

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

4 February 2026

## ***“Is it possible to have a principled foreign policy in the era of Trump?”***

Speech by Andrew Gilmour <sup>1</sup>

It’s a great honour to be asked to speak at this distinguished forum set up by Michael Lothian.

To get the semantics out of the way first. I briefly debated whether to use “ethical” (as Philip Hammond announced two weeks ago in this room would be my topic); or “moral”, or “principled”, or “values”.

“Ethical” was the word used by Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary after Labour came to power in 1997 to describe their foreign policy<sup>2</sup>. He got a bit mocked for that, on grounds of inconsistency, and in any case the concept got further discredited when his Prime Minister took the country into a war on false information and without UN authorization. As for “moral”, it has a moralizing connotation that I would want to avoid, plus we have recently had Trump boasting that the only possible restraint on his freedom of action was “my own morality”, and since he has a “high grade”, why would he need international law?

But whichever word we could have used for today, what would have been meant by all of them is the notion that foreign policy should not aim solely at naked national self-interest, based on cynical realpolitik. Rather, that foreign policy can and should aspire to more than that: towards a world we want to live in, based of course on a hard-headed assessment of our interests, but also grounded in a set of values, principles and rights. And using all powers at our disposal, hard and soft, while standing up for multilateralism, peace, law and the environment.

Now seems to me an especially relevant time to ask that question, and to respond in the affirmative. But I accept that it might seem on the surface harder to make the case when faced with such amorality, coercion and illegality on the part of the great powers.

Three quotations often get waved about whenever this type of debate occurs, usually to help portray those arguing for values and any notion of a common good as naïve idealists.

The first is Thucydides: "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must", to show that everyone needs to just buckle down to this natural law of submission. But Thucydides was presenting this not as a model, but rather to deplore the reckless amoral

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<sup>1</sup> Not quite as actually delivered – it contains a few passages deleted earlier in the day to allow more time for Q and A.

<sup>2</sup> Though Cook revised it, referring to an “ethical dimension” of foreign policy, as opposed to the entirety.

arrogance<sup>3</sup> that brought an end to the Athenian empire. And is obviously relevant today when amoral arrogance is hardly in short supply.

The second is Lord Palmerston: “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow”. Granted, Palmerston was talking there solely about interests rather than our values. But that wasn’t the whole picture. Palmerston’s even more famous quote “civis Romanus sum”, while attacked by Gladstone as a justification for gunboat diplomacy, was about using power to protect any citizen (in this instance a Gibraltar-born British subject whose house in Athens had been attacked for reasons that included anti-semitism) “against injustice and wrong”. So hardly without values.

The third is Machiavelli’s famous: “it is much safer to be feared than loved because ... fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails”, with its connotation that only brute force and deception are effective. Whereas wanting to be liked, or soft power, is useless in foreign policy.

This seems the view of many, especially since our vaunted “special relationship” now seems on the skids. They feel, in this current world of shameless illegality, corruption, and big-power aggression, that go-it-alone self-interest is the way we need to go too.

With mild apologies for proving the truth of Godwin’s Law, whereby sooner or later every discussion brings in a comparison to the Nazis; but at least Hitler and Goebbels were not so shameless that they didn’t feel the need, when invading Poland, to concoct some stunt with SS officers wearing Polish uniforms staging an ‘attack’ on a German radio station, allowing Hitler to claim he was acting in self-defence.

And even the Brezhnev-era Soviets claimed they were “invited” to invade Afghanistan by a leader they had not quite yet imposed there. As for Trump’s America, yes he claimed his attack on Venezuela was about stopping cocaine, but it was soon admitted to be really about oil; indeed he ensured the first sales of Venezuela crude went to one of his biggest donors.

With Greenland, the US did not bother with any claim at all. No provocation, no staged border incident, no fake invitation. Trump just wanted to own it, declared he “needed” it, and since he has the power, would simply take it “the easy way... or the hard way”.

A recent German National Security Advisor Christoph Heusgen recounts the first time he met the First Son in Law, Jared Kushner, to whom he recalled President Kennedy’s vital great role during the Berlin crisis. The response from Kushner? “Stop Christoph. We’re not diplomats, we’re businessmen. And in business, one day you’re a friend, the next day you’re an enemy. That’s how we conduct our foreign policy”.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, total transactionalism. But it’s not just that we are up against now. There’s also an ideological element that, to my mind, is actually far worse than the cynically and

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<sup>3</sup> A phrase borrowed by the American commentator David Frum, 20 January 2026

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *Le Monde*, 12 October 2025

corruptly transactional – which is the unrestrained racism and the thrill of violent power so often on display, in foreign policy no less than on the streets of Minneapolis.

The triumphalist rhetoric of the administration after the operation to remove Maduro from Caracas was instructive. Stephen Miller, the ghoulish anti-immigration fanatic in the White House, suggested that a new era of raw-power imperialism and theft of resources had dawned in Washington. “We live in a world ... that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power... These are the iron laws of the world . . . since the beginning of time.”<sup>5</sup>

Trump also chimed in with references to ‘iron laws’. They were not the first to use that phrase, which recurs in *Mein Kampf*, especially when opposing what its author considered worse than bestial (in that beasts only mate with their own species whereas humans sometimes engaged in ‘mixed’ marriages). Those turned into the Nuremberg laws for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour of 1935, whose main feature was the prohibition of sex between Aryans and non-Aryans. Their word was *Rassenschande* – “defilement of the blood”.

The Trump National Security Strategy released two months ago uses a different term for something similar: “civilizational erasure” – which takes place, according to their Great Replacement Theory, when white Christian countries admit too many fast-breeding immigrants.

There is a reason, other than its innate repulsiveness, why we need to be concerned about this “civilizational erasure”. This new National Security Strategy – unlike all its predecessors – identifies ideological enemies in only one region of the world. Not China, not Russia, not the Middle East. According to the US government, it is only Western Europe which threatens American democracy and freedom. Which is why “our goal should be to help Europe correct its current trajectory”. And the way to do that is to assist those they term “patriots” to overthrow our order, laws and norms. These patriots are what most others see as authoritarians and neo-fascists who have received copious assistance from the Kremlin and flock to Mar A-Lago for selfies and where they lambast their own countries. With ‘patriots’ like those, one may ask, who needs traitors?

Trump and his acolytes claim that a war against migrants, against science, against net zero, against the ‘hoax’ of climate change, against free trade, human rights, police restraint, judicial independence, human dignity, decency and tolerance – erasing all these will somehow contribute to America’s global supremacy. But to ensure that this supremacy is lasting, it needs to be replicated in Western Europe. We must recognise that we have been very clearly warned.

After Venezuela, after Greenland, after Davos, came the Pentagon’s 2026 National Defence Strategy signed by the ever-strutting Peter Hegseth, in which they mock “cloud-castle abstractions like the rules-based international order” in favour of “America First”<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *New York Times*, 5 January 2026

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/scorecard/scowcroft-strategy-scorecard-grading-trumps-second-national-defense-strategy/>

Lastly, we have what is likely to go down as the supreme example of global megalomania in recorded history. I mean the attempted replacement – because that is surely what is intended in Trump’s “Board of Peace” – of the entire United Nations and its treaties, resolutions, Charter values, instruments and institutions. Three weeks ago, we<sup>7</sup> celebrated a few hundred yards away, the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first meetings of the UN, held in London. All that to be replaced by the ego of one person: who gets to choose every member of his Board of Peace; who will decide who can participate from each country; who can decide every agenda item; every procedure, every expenditure, every sub-committee, and who can veto every decision at any level. And who will carry on chairing the committee even once he stops being president.

The Board of Peace was authorised by the UN Security Council in November – reluctantly on the part of many Member States, but agreed to because it seemed the only way to stop the violence on Gaza and also it indicated a future Palestinian state – specifically for one task only: to manage Gaza’s future. But then when it was reinvented just a few weeks ago, it contained no reference to Gaza, let alone a Palestinian state, no reference to the Security Council resolution that had established it, no mention even of the UN. And had arrogated to itself and its lifelong chairman the right to intervene in any part of the world it likes. Surely the most exponential example of ‘mission creep’ anyone has even dreamed of.

On the Board are property developers who are buddies or relations of Trump, Sir T. Blair, some far-right international leaders, as well as two invitees who sadly could not attend the festivity in Davos because the Swiss government had announced that their police would be formally obliged to arrest President Putin and Prime Minister Netanyahu for their war crimes.

So how to confront this political, economic, military onslaught on European and British interests and values?

The obvious course, in the eyes of many especially on the right, is to draw the conclusion that in this dangerous world of might-is-right, bullying, allies-bashing, and values-free transactionalism, then we have to ape our erstwhile ally and jettison our principles – both in methods (soft power and multilateralism) and goals (basically ‘our country above all’). Principles are apparently a luxury we cannot afford in face of the coming domination by China, the territorial designs of Putin, and the withdrawal of friendship from across the Atlantic.

Hence last month, the *Sunday Times* finally found something they could praise Keir Starmer for: slashing our development budget last year – as if to suggest ‘good decision: the one way we can find to pay for our needed defence and more security is to cause the painful deaths of millions of the most vulnerable people in the world living in highly unstable conflict-ridden, climate-affected, environments’. The Labour government’s decision to compound earlier cuts by a massive further 40% was announced exactly as Elon Musk and Marco Rubio were eviscerating USAID (which has been estimated<sup>8</sup> to cause up to 14 million avoidable deaths

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<sup>7</sup> UNA-UK at Methodist Central Hall, in the company of the present UN Secretary-General and President of the General Assembly, commemorating the first-ever meetings of the UN Security Council and General Assembly in January 1946.

<sup>8</sup> *The Lancet* [Volume 406](#), July 19, 2025

by 2030) and just a couple of days before Starmer was to have his first meeting with the re-elected President – as if he felt that such toughness would somehow impress Trump, not as much as the letter from the King perhaps but still enough to try.

That same edition of the same paper newspaper carried a column by Dominic Lawson exemplifying the anti-values approach, pouring condescension on Starmer’s alleged “delusional” obsession about (what he puts in inverted commas) “international law”, and actually praising Trump, “for all his narcissism, venality and idiocy (but who) at least serves to demonstrate that soft power has a sharply falling export value”.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, we should forget about soft power, forget about delusional international law. All that counts should be hard power in the service of selfish national interest – not promoting values, law, peace, human rights or a clean environment.

But soft power is not just for softies; nor is it a goal in itself. It’s a vital tool or method of statecraft. And while some of it is values and principles driven (e.g. respect for law and human rights, or the BBC World Service providing truthful news for oppressed peoples), other forms of soft power (such as Russian disinformation and promoting inter-racial hatreds) are clearly not beneficent.

Of course there is quite a difference between those on the one hand who espouse extreme realpolitik (one could call it Hobbesian, Darwinian or Bismarckian, demanding that we take the world “as it is and not as we want it”, and act in accordance with nature being “red in tooth and claw”). Between those and, on the other hand, people they dismiss as woolly sandal-toed idealists intoning Gandhi, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the need for universal values and laws that constrain the powerful from dominating and destroying the less powerful.

But putting interests and values in stark contra-distinction to one another, as some do, ignores the whole concept of enlightened self-interest – that we got from Burke and Adam Smith<sup>10</sup>. Because it is not quaint and feeble, on the contrary it is firmly in the long-term national self-interest, for a country to act according to values and law. And for middle-ranking countries to work in concert with those who think along the same lines, who want to constrain the most powerful and amoral and forestall return to the law of the jungle, and who recognise that only through cooperation can we deal with the profoundest threats facing the world.

For instance, during what we call our “Finest Hour”, the conviction that we were in the right, that it was not just our security that was threatened but our values and principles, as well as solidarity with victims elsewhere, helped strength the British spirit. Which in turn helped inspire resistance in lands under occupation. Even more important, as Tim Bouverie has shown in his recent *Allies at War*, that moral high ground was the key reason why an overwhelming majority of Americans were prepared to support aid to Britain even before the US itself entered the war. Of course, you can’t fight off a massive and brutal attack armed just with honour and values, but it can certainly help.

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<sup>9</sup> Lawson – “The PM has a doctrine – but it’s delusional” Sunday Times 25/1/26

<sup>10</sup> See Jesse Norman’s biographies of both.

There are many other areas where upholding values and principles moves into the category of a nation's hard interests.

Climate and ecological issues are seen by realpolitikers as intrinsically soft power issues: cuddly pandas, newts and mangroves etc. And there happens to be a remarkable correlation between climate deniers, hardcore realpolitikers, foreign aid bashers, UN sceptics, and militantly anti-immigrant demagogues, who are very often the same people, even though the results of their prejudices in some areas may exacerbate their bugbears in others. For instance, casting doubt on climate science and slashing the overseas development budget both make it much more likely that migration from the world's worst-affected regions to Europe and North America will increase.

Therefore, those of us with different views to them welcomed the release last week of the long-delayed but hard-hitting UK National Security Assessment, focusing on biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, and prepared by our intelligence services. Many people, especially in the senior ranks of the military, already understand the alarming security implications of climate change. What is even newer is this recognition that the collapse of biodiversity systems poses threats of similar scope. Thus that National Security Assessment concludes with the likelihood that crop failures, natural disasters and pandemic outbreaks will intensify, resulting in "geopolitical instability, economic insecurity, conflict, migration and increased inter-state competition for resources".<sup>11</sup> Soft power and cooperation are certainly needed, but to deal with very hard power interest.

Last May, the Attorney-General Lord Hermer gave a notable speech in which he wanted to dismiss two contrasting positions on foreign policy: the "legal romantic idealists" on the one hand, and proponents of "pseudo-realism" on the other. He argued that British leadership to strengthen the international rules-based system was both the right and the only truly realistic choice. The government's chosen foreign policy of "progressive realism" would be an ideal middle way between those two schools of thought. A bit provocatively (and it led to some calls for his resignation from the Tory benches), Hermer compared the thinking on the British Right with the Nazi jurist, Carl Schmitt, whose central thesis was in essence the (very Trumpian) claim that state power is all that counts, not law. Hermer's heart seemed to lie more in kicking the 'pseudo-realists', though he gave a deliberately extreme version of the 'legal romantic idealists' in order to be able to attack them too.<sup>12</sup>

That aside, Hermer's views, even if he wasn't Attorney-General, are worth looking at, because they lay out a strong Government case for why it's essential to reject the "siren song" of rightwing politicians and media, that Britain should abandon the constraints of international

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<sup>11</sup> "Biodiversity collapse threatens UK security, intelligence chiefs warn." *The Guardian* 20 January 2025

<sup>12</sup> For instance, claiming that their position is that "We should always call out our partners (when they do wrong) and .... we should always talk to hostile regimes nicely because that will result in them being nicer to us". It is hard to imagine that any person has such an opinion.

law in favour of raw power a world where “hunks could be ripped off borders and every dispute be settled by the force of the strong”.

There is one rather obvious problem with the Attorney-General’s speech, which has nothing to do with the merits of the argumentation. Rather it lies in that fact that the government in which he serves, despite being headed by a former human rights lawyer, seems to have a highly ambivalent approach to law, justice and rights. To illustrate how this is seen by some, the slightly arch response of one leading international lawyer to the invitation for today’s event was that a more searching question than the one I’d set myself would be “is it possible to have a principled foreign policy in the era of Starmer?”

It is not clear to what extent politicians on either side of the House have taken on board that Britain’s standing in the world – especially when it comes to taking the country seriously on any justice issue in the years to come – has been damaged. From on the one hand calling out the Russian invasion of Ukraine together with its indisputable war crimes, and proposing all sorts of escalating sanctions, while being relatively muted on Gaza, resisting almost all sanctions, and continuing to provide vital military components and aerial intelligence for use by the Israeli military throughout the two-year war. It is not just our reputation for fairness that suffers; this will almost certainly damage our ability to pursue our national interests in several parts of the world in future.

There are two recent speeches I would like to briefly discuss. The first is the excellent one two weeks ago by Simon Macdonald in this room (an irritatingly tough act to follow). It coincided with Greenland-Davos and Macdonald himself as having a realpolitik perspective on the matter. He was not kidding. His view that since Trump was probably going to take it anyway, and since a US invasion of that island would almost certainly mean the end of NATO, then his advice would be “Oh Danes, you should (give it up and) get the best deal you can”. He paraphrased Bismarck saying, Greenland is not worth the life of a single British soldier. That is a fair point of course. But it also seemed slightly redolent of the sentiment that Greenland is a faraway land of which we know nothing.

I do slightly wonder, for the UK to be remotely respected on the world stage, if it can just ignore what is perhaps the most fundamental precept of the entire UN Charter – especially given our disproportionate benefit from our permanent membership of the Security Council – which is the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force.

Should we really signal to the world that we no longer regard that principle as worth even a token fight? I believe not – not least as deploying even a token European military presence would necessarily turn Trump’s operation into more of an obvious invasion (though without bloodshed) that would create serious problems for him among Republicans in Congress and outside.

In answer to a question about Trump’s relationship to Russia, Simon offered a good joke in deadpan delivery – “as a former British ambassador, I would never publicly suggest that the

President of the United States was a Russian agent. But one does have to ask how his behaviour would be different if he were.”

Indeed, and I can't be alone in struggling every single day to figure this one out. Because Trump's gobsmacking behaviour seems so obviously the Exhibit A example of how pursuing a transactional, unprincipled, aggressive policy is counter-productive – in that it weakens Western and American power, thereby smoothing the way for Chinese and Russian advances.

Brutish values-free, rules-free policy is not clever real-politick, it's spectacularly own-goalish. At every level and in every sphere. Economically – focusing on oil and coal, allowing China to increase its vast lead in modes of energy for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century economy. Politically – pulling out of UN bodies (as they have just done to over 30 of them, paralyzing most of the remainder by not paying their dues) and upsetting almost every one of your allies means the US loses influence and long-term leverage over them all, and China is delighted.

Morally – acting so illegally that it allows to show that it, by comparison, supports international law, and Russia to claim that when it invades a country like Ukraine, it's no worse than the US invading Venezuela to take its oil – and also to satisfy Secretary of State Rubio's anti-Havana messianism, not entirely dissimilar to Putin's historical view of Kyiv.

The other speech I want to refer to is Mark Carney's gratifyingly defiant one in Davos standing up to the class bully. So much has been written about it and the “fiction” he admitted to, but I want to focus on just one passage: “we knew that international law applied with varying rigour depending on the identity of the accused or the victim”.

Now the honesty of a Western leader admitting that, even in such an under-stated way, has been much commented on. Because for much of the world, if asked about the West's own respect for the rules-based order it harps on about, would have echoed Gandhi's famous response when a journalist asked what he thought about Western civilization – “I think it would be a good idea.”

Future historians, I am convinced, if they are objective, will date the sad collapse of the rules-based order not from Venezuela or the threat to Greenland. But from Gaza. After all, for two years, almost the entire Western world not only stood by when war crimes were systematically committed but actively provided support for them.

This is what Carney was hinting at when he said we have applied international law depending on who was the perpetrator and who the victim. If you were to rely on British papers such as the *Times* or the *Telegraph* for all your news, you would have no idea at all that almost every major human rights organisation in the world has carefully and judiciously weighed the evidence and determined that Gaza was a genocide – Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Medecins sans Frontieres – as has the UN Commission of Inquiry which examined it and concluded that on 4 of the 5 counts, it was genocide. A view shared by Israeli human rights organisations, by leading Israeli genocide experts, and the World Association of Genocide Scholars.

You would not know that the formidable Israeli professor of history at Oxford, Avi Shlaim, has recently written a book – *Genocide in Gaza: Israel's Long War on Palestine*. His German publisher got cold feet, and tried to make him put a question mark after 'Genocide in Gaza'. He refused, and found another publisher. "I didn't agree to add a question mark, because in my mind, there is no longer any question as to whether Israel is guilty of genocide... The turning point for me ... was when Israel suspended all international aid to Gaza, deprived the people of Gaza of water and food and fuel and medical supplies, that convinced me that this is genocide." <sup>13</sup>

Pressed on this, the British government points out that international courts need to make a formal ruling on whether what the world watched for two years constitutes genocide. But UK officials are fully aware that the first article of the 1948 Convention on Genocide calls on all state parties not just to punish the perpetrators of genocide after the event, but also to *prevent* genocide happening, if there are any grounds for believing that it might be. Therefore, to claim that the UK cannot take action until the ICJ issues its final judgement – likely in 2028 (a good four years after the ICJ's issued a preliminary ruling that genocide claims were 'plausible') – seems like a clear attempt by two British governments to fudge their legal obligation to take actions to prevent further killings.

There is a reason why the word "universal" features in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Because to mean anything, obligations to uphold rights need to be applied universally – not just when you don't like and are trying to make a point against the perpetrators. A war crime is a war crime whether it is committed by a friend or a foe. Genocide too.

Similarly, illegal invasion is a violation of the UN Charter whether you like the guy being invaded (Zelensky) or not (Maduro) – yet very few Western leaders defended international law after the Trump administration's brazen recent murders on the high seas, mini-invasion, abduction, and wholesale theft. One can understand why, but then not be surprised when the rest of the world takes note of the omission for future reference.

This is what Carney was getting at, and why much of the rest of the world finds our double standards both infuriating and risible. It is why I consider it important that a Standing Group on Atrocity Crimes has been launched in July 2025. An initiative aimed at strengthening the UK's leadership on international justice. To predict, prevent and respond to atrocity, and to use universal jurisdiction to prosecute international crimes and impose sanctions.

It is needed because without some impartial mechanism, which would make ministers less afraid to call out powerful perpetrators on their own, there will always be attempts to politicise the government's response to atrocity crimes, undermining national credibility.

The ideal would be an approach followed by a number of European countries – including Ireland, Norway and Spain – whose leadership has shown the courage to do what they know is

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<sup>13</sup> Interview of Avi Shlaim in Jacobin 13 Jan 2026

right. In London last September, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez in London decried the west's double standards over Ukraine and Gaza, the latter of which he described as "one of the darkest episodes of international relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century", adding that these double standards were unsustainable "if we want to increase our credibility when it comes to other crises", including Ukraine.

In 1957, President Eisenhower, a staunch Republican, and appalled by the Suez escapade and by Israel's reluctance to pull its forces back from the newly-occupied Gaza and Sinai, asked: "Should a nation which attacks and occupies foreign territory in the face of UN disapproval be allowed to impose conditions on its own withdrawal?" If so, he went on, "then I fear we will have turned back the clock of international order."<sup>14</sup>

He urged against double standards and "might is right", emphasized rule of law over force, and told his allies – and their friends in Congress and the media – what they did not want to hear.

It was a time when people looked up to America not just because its aircraft carriers and nuclear missiles were bigger, but – despite some monumental inconsistencies – it was seen to value respect for law, freedom and democracy. Its soft power via Hollywood and so much else was unequalled. Many people believed and were inspired by JFK when he declaimed his "pay any price" lines at his inaugural speech.

Conversely, America's abandonment today of many of its soft power advantages is going to be deeply damaging to its interests and long-term leverage. A few days ago, Martin Wolf in the *FT* parodied JFK's words to depict the current US presidential world world-view: "We shall exact any sum, impose any burden, inflict any hardship, oppose any friend, and befriend any foe to assure the wealth of me, my family and friends."<sup>15</sup>

In summary, principles, values and interests – when pursued cleverly and courageously – are not incompatible. They can and should reinforce one another.

Probably at no time since the UN's founding has the need been greater than it is now for democratic middle-ranking powers to come together, make common cause, and build up their alarmingly depleted military capacities. And at the same time, stand up together for the principles they share, most of which have been enshrined in international law but are now under threat as never before.

I just do not see how we can reliably base our future peace and prosperity on any other foreign policy.

Thank you very much.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-and-television-address-the-american-people-the-situation-the-middle-east>

<sup>15</sup> Martin Wolf *FT* 16 Dec 2025