reduce our confidence in our democratic principles and institutions and processes, under this theory as everyone helps to destroy ourselves, essentially, and Russia is then the last man standing, so to speak, in Europe.

I think it's important for us to compete effectively. And part of that competition is forward-positioned capable joint forces. One of the approaches that the China and Russia are taking is to invest in long-range missile capabilities, tiered and layered air defense, countersatellite, offensive cyber capabilities, swarm drone capabilities. And this is really to create these bubbles, right? These bubbles of anti-access area denial. But I think it's just worth pointing out that, if you have forward-positioned capable joint and multinational forces, they automatically transform what would be denied space into contested space. And we know from our experience of World War II, whether it's penetrating the inner island chain in Asia, or whether it's the costly invasion of the continent on D-Day to liberate Europe, that it's much easier to deter a conflict, much cheaper to deter a conflict, than to disengage, inviting aggression, and then have to respond to it after the fact.

***Kimberly Kagan:***

Some would say that the Russians and the Chinese, the Iranians and others are engaged in the destabilizing behaviors that you describe, because the United States is encroaching on their spheres of influence. And that if the United States would just confine itself to its own sphere of influence rather than having these forward position joint forces, or using those of forces abroad, those competitors and adversaries would cease to bother us. Do you agree?

***H.R. McMaster:***

No, no, I don't agree. It's funny, Kim. This is an approach to the world that is oftentimes described as the realist school, but it's really very ideological, because it's a school of thought that sees our disengagement as an unmitigated good everywhere. And it also masquerades as a more humble approach to foreign policy, when really, the way

you described it, is extremely arrogant, because it assumes that the others, in this case, China and Russia, have no aspirations and take no actions other than those that are in reaction to us. They have no aspirations of their own, and they have no authorship over the future of their own. And, so I think it's fundamentally unrealistic and ideological and maybe a romantic view of the world, you could say.

I think what's important to do is to apply what the historian, our friend, Zachary Shore, calls strategic empathy. And that's to view these complex challenges and competitions from the perspective of the other and to pay particular attention to the ideology, the emotions, and the aspirations that drive and constrain the others. So consider just quickly the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese Communist Party I argue in *Battlegrounds* is driven mainly by a combination of fear and ambition, fear of losing the party's exclusive grip on power internally. This is why you see them put a million and a half people in concentration camps, why they're rushing to perfect this Orwellian technologically-enabled surveillance police state, is why you see the Chinese Communist Party standing its repressive arm into Taiwan, the threats toward... I mean, in Hong Kong, the threats toward Taiwan, the bludgeoning of Indian soldiers to death on the Himalayan Frontier, the land grabbing in South China Sea.

They want to extend and tighten their exclusive grip on power and to use Xi Jinping or make China whole again through these aggressive actions. And then, externally, they're driven by this ambition to achieve national rejuvenation and to take center stage in the world, to use a phrase from Xi Jinping's speech in October 2017. I think it's important to look at what China is doing in a very sophisticated campaign and a strategy of co-option, co-opting us and other countries and international companies with the lure of profits or the lure of Chinese investments. But then these are traps. These are traps so that China can gain coercive power over countries and over companies to get them to conform to China's ambitions and its foreign policy. And then it can seal this aggression, it's just normal business practices.

And so, I think it's immensely important that the free world work together to counter this campaign, because if we don't, the world will be less free, less prosperous and less safe. But think it's fair to say that the Obama administration's policy of cooperation and engagement emboldened China in places like the South China Sea. And, I think you can even go back further to the unenforced red line in Syria, after the Assad regime committed another mass murder attack using chemical weapons, some of the most heinous weapons on earth. You can draw a line between that, I think, and Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine, as well as Chinese actions in the South China Sea. So, US disengagement doesn't make the world more peaceful, I would argue. I think it creates opportunities for adversaries who have a mind of their own and an agenda of their own.

***Kimberly Kagan:***

Do you assess that authoritarian regimes will have advantages in the future that come from the fact that they are authoritarian?

***H.R. McMaster:***

I think, Kim, there are some advantages. I mean, the Chinese Communist Party has these strategies of civil-military fusion, for example, that allows it to force all of its companies to act as an arm of the Chinese Communist Party. Now, this is an advantage for them, mainly because of how gullible we are, and our tendency in recent years and even decades, to underwrite our own demise by financing these companies in a way that allows China to gain a differential advantage and unfair advantage in the emerging data-driven global economy, as well as to gain a differential advantage over us, or their aspiration to, militarily.

For example, as I point out in *Battlegrounds*, how US venture capital firms invested more in Chinese artificial intelligence startups than they did in American artificial intelligence startups. And, of course, it is these artificial intelligence technologies that China wants to apply to the People's Liberation Army capabilities, but also apply to



perfecting its police state internally. And so, I think there is a lot more that we have to do across the free world to demand that China stop its unfair trade and economic practices. But, Kim, I would also point out there are real frailties in the system. You're starting to see this, I think, with the state-owned enterprise debt crisis in China now, because Chinese companies often don't make decisions based on what return on investment they're going to get. They make decisions based on what the party wants them to do, or what leaders at the regional level think that the party wants them to do.

And so, there have been a lot of investments made that have created, I think, vulnerabilities in these companies in the past, the parties bailed them out, but I don't know if the party has the resources to bail them all out again. And so, I think that this is going to be a period of time really worth watching to see if what... I'm not an economist. Actually, I have the privilege of being with a lot of great economists here at the Hoover Institution. Sadly, one great economist just passed away a few days ago, Ed Lazear. He was just a fine man, wonderful person, from whom I've learned so much over the years. But it looks like a Ponzi scheme to me, Kim. I just don't think it's sustainable. Of course, we don't want to underestimate the power of the Chinese Communist Party and of this model. But I think if we take a competitive approach, if we stop being our own worst enemy, in many ways, we can compete much more effectively.

**Kimberly Kagan:**

How should the United States compete?

**H.R. McMaster:**

Well, Kim, I have a chapter in *Battlegrounds* entitled 'Turning Weakness Into Strength.' I think a way to think about this is to think about what is the party fearful of, and how do we use those fears as a way to strengthen our own democracies and to strengthen our free market economic systems. Let's think about what the party fears. The party fears that the Chinese people might have the temerity to believe that they ought to have a say in how they're governed. And so, I think what we should see is our representative form of government, the fact that we have the say in how we're governed as one of our relative advantages. Strengthening our democracies is not just sort of a Kantian endeavor, an altruistic endeavor. It's also important from a competitive standpoint, because countries that have representative government are inoculated, in large measure, against China's pernicious influence campaigns.

Australia is a great example of that, standing up to China, recently. But there are many others, from Sri Lanka to Malaysia, to Ecuador, where countries have seen the debt trap that China has laid for them and how they've indebted multiple generations for very little return to the people. And they voted governments out and they've demanded reforms and a reduction in Chinese influence. You see this now catching on across Africa, from Kenya to Nigeria. I think democracy is one of our strengths and we ought to do everything we can to strengthen our democratic institutions and processes and help others who want to strengthen theirs as well.

The party fears rule of law. Because if you have rule of law and due process of law, you can't just throw one and a half million people into concentration camps. You can't extinguish human freedom by eliminating any legislators who are opposed to Xi Jinping. You can't take a mild critic of Xi Jinping and just throw him in jail for 18 years like they did recently. So, I think rule of law is what the party fears. Xi Jinping just made a long speech on rule of law. It was the most tortured document I think I've ever read because what he's trying to do is say rule of law really means subservience to the party and it's really good for you.

So, I think that Xi Jinping's efforts to contort Confucianism and to equate harmony with authoritarianism and hierarchy, I don't know if that works long-term in China. So, I think supporting Taiwan, supporting others who are examples of where rule of law and representative forms of government exists, I think this is what really bothers

China. Taiwan is an example of a successful democracy that demonstrates that the Chinese people are not culturally predisposed toward not wanting to have a say in how they're governed, or toward not wanting to live under rule of law and due process of law.

Freedom of speech and freedom of the press, Kim, I mean it... When a general manager of an NBA team tweets support for Hong Kong, the Chinese Communist Party leadership overreacts, they're touchy about it. I think promoting freedom of speech, investigative journalism, like John Garnaut's work in Australia that pulled back the curtain on pernicious Chinese influence across various sectors of Australian society. It's really powerful. So, really, strengthening our fourth estate these days, I think, is important to make sure there are authoritative sources of information where people can go to and, then, protecting freedom of speech and promoting it.

So, I could go on about this, Kim, but, essentially in the book I argue that we ought to take what the party regards as weaknesses and turn those into our greatest competitive advantages. We, of course, have to also take defensive measures against China's campaign of sustained industrial espionage against us. We have to stop being really negligent in allowing PLA scientists to infiltrate and work in government-funded research projects. That's crazy. So I think that there's a lot we can do defensively, but we ought to really think about our competitive advantages and how we can strengthen those.

**Kimberly Kagan:**

You have argued earlier in this podcast and also in *Battlegrounds* that the United States needs to maintain strong armed forces and keep them forward-positioned abroad in order to help add to the credibility of its diplomacy and its non-military advantages. So, what should the United States think and do to modernize its armed forces in a way that adds to their ability to deter?

**H.R. McMaster:**

Right, well, Kim, our adversaries, our rivals, our competitors, they've been pretty smart, I think, in recent decades. And I think this goes back to the end of the Gulf War, when that lopsided victory over the fourth largest army in the world demonstrated our technological military prowess. What followed, though, from a military strategy defense policy perspective, is a period of complacency in the 1990s. There grew in this period... And your husband, Fred Kagan, also my dear friend, has written a great book about this called *Finding The Target*. This orthodoxy of the revolution in military affairs assumed that the technological military prowess would guarantee our security going well into the future. Remember the catchphrases at the time, no pure competitor till 2020, full spectrum dominance, rapid decisive operations.

It all seemed nonsensical to me at the time, but a lot of people bought into it. And our adversaries looked at what we saw as our technological military advantages and thought about how they could take them apart with countermeasures. So, China and Russia didn't invest billions and billions of dollars into stealth technologies like we did. They thought about how can we defeat those stealth technologies. They didn't try to rival our ability to establish air supremacy, but to instead disrupt it with surface-to-air missiles and tiered and layered air defense and countersatellite capabilities and electronic warfare and long-range missiles. And, so now, we see this broad range of countermeasures that our rivals have developed and we need to counter the countermeasures.

And in general, to do that, I think, we have to design systems that are based less on more and more expensive, more and more exquisite systems that are prone to catastrophic failure, based on these countermeasures that are developed, and invest more in resilience systems that can degrade gracefully and to reemphasize joint operations, which means land, maritime, aerospace, cyberspace, and space capabilities that can operate together synergistically. But then as I mentioned, operate together in a degraded manner and can work together in a decentralized manner. Because, I do think this idea of uninterrupted communications and complete access to precision navigation

and timing and so forth, I think we have to realize that that's all in jeopardy now. That also puts a bigger premium, I think, on the capacity or size of forces, and it also puts a bigger premium, I think, on forward-positioned forces, as I mentioned before, "Hey, if you're already there, it's not denied space."

So, I think these are important considerations for future defense strategy. I hope we just don't go back to this orthodoxy of the RMA, which is really the equivalent of the argument that, "Hey, really, really, really next time, the next war will be fundamentally different from all those that have gone before it. And it will be fast, cheap, and efficient, way from standoff range and rather sanitary." And this time, I think, Kim, it's these range of artificial intelligence technologies that are leading to the resurrection of this, what I call the vampire fallacy of war, because you can't kill it, it just keeps coming back.

So, it's back again in a new guise and I hope that we don't fall for the same kind of cognitive traps that we have in the past, which really are mainly associated with a failure to consider continuities in the nature of war, and to focus exclusively on technological changes in the character of warfare. I stress this... This is a theme in the book is the need to recognize continuity and change in all of the challenges that we face. I'm a big fan of the American historian, Carl Becker's passage in... Actually, it was an address he gave to the American Historical Association in the 1930s, in which he says something like, "Memory of past events and anticipation of future have to walk hand in hand in a happy way without one disputing primacy over the other."

**Kimberly Kagan:**

As we watch the president-elect and his team invest in modernization of our armed forces, what advice do you have for them about, first, modernizing successfully and, second, doing so in a world with the degree of competition and challenge that you have presented?

**H.R. McMaster:**

This is really an important question because we can't do this by ourselves. We need allies and partners to contribute to collective defense and collective deterrence. I think a lot of the discussion about... The change to a Biden administration has been about how much better it's going to be for allies. Alliances and the strength of an alliance is much more than the atmosphere at cocktail parties, right? I think one might be better. That might be much better with our European allies than under a Trump administration. But actually some of our alliances are extremely strong, based on the common threat that we perceive, especially from China and Russia. For example, I think the alliance with Japan is maybe stronger than ever. And so, I think, for deterrent capabilities, the self-defense force in Japan should modernize and we should modernize together in a way in which our capabilities are complementary.

I think what the Republic of Korea, South Korea, has done to strengthen its own defenses is immensely important as well. Developing, for example, a long-range precision strike capability that could protect them, maybe, against this missile capability that, better protect them, that Kim Jong-un is developing and growing in the North. And then across the Indo-Pacific region, the alliances that we have are extremely important, the treaty allies with the Philippines, which is problematic at this time obviously, Thailand, who has their own problems now with the protest against the monarchy and against the current government, and then Australia and India are extremely strong allies and partners.

India is losing its reluctance to join into partnerships that look like alliances because of the threat from China. And this quad format of India, Australia, Japan, and the United States, I think, is particularly promising from defense cooperation perspective, because each of our countries can serve as a hub with spokes out to other countries. And we can galvanize, I think, collective defense and deterrence much more effectively. I think in Europe, of course, again, it's about what is the alliance for? I think what our allies and alliances have to do is become adept



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at not only deterring conventional conflict, or God forbid a nuclear war, but then also more adept at countering aggression that falls below the threshold that might elicit a military response from us.

And this is so-called gray-zone conflict or Russian new generation warfare. And what that's going to require is routine cooperation and work together between various departments of our governments, just like our military works together on a routine basis within the construct of, say, the NATO alliance. And so, this is intelligence and law enforcement and Treasury and Commerce Departments to counter economic aggression. These are informational actions that have to be taken. And so, I think that's really where alliances have to evolve is that we have to be much more nimble politically and much more nimble at integrating the elements of national power across the alliances.

**Kimberly Kagan:**

Can the United States maintain its preeminent position in the world?

**H.R. McMaster:**

I think the United States along with like-minded partners certainly can. And if you just think from an economic perspective, the United States, Japan, the European Union, and now the UK outside of the European Union, work together, it's really hard for China to set different rules that would give them an unfair advantage. And so, I think what we really have to do is work together across those largest economies and then pull others into our efforts. I think that already has a broad appeal among countries who are concerned about China's aggression. Kim, I'll often hear friends in countries across the Indo-Pacific region, maybe in Singapore, or Vietnam, or Philippines say, "Hey, don't force us to choose. Don't force us to choose between China and the United States."

What I try to say to them, and the message that I hope gets through, is that's not the choice we're asking you to make. The choice that's in front of you is a choice between sovereignty and servitude. I think that that's broadly recognized across the region, increasingly so, because of how aggressive Xi Jinping has become in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, after foisting the pandemic on the world and then adding insult to injury with this wolf warrior diplomacy and the range of aggressive actions we've already talked about.

So, I think it is possible. Kim, there's been this narrative of America's decline now for decades and the inevitability of it. And really, a prudent policy would be just to manage our decline. I don't believe it. I think we do have tremendous competitive advantages. We ought to strengthen those competitive advantages and be confident, restore our confidence in who we are and our ability to sustain a reasoned and sustainable foreign policy. Not one that is interventionist, but one that is competitive and to compete effectively, of course, as I mentioned already, alongside like-minded partners.

**Kimberly Kagan:**

Thank you, H.R., for your extraordinary presentation of American national security, of the challenges that we face and all of the insights that you have shared with us today. I highly recommend reading *Battlegrounds*. It is a fascinating look at some of these very themes and a deeper look, indeed, at our adversaries, but also at America's competitive strengths. Thank you, General McMaster, for joining us at Overwatch.

**H.R. McMaster:**

Hey, Kim, thank you. And thank you for your friendship and support and your wisdom over the years. I really missed you. I missed you and Fred when I was on the tight deadline to finish this book because I recall in the first book I wrote, *Dereliction of Duty*, that you and I and Fred wrote the conclusion together of that book on napkins in Dong Fong Chinese restaurant in Highland Falls, New York. So, that was a great memory for me. And I guess I wish I'd been closer to you as I approached the finish line for *Battlegrounds* as well.

**Kimberly Kagan:**

I think the conclusion is better. And, indeed, I am sure that you ate better food.

**H.R. McMaster:**

Thanks. Thanks, Kim. What a pleasure to be with you. Thank you for the opportunity.

**Kimberly Kagan:**

Thank you.

**Jacob Taylor:**

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Overwatch*. ISW is pleased to announce its 2021 Hertog War Studies program, a premier program that aims to educate advanced undergraduate students about the theory, practice, organization, and control of war and military forces. Applications open soon and information can be found in the show notes, or by going to [hertogfoundation.org](http://hertogfoundation.org).

**Kimberly Kagan:**

General McMaster, why should students apply to the Hertog War Studies program?

**H.R. McMaster:**

The Hertog War Studies program is a tremendous opportunity for young people who are interested in the study of military history and the insights that military history can provide to the challenges that we face today. It's important to study war because that's the first step in preventing war. It's also important to study military history so you can learn how to ask the right questions and how to understand the complex causality of events. It's a tremendous opportunity for young people and I highly recommend it.

**Kimberly Kagan:**

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Overwatch*. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit [www.understandingwar.org](http://www.understandingwar.org) to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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