

The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West

Featuring Bradley Bowman, David Kilcullen and Kori Schake.

Moderated by Clifford D. May.

MAY: I'm Cliff May, founder and president of FDD, the Foundation for Defensive Democracies and thank you for joining us today for a special discussion marking the release of Dr. David Kilcullen's latest book, *The Dragons and The Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*. Today's event is hosted by FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, CMPP, which promotes understanding of the defense strategies, policies, and capabilities necessary to deter and defeat threats to the freedom, security and prosperity of Americans and our allies. I should mention Dr. Kilcullen is a member of the board of advisors of CMPP, which is chaired by former national security advisor, Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster. CMPP experts work closely with FDD's Center on Economic and Financial Power and our Center on Cyber and Technology Innovation with the goal of integrating all instruments of American power to achieve better outcomes for Americans and for our allies.

As you may know, FDD is a nonpartisan policy institute. We are a source of timely research, analysis and policy options for Congress, the Administration, the media, and the wider national security community. We take no foreign government or foreign corporate funding. This is one of the many events FDD hosts throughout the year. For more information on our work, we encourage you to visit our website. It's just fdd.org. Today we invite all of you to join in the conversation. We don't have a studio audience today, we're being cautious in response to health concerns. We are live tweeting @FDD, so please feel free to put questions there. They'll get to me.

I'm going to start with a brief introduction of our panelists, David Kilcullen, and I meant to hold up his book so you can get to see it and you should go out and get yourself a copy. He is an authoritative voice on guerilla and unconventional warfare, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency with extensive experience over a 25 year career with the Australian and US governments as an Army officer, analysts, adviser and diplomat. He currently serves as professor of practice at Arizona State University and he's CEO and president of Cordillera Applications Group, a research and operations firm providing geopolitical analysis, remote observation field work and related support to government industry and NGOs. Kori Schake is now the director of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute. Dr. Schake was previously at the International Institute for Strategic Studies and she has a distinguished experience in government working with the Departments of Defense and State as well as the White House's National Security Council.

Bradley Bowman is senior director of our Center on Military and Political Power. He served as National Security Advisor to members of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees and he was more than 15 years an active duty US military officer. During that time, he was both a Black Hawk pilot and an assistant professor at West Point. So let's get going, Dave, for those who haven't read your book, again, everybody should, explain briefly who are the dragons, who are the snakes?

KILCULLEN: Yeah, so this is a book about military adaptation by adversaries and potential adversaries since the end of the Cold War. And the title comes from Jim Woolsey who was President Clinton's CIA director who –

MAY: And an FDD chairman for some years.

KILCULLEN: Yes, thank you for pointing that and an incredibly prescient guy, right? If you read his testimony when he was going through his confirmation hearing in 1993, he was asked, “the Cold War just ended, what do you think will be the threat environment that America needs to face in the post-Cold War period?” And he said, “We've slain a large dragon,” talking about the Soviet Union, “but now we find ourselves in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes. And in many ways, the dragon was easy to keep track of.” And he goes on to lay out this incredibly detailed vision of weak states, failing States and non-state actors, which I'm calling the snakes, right? And suggests that peer and near-peer state adversaries aren't going to be a big deal for the immediate future, which I'm calling dragons. And what I'm suggesting is that we've had a period of about nearly 30 years since his testimony where our adversaries have adapted and evolved. And I'm trying to sort of trace the history of how that happened and where they are now.

MAY: If you look at what's happened since then, and your book obviously suggests this, you have the snakes, but the dragons have come back from the dead. When you talk about dragons, now we're talking about Russia. It turns out Vladimir Putin, once he took over, his aspiration was not to be a member in good standing of the international community contributing to stability and in peaceful relations. That was not on top of his to do list.

KILCULLEN: Well, we wanted to make Russia a normal country and Russia said, “Normal by whose definition?” Right? And they were like, “Well, you know.” So yeah, I think Russia has specialized in playing a pretty weak hand, extremely well.

MAY: Extremely well. Then you have China now for years on, I think on both sides of the aisle, Republicans, Democrats, conservatives, liberals thought, “Oh, as the Chinese get rich, they're going to get moderate. They're going to be a strategic partner. It's not really communism anymore. It's all okay.” It's not all okay. They haven't evolved in that way at all. We were all wrong. That's another dragon challenging us. Right?

KILCULLEN: Right. I'm suggesting the dragons are back, but in the proceeding 25 to 30 years, they've learned from the snakes and they operate in a different way now.

MAY: Okay. Kori, now the Trump administration's national security strategy. I'm sure you've read it and thought about it. In a way, it does talk about the dragons and the snakes – it doesn't use those terms – what we just refer to as dragons, that we call revisionist powers, China and Russia. The snakes we essentially call rogue powers as well as non-state Jihadi actors. So is the NSS, the National Security Strategy, is recognizing those threats. Is it essentially saying the same thing that that Dave is saying?

SCHAKE: It's definitely going in the same direction Dave is going in a much less erudite way than Dave's excellent book. One thing I think I would love for people to take away from the

conversation, both about the NSS and about Dave's terrific book, which I don't think we have really centered our conversation with. I don't mean on this panel, I mean generally as we talk about American strategy, both against snakes and against dragons, is that these are the wages of our success, right? Great powers were driven to the edges of the conflict spectrum because we are so dominant and on the high rungs of the escalation ladder. And so nobody thought they could win a war against the Western militaries. And that's why they were driven to the edges of the conflict spectrum. Moreover, I think the notion that Russia and China are revisionist powers, they're rejectionist powers, right? Russia has determined it can't be successful on Western terms and so as Dave rightly points out in the book, they've taken a liminal strategy, which is –

MAY: Define liminal for, because it's not a word everybody hears all the time.

SCHAKE: Working on the margin. So trying not to cross the threshold that would provoke direct confrontation with the West. And again, that's a smart marginal strategy and it indicates that we are actually still in their minds, dominant in the middle of the conflict spectrum. So both in terms of what they are trying to achieve politically and how they judge their military opportunities, we should acknowledge that we start from a notion of the success of what we did. It's just not going to be good enough. And Dave makes that argument really nicely in the book, that our adversaries have been much more adaptive than we have been and we need to limber ourselves up in order to remain the rule-setter of our own fortune.

MAY: Brad, particularly as a military guy, there's a tendency, I think Dave alludes to it, talks about it for the military. They say, "Let's do what we do well." And what we do well is we did it in the first Gulf war. That's great. And we would really prefer that our enemies help us by challenging us in ways we're used to. And if they begin to challenge us in other ways, well that just screws up all the plans we have and all the things we've done with the weapons that we're going to design and all of that. But that's, of course, exactly what they want to do. And part of Dave's point is our enemies are adapting and evolving, to use Darwinian terms, which you do and anthropological terms, which you do, and we are not because we get on a track and we like to stay on it.

BOWMAN: I think that's right. The adversaries are employing methods far beyond just military power and in our war colleges and our advanced courses, we talk a lot about that, but in the end sometimes our strategies are one dimensional and part of that is because our military is so effective. But if you look at the way the Russians and the Chinese are operating, it's clear that military power is necessary but not sufficient. And that's why I think cutting the State Department's budget by 30% or cutting the budget of USAID is so shortsighted because if you talk with anyone and Dave Kilcullen has far more time in these places than I ever will, if you talk with most war fighters, the troops know they want those development and diplomatic experts beside them because they understand that converting our battlefield success to long-term sustainable political gain requires far more than military power, it requires aptitude in areas of diplomacy, development and much more.

SCHAKE: And can I add one other thing, which I think is a distinction between what Dave argues for in the book and what the National Security Strategy argues for, which is the National Security Strategy makes a narrow argument about national America first nationalism

and for the kinds of challenges that Dave rightly identifies in the book, and that the NSS rightly identifies, cooperation and pulling institutions and pulling allies along with us is a much stronger front with which to confront these challenges. And that's the failing. The two failings of the NSS are first, they're not actually carrying out their strategy because they're not funding the non-military elements of it. And second, they have a conceptual mistake that cooperative enterprises are diminishing to American power instead of the fact that, which I believe to be true, that playing team sports is actually what we do well and being the captain of teams is what we, is our comparative advantage relative to any of our adversaries, dragons or snakes.

MAY: I've got a question, but you've got a comment before I do.

BOWMAN: Too good for me not to want to follow up on. I mean often our allies are portrayed in recent years as liabilities. On the contrary, I view our allies as one of our great grand strategic assets. I mean if you look at, Dave was there when we had a 100,000 plus troops in Iraq, a 100,000 plus troops of different time in Afghanistan. Unless we have another 9/11 with weapons of mass destruction, something horrific like that, we're probably not going to go there again because it's not politically doable. But what we can do is have a thousand troops in Syria leveraging 70,000 Syrian defense forces who, with our logistical and air support, defeated the ISIS caliphate. The American people need to understand the ISIS caliphate would still exist if it weren't for our partners in Syria or we would have had to send the 101st or the 82nd, do it ourselves with a lot of American casualties. Allies are a great grand strategic asset, and we cannot implement the national defense strategy without our allies because the combined powers of adversaries are just too great.

MAY: I also want to dig in on this point, I happen to totally agree that our allies in say Syria, the Kurds, the Arabs are working with a very small footprint. We're a force multiplier. I don't understand why President Trump hasn't taken great credit for this kind of Goldilocks solution. Neither 100,000 troops nor zero troops and we're, as you say, diminishing the Islamic state, but also by the way, secondarily tertiary, we're keeping at bay, the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has its ambitions in Russia, which has its ambitions. All that's being done by a very small footprint of very highly skilled troops that are in combat and probably need to be in combat in order to learn, if I'm understanding you correct. However, I also wanted to bring this in, when we talk about our allies, and I'm going to get a lot of diplomats if they're watching angry at me, but that's the way it goes.

The Germans are not contributing to the collective security the way they might be. They are not spending enough money and when they do, they're spending it on benefits for retired soldiers rather than making sure their tanks are capable. The Turks are the second biggest military in NATO. I don't see the Turks coming into defend Estonia, if the Russians attack, I just can't imagine that. The French have some capabilities. The Australians, not in NATO, but will have capabilities. The British some, and that's about it. The rest of the NATO members, I don't see them contributing and being allies that we can count on. They expect us to protect them without any, with very little input from us. Go ahead.

KILCULLEN: I think it's possible to criticize NATO, which I do in the book primarily for now being too big and too unwieldy and too threatening to Russia and yet at the same time

being sort of too disorganized to generate a unified effect in the places that count. It's interesting to see how the European group within NATO has really, in fact, started to spend more in the last two or three years. President Trump has made the same comments that the last three or four presidents have made in just – .

MAY: Less diplomatic.

KILCULLEN: Shall we say, yeah. A slightly stylistically unusual way and that's actually had an effect. Can I also say that –

SCHAKE: What had the effect was Russia's invasion of Crimea.

KILCULLEN: We didn't see a step up in spending.

SCHAKE: Actually, you do.

KILCULLEN: The Germans began in 2016, right?

SCHAKE: Right.

MAY: The Germans – despite Crimea – the Germans are going ahead with Nord Stream Two which we believe American – this administration believes, maybe you don't, will make Germany and Europe more dependent on Russia than ever.

KILCULLEN: The US has this Freedom Gas program, which I think is very well worth people paying attention to, which is about weaning some parts of Europe off of Russian natural gas. And I think that's a critical weakness. Can I just talk allies more boldly there for a second?

MAY: Please.

KILCULLEN: When I first served as an Australian embed within the force in Iraq, people would say you're a great coalition partner. And I would say, "Excuse me, we're not a coalition partner, we're a treaty ally." Right? There's actually a difference between allies by treaty who are committed to certain requirements and then just people that you aggregate on the ground. And one of the points I make in the book is that US dominance poses an adaptation challenge, not just for our adversaries but also for allies. So the Aussies have chosen to focus on certain capabilities that they want to keep up with the United States, but they have sort of let other capabilities slide by the wayside as Kori can probably talk to you better than I. The British have tried to cover a much wider band of things and keep up, but they've got less resources for each individual category. So part of this is a, and that's why I say how the "Rest Learned to fight the West." We have to start thinking as a collection of Western powers, as a joint set of capabilities rather than sort of individually competing.

MAY: Kori, and one more point that I want you to talk about here is you're not talking only about our military allies. You're also talking about when we have a battlefield success, and this is very much in the book, we need to have a way to translate that into a political success

afterwards. We have not been very successful at that. The question is who does that? If it's left to the military, the military will try whatever their mission is, they'll do it. I can remember being in Afghanistan a few years ago and having generals and helicopters talking to me about the crops they should be planting and I thought, well, what does that have to, why is an infantry officer telling me that? But he said, because I want to win and that's my mission. But the question is, do we have, at the State Department, at USAID, at the National Endowment for Democracy, do we have people who really know how, again, not so much to nation-build in the sense of we're going to create a Jeffersonian democratic society, but at least can put in the institutions of basic government so that it's not a total failure, corrupt and a failed state the minute we leave.

SCHAKE: Yeah. So it's a really good challenge. And my having worked in both the State Department and the Pentagon, I was shocked at how little advantage the State Department's personnel system makes of the talent in their midst. If you think about the American Army with, no offense, Brad, mostly what they are brilliant at is taking talent at the middle of the bell curve and shifting the bell curve upward. Right? So they look for a young woman who has the skills that would make her a good soldier. They recruit her, they train her, they spend about a third of her career teaching and training her. They promote her, not just on what she has done well, but on her potential to contribute in broader challenges going forward. The State Department does none of those things. You have brilliant American diplomats, Bill Burns for example. There are people you can throw into the deep end of the pool and they won't drown, but nobody ever teaches them to swim.

And so the institution doesn't array itself to set diplomats up to be successful. I cringe every time somebody argues for whole of government anything in the United States, because we are politically incapable of that. We have a government designed not to do that. What we are brilliant at is swarms of independent action that add up to stuff and instead of trying to make us culturally different than we are, and we're successful for a reason, and the reason isn't the ability to create whole of government operations. It's the build a better mouse trap entrepreneurial-ism and we should have strategies, as Dave argues in the book that build on that.

MAY: I'm going to ask you a question that, and I want you to answer me quickly because I want to move on.

SCHAKE: Sorry. Sorry.

MAY: But I'm sure if we, if President Obama had not pulled all our troops out of Iraq in 2011, if we had stayed there where we were building the largest embassy in the world, huge. And we had worked harder with the Iraqis on, I'm not going to say called nation building, I'm going to call it on the building of institutions. They were voting, they were proud to vote. The purple fingers. Would we be in a very different place in Iraq today if we, the military, had stayed to broker among the various factions and we had put more effort into trying to create institutions of government and bureaucracy?

SCHAKE: Yes.

MAY: Okay. Do you agree with that?

BOWMAN: I do and I was there as a humble staffer supporting my boss on the Senate Armed Service Committee in 2011 when people like John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and Kelly Ayotte were warning the Obama Administration not to do it and predicting exactly what ended up happening. You'd think after 9/11 our country wouldn't need a reminder that bad things in the Middle East can come and hurt us here. That's what happened on 9/11 and it happened again when we left prematurely in Iraq and it's going to happen again in Afghanistan if we don't learn the lessons.

KILCULLEN: I would just say I was not a fan of going into Iraq in the first place. I was very much not a fan of leaving as we did in 2011. If we hadn't done that, they'd probably would not have been an ISIS, certainly not in the form that we found. We wouldn't have had to go back in. I will just say though, and this isn't a partisan statement, the Trump Administration may be about to make the identical mistake in Afghanistan and Syria that the Obama Administration made in Iraq.

MAY: I want to come back to that, but I don't want to miss this opportunity. We're going to go through – what I want to do before we come back to that, don't let me forget to come back to that. Let's go through the options you sketch out in the book very quickly. I want to start with – I want to name them because I like your names and I like to be able to say them on the air. So start with, just explain to your option: embracing the suck.

KILCULLEN: So embracing the suck is a military slang, but what it means is just accepting the fact that something unpleasant is going to happen and trying to make the most of it. So in embracing the suck strategy would be to say, "Look, to the extent that the US global primacy over the past 70 years or so is an example of a historical phenomenon of an empire, like any other empire, we're going to decline. We just have to deal with that and we need to go for a soft landing by looking for a successor that can sort of take the reins from us." And I suggest in the book that's not going to work.

MAY: And by the way, you also say in the book that President Obama favored such quote "managed decline" and that paradoxically, you write, "It may take Trump to execute the Obama strategy."

KILCULLEN: Despite all the partisan rhetoric actually in their strategic positioning, President Trump or President Obama are a lot more similar to each other than either would like to hear. But I do think that the problem here is for a strategy of handing over to a successor to work, that success has to be, A, interested in doing that, B capable of doing it and C, friendly enough to us that it wouldn't suck for that to happen. The Chinese don't want to do it. The Russians can't do it. Neither of them are friendly enough for us to trust them to do it, so it's not a good solution.

MAY: And I'll let you comment on that, but one other point I think that President – There's a basic ambiguity, if not contradiction in President Trump's thinking because, on the one hand he wants America to be great. On the other hand, any president whose job is to manage

decline, they're not making America great again. You're trying to make America Denmark at best.

SCHAKE: I think what the President wants is the United States to get credit without doing the work, and that's the key to a failing strategy. My whole career, I have looked for better allies than the NATO allies. I would love to trade the NATO allies in for a better set of American allies. Unfortunately, I cannot find a better set of American allies. And that leaves you with the choice of – does the United States organize everybody, line everybody up, challenge everybody to do better than they do, shame everybody into doing more than they do? Or do we step back in the hopes that others will step forward?

And I think Dave's rightly outlined the problem. The people who step forward are not going to do it on the terms that we are going to want them to do it on, and it is so much less expensive to sustain a largely beneficial environment than to allow it to corrode and have to reestablish it.

KILCULLEN: Can I also, noting that we have a slight disagreement about the timeline here. I think it's worth noting that one reason why people are stepping up more effectively in response to President Trump than to previous presidents is because previous presidents have given mixed messages. They've said, "You guys need to do more. Oh, by the way, we'll always be there for you and we'll always do whatever it takes." Right? Article 5. President Trump has said, "You guys need to do more. And by the way, if you don't do more, I might not be there." And now suddenly everyone's like, "Oh yeah, that's actually a good point."

So I think there's, maybe it's instinctive, but there's a nuance and a subtlety to the way that this president pursues foreign policy, which I think he doesn't always get credit for.

MAY: Go ahead Brad.

BOWMAN: Just a quick comment on NATO. The fundamental purpose of NATO is to deter a Russian invasion of our European allies. That's the fundamental purpose, codified in Article 5 of the treaty there. I understand the desire to try to get our NATO allies to pay more, particularly Germany. But the big mistake of the president was to tie that effort to Article 5 because by suggesting that America won't be there to honor our collective defense responsibilities, you're inviting the very thing that NATO was designed to prevent. You're encouraging Russia to do in the Baltics the thing that will be far more costly than maintaining a few brigades in Europe. So incredibly shortsighted.

Ash Carter go back three, four or five Secretaries of Defense. They have all said, "You need to pay more. You need to pay more." I agree. Maybe a little harder stick was necessary, but implying that we wouldn't honor Article 5 was incredibly shortsighted and contrary to the congressionally mandated national defense strategy commission that expressed these very concerns in the context of the Baltics.

KILCULLEN: I agree with that. But I understand why President Trump did what he did. I also think, and I liken this to, I don't know how people's war history knowledge is, but in July

2014 Kaiser Wilhelm gave a blank check to the Austro-Hungarians which dragged the world into World War One. And I think it's worth thinking about how do we not make Article 5 a blank check, but on the other hand, don't do what Brad's suggesting of encouraged what we're trying to prevent by making it a dead letter. Somewhere in between there's sort of a more complex messaging strategy.

SCHAKE: Article 5 is fundamentally defensive commitment. If Germany invades Russia, I don't think anybody believes NATO allies would back Germany up on that.

KILCULLEN: No, that's true.

SCHAKE: So it's a fundamentally defensive commitment each makes to each other. And so you don't have to worry about it galloping off in the way the blank check gallop of Kaiser Wilhelm.

KILCULLEN: I think and I've heard President Trump say some varying to this, the region of Narva in Estonia, which is 83% Russian or the area of Montenegro in the Balkans –

SCHAKE: No, it's 100% Estonian and of those 100% of Estonians, many of them are ethnic Russians.

KILCULLEN: Absolutely. But his point I think is why would Portugal, France and Germany go to war to save this tiny little area in Estonia? Now I'm not defending his point of view. I'm saying that it's got to be somewhere between blank check and dead letter. And I also want to just make the point that the notion of the Russians doing a tank on tank invasion of Eastern Europe, as I lay out in the book, is highly unlikely.

What's much more likely is what's happening right now, which is a liminal warfare strategy where little pinprick military activity is specifically being targeted to undermine the political unity of NATO. And that's the real issue. I'll also make a point –

SCHAKE: Actually you're advancing that cause by suggesting that Portugal shouldn't come to the defense of Estonia.

KILCULLEN: I'm not suggesting that. I'm just quoting president Trump's point of view. I'm not saying that that's necessarily the right attitude. I'm saying that I'm trying to interpret what it is that's driving him to talk the way he's talking. And I don't think that he's Putin's puppet. I think that's a stupid idea as I lay out in the book. But I think that he's trying to achieve some kind of a double messaging strategy.

One other point to make is that as we think about Russia's relationship with NATO and think about it as a political competition that's underpinned by military and economic means, it's worth pointing out, Russia's got the economy of Greece, it is almost entirely oil and gas dependent economy that has some very serious internal problems. European group within NATO dramatically outspend Russia on defense as a collective. They just don't act in an organized fashion. And the Russians have news. That's one of the critical differences. So again, as these

guys have been saying, it's about organizing and aggregating our effect rather than operating in a kind of lone wolf fashion.

BOWMAN: Just very quick, I'll be very brief. In Dave's book, he has a section where he talks about "traditional Russian frontier craft." And I really liked that section because he talks about how it's the longstanding policy of Russia, the Soviet Union and before to stoke separatism, I'm reading from it, 'to sap unity and create pretext for interference. To destabilize and subvert neighbors' sovereignty as a means of exerting control.'

And sometimes people like to blame NATO expansion, open door policy for Putin's policy. But as you say, Dave in your book on 133 Putin's goal in 1999 was to reassert, your words, Russian dominance. And the whole idea of open door policy was if a democratic people, they have the right to choose with whom they want to associate. Putin wants a sphere of influence. We respect the right of democratic countries to choose with whom they associate. By no reasonable definition can we say NATO is an offensive threat to Russia. And anyone who wants to put NATO's expansion to blame for Putin's policies in Georgia, Ukraine, I just doesn't think it withstands the laugh test.

KILCULLEN: While agreeing with the blame point, this is about understanding Russia motivation. And I'm quoting Keir Giles when I make that point. Keir Giles is a great a Russia expert based in London. He makes the point that in Russian history, Russians traditionally only regard a Russian frontier as safe if it has a Russian soldier standing on both sides of it. The idea that they equate depth of territory with security.

And while we're talking NATO, I just want to just in defense of NATO for a second mentioned that the NATO organization as seen from the NATO nations have been really focusing on another article of the North Atlantic Treaty that a lot of people don't spend much time on, which is Article 3, which requires self-help nations to be more resilient, focus on NATO's identified seven baseline requirements that everyone's got to work together on to defend against exactly this kind of stuff.

And I think that's a really important element of what NATO is trying to do. This kind of internal resilience against the sorts of disruption that Brad and Kori have just been talking about.

MAY: Okay. None of you want to embrace the suck. Let's talk about options two. Option two is doubling down, and it's your term, I think, fighting to win against all the adversaries. We do what it takes and we defeat them. There's none that we can't defeat so that's we would ask what we'd do. Go ahead.

KILCULLEN: So the argument in doubling down is sort of that, but it's a little narrower too. It's that we keep on doing what we're doing now, we just do it harder. So we spend more money, we get more aircraft carriers, we get more fifth-generation fighters, we exploit our existing dominance in a pretty narrowly defined form of conventional warfare.

And I argue that that's probably not going to work because while I agree with Kori about the asymmetry and the liminal strategy, the point I'm making in particular with respect to China is that these guys are pursuing a combination strategy, not a purely asymmetric strategy.

So for example, China has built an entire new class of anti-shipping ballistic missiles that can knock out a carrier at sea up to 2,500 miles away on the move. So why are they still building carriers, it's cheaper and quicker to build anti-ship ballistic missiles or submarines, which they're also building then to build carriers. I suggest in the book that building carriers to keep us focused on carriers. In order to keep us soaking up a lot of our effort and expense in our traditional areas of dominance while simultaneously building ways to strike from the side. And that's actually laid out in the Chinese strategic documents.

So I think it's worth just remembering that doubling down means doing more of what we're doing now. I'm suggesting we can't get out of the business of doing conventional warfare, our enemies will just move into that space. We've got to do more that's different as distinct from more that's the same.

MAY: Kori.

SCHAKE: I agree with that. Charles O'Reilly, the Chair of Institutional Innovation at the Stanford Business School has a really good book called *Winning through Innovation* where he talks about why is it that successful businesses can't innovate? And it seems to me extremely applicable to the challenges that Western militaries are facing now, which is that when you are successful, it sort of dulls that hunger for disruption. Because it's hard to let go of 11 aircraft carriers if that's the way you have imagined for 70 years.

KILCULLEN: This is why cavalry generals after the First World War didn't like tanks. Because they were the top of the industry.

SCHAKE: Exactly right. Continuous aimed gunfire aboard ships is actually an example Charles uses in the book. My favorite military strategist, a 19th century American soldier by the name of Ranald Slidell Mackenzie was successful on the Indian frontier again and again and again because he asked the fundamental question of innovation, which is, 'what are our adversaries doing right? And then how do we blunt the effect of their success by doing different things right?' And I think Dave makes a very powerful case in the book that we've gotten dumb and lazy because we're so successful, and we're simply being out innovated in basic ways that we just need to up our game, and we're actually culturally advantaged in this regard as free societies.

KILCULLEN: I make a similar argument to what Kori is making through the lens of adaptive biology. That we're sort of the apex predator and we've become sort of fat, lazy and slow because we're not competing. And at the risk of starting another fight, on the one hand –

SCHAKE: That's what we came for.

KILCULLEN: Ross Douhat's book that's out now about stagnation I think is very good in terms of talking about how we may be in fact the victims of our own success. The other guy

who I think really nailed this and his book is widely misinterpreted was Francis Fukuyama when he wrote in the *End of History* about what happens now. And a lot of people have chosen to critique him for something that he didn't actually say. His point I think was "Okay where the apex predator now," my words, "where do we go from here?" Which is what you're saying.

SCHAKE: The other thing I think Frank gets right in *End of History* that people don't properly credit him for is that the challenge will be boredom, dissipation and a sort of lazy satisfaction.

KILCULLEN: Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*.

SCHAKE: And that is what we in free societies have indulged ourselves in. The one place I'm more optimistic I think than you are in the book is that free societies also have a regenerative capacity that I don't think you give us quite enough credit for and that too is an enormous advantage compared to the adversaries we're facing.

KILCULLEN: Yeah. I think if the government posits an authoritarian position where it needs to control everything, then anything that goes wrong is the government's fault. And we're seeing this in China right now with the coronavirus. When you have a much more pluralistic, open, laissez faire society, you're a lot more resilient in many ways.

MAY: Go ahead Brad.

BOWMAN: Just a quick comment. Dave talks about in his book, how some of the great military reforms in history come after defeats, or when they're under pressure, and strikes me as what the United States is trying to do right now in line with the national defense strategy is go through what I would call the largest restructure and reform in 40 some years to prepare for an adversary who has not yet defeated us. And so that's tough politically to sell that on Capitol Hill. And so I think we have to help the American people and their leaders in Congress understand that it would be better to reform now before the defeat and then wait until the defeat happens.

MAY: All right, let's go to your third option, which I at least infer. I know you're trying to start a conversation, you're not trying to dictate, but I've heard that you see it as the least bad of the options, and you call it "going Byzantine."

KILCULLEN: Yeah. So I do regard it as the least bad option, but I still make the point in the book that it still might not work. So I draw by analogy on the history of the Byzantium Empire and I point out that we regard the Byzantium's different from the Romans, but they always thought of themselves as Romans and the Roman Empire collapsed in the fourth century AD. But Byzantium sustained itself for another 1100 years until the 29th of May, 1453 when the Ottoman Caliphate conquered and occupied Constantinople. And I asked the question, how did they do that?

And there's a number of things that come out of that. One, they selectively learned from their enemies, which we've just been talking about. Figuring out what our adversaries doing that's right, that we can copy. And I think if we look at what our adversaries are doing, there are some things we would never in a million years do for ethical or legal reasons, but it's a pretty

short list. There's actually a lot of stuff that's neither good nor bad. It's just a technique that we could be using.

Secondly, they really focused on not going into large wars of occupation outside their core territory like the Romans did. And instead of trying to occupy and govern whole provinces, they had agile forces that could move from threatened frontier to threatened frontier as required. They had very large and effective groups of local allies, so local allies, military forces that are agile. They had certain core niche advanced technologies that they were able to acquire that were more capable than their adversaries. They had a very strong focus on domestic resiliency and having an efficient and effective governance taxation, administrative educational system at home as a way of creating the resiliency from which to power project.

And then they were not shy about stepping back, letting things fall over and coming back in later to reestablish. So I think they had a much more flexible strategy that was actually optimized for longevity. The Russian Empire in Central Asia and in Western Europe at various times was optimized for expansion. That was also true of the Roman Empire. The Byzantines were going for longevity and they achieved it.

So it's worth thinking about that. I say it might not work, but what it might do is buy time for the global environment to shift. So I think it's not a solution, but it's almost a holding strategy.

MAY: Sorry, Brad, you want to start and then Kori can comment on this?

BOWMAN: Would you like to start? I was just going to say if the time horizon is centuries or millennia, of course it's true that eventually empires or great powers will fade or die. But if we take a slightly shorter time horizon it's an interesting thought experiment to put ourselves in Constantinople in 500 AD. They didn't know that they were going to last for another millennia. They might've worried that they would fall in 50 years, but they put together a set of strategies, tactics, techniques, procedures, and so forth that have allowed them for the last long time. And so I studied under Paul Kennedy in grad school and I am reminded it was rise and fall of great powers and I'm old enough to remember all the consternation about Japan and how America was done. And so I guess I would just respectfully challenge the premise a little bit about inevitable decline. Sure, over millennia, yeah. But I'm not convinced that we don't have several more centuries here, but it depends on the decisions we make.

And I think those decisions have to be informed by a couple things. Let's remember, we can't trade who we are for security because once we do that, we're going to have neither our freedom or our principles or our security and we need fiscal sustainability, right? We're going to be spending more on national debt service than we do on national defense within the next decade. And we have to understand that defense is far more than this, the Department of Defense. And we need to remember the value of allies. If we do those things, I'm not convinced that we're going to see inevitable American decline in the next 1500 years.

KILCULLEN: Just to make the point, as you know I'm not actually arguing – I problematize that question. So I can't contrast Fareed Zakaria's view in the sort of post Western world where he says, "Look, decline is inevitable, right? Everyone declines. We're going to

decline. So that's the environment." With Jonah Goldberg's version in *Suicide of the West* where he says, he quoted Charles Krauthammer, "Decline is a choice." And I think I don't know the answer to which of those two things is the case. I do think it depends on timeline as Brad says, but certainly, even if decline might eventually come about, there's ways to extend that, our period of primacy without sort of frittering the dominants away.

MAY: And I just have to say, you don't have to agree, but Fareed Zakaria's view of the rise of the rest, which he says is thrilling because they're going to be for all kinds of – He was wrong in that. We are not seeing in the rise of the rest wonderful examples that say, "Wouldn't we like to be like that?" It just isn't happening that way.

KILCULLEN: It's worth remembering that Fareed wrote those words in 2008, so if we were to invite him down here, I wonder –

MAY: I hope he would say I made a mistake when I said we got a thrill – we think the rise of the rest is thrilling. I hope he would say that.

SCHAKE: The element that for me stitches all of these together is that type of governance really, really matters. And you allude to this in the – You say it in the book. I would just bang a hammer down on that again and again and again because, while it is certainly true that democratic states fight more wars than other types of countries, they fight wars about expanding the space of freedom and that does in fact make the international order more stable, safer for free peoples. And the way to choose when and how you commit to policing frontiers or going out into Indian country is when the opportunity presents itself to help people secure their own freedom. And that's the thrilling rise of the rest doesn't work because they're not advancing freedom. China getting stronger while it's this repressive is an actual danger to us. But at China where moms can militate for safe baby milk and achieve something besides prison sentences, that's a China, that's a strong, powerful China we actually can deal with.

MAY: But we don't have it evolving.

SCHAKE: We're not anywhere near that China.

MAY: China should be coming more like Hong Kong rather than Hong Kong being digested into China or Taiwan.

KILCULLEN: Again, Fareed's not here to defend himself. So let me just argue on his behalf.

SCHAKE: Alternatively you could just not defend him.

KILCULLEN: But you mentioned Indians. I know it's a different climate, different – but I think one of the key players in Fareed's mind was actually India, right? World's largest democracy and a potential long-term strategic ally of the West. And I think if you add India into the mix, the pictures a little more positive.

SCHAKE: India is trending authoritarian right now in really dangerous ways because of intolerance, because they are allowing the corrosion of the things that make free societies resilient and vibrant.

KILCULLEN: True. Although it's a parliamentary system, right? So they'll have a peaceful change of power at some point and they'll have a new president and new prime minister. That's the point of democracy, right? It has the ability to generate, to fix its own problems.

MAY: I can't delay this any longer. So we all agree I think that in Syria, US military is doing good work at least keeping down some bad guys and should continue to do that. Twice, at least twice, President Trump wanted to just cut and run. He was persuaded otherwise, at least for now. Good thing. We all agree. Now let's get to Afghanistan and talk about that because there are a couple of things. One, there is a peace plan. I put that in quotes and I want to get your thoughts on that. Even with here with FDD, there's some disagreement. I don't think the peace plan is a good plan. I don't think it's a good idea what we're doing. On the other hand, there are worse ideas that one could have going from 13,000 troops to maybe 600 troops at least for the next year.

The question is there are those on the right and the left and the right they can now call themselves, not isolations, but restrainers who say, "No, we should just give up on Afghanistan. If they can't defend themselves after all this time, those Afghans, then let the Taliban takeover. It's no skin off our nose." On the other hand, we can say, "You let the Taliban after 18 years defeat the US military, watch how supercharged Jihadists and other enemies are now that they know that America is that willing to – Once they know how to drive us out of one battlefield, they'll use the same method. They'll learn and drive us out of any place else." And there are those who say, "That's fine. We got two oceans. Let's get between them, put up some walls and borders and let the rest of the world go to hell." Discuss.

KILCULLEN: Let me start. I have my applause very firmly in check for this particular peace deal. On the one hand you've got two rival Afghan government administrations that were both inaugurated today in rival inauguration ceremonies in Kabul. The Afghan government was not involved in those discussions. Didn't sign up to the things that we are trying to get the Afghans to do as part of this agreement. More importantly, more than a decade ago when I worked for Stanley McChrystal in Kabul, part of my job was talking to people that were pro-Taliban and the negotiating position that the Taliban had in 2009 is identical to the position that we just agreed to 11 years later. They haven't shifted. They've been always saying they'll no longer have a relationship with Al Qaeda, which I'm extraordinarily skeptical about. They've said they will not allow their territory to be used to carry out a tax on anyone else.

They want us to leave and then they'll deal with the Afghan government after we're gone. I think that we could and should push for a better deal. Obviously there will eventually need to be a political deal, but I think we're dealing from a position of weakness here rather than a position of strength. The other point I'd make is, I don't want this to come off as harsh, but from a strictly financial and military standpoint, we, the United States, and our allies can keep doing what we're doing in Afghanistan literally forever. Right?

We lose a couple of dozen people every year, which is horrible and it's very bad for their families and for their communities, but it doesn't destroy our ability to continue the operation. We lose that many people in car accidents in NATO. What's problematic in Afghanistan is not our losses or the money we spend. It's the Afghan government's losses. They've lost 45,000 people in the last five years. We've got to figure out how to reduce their losses, give them the kinds of support that they need. And I would argue its aviation, intelligence, medical support, maintenance, things that are relatively non-combat focused and ironically having a slightly smaller special forces and a larger conventional force. And I think we need to focus on making them sustainable so that they can negotiate from a position of strength with the Taliban.

SCHAKE: So this is a hard call for me. I am sympathetic for the argument – to the arguments that 18 years of time and effort producing this little change, maybe our effort would be better spent in other places both at home and abroad where we can foster the kind of resilience that Dave's strategy argues for. And I also agree with all of the analysis Dave just outlined. What puts me on the margin in favor of remaining in Afghanistan is the moral argument that is that we created the circumstances that exist now in Afghanistan. Both the hope for a better kind of Afghanistan and Afghanistan where individuals have rights and they loan them in limited ways to governments for agreed purposes.

I also think that we are responsible for encouraging wave after wave of Afghans to come into the security forces to try and create that. We bare culpability for those 45,000 dead Afghan national security forces because we help persuade them that this could be a different kind of place and it grieves me to think that we will hand Afghanistan back over to the harsh realities of Taliban control and so on the margin I am in favor of continuing a strategy that I do believe will eventually be successful and that we haven't prosecuted with anywhere near the kind of creativity or attention that we ought to be prosecuting the strategy with.

MAY: Go ahead, Brad.

BOWMAN: It's deeply frustrating that after so much time we have not seen better results after so many Afghans and Americans have given their lives and so many of our NATO allies. We should remember more than a thousand – Europe wasn't attacked on 9/11, we were. And they invoked article five and they went and stood with us at our side shoulder to shoulder and fought and more than a thousand NATO service members did not go home to their husbands and wives. Those would have been Americans. So talk about a tangible value of our Alliance right there. I think we need to remember that, but it's frustrating that we have not seen more progress over this time. But in strategy I think you begin with the end, you begin with the objective. The objective is to prevent another 9/11, in my view, from being launched from Afghanistan on our Homeland and our allies.

And I think the burden of proof is on anyone that says that we can withdraw and not see that happen. The response to that is, "Well, we have safe havens for terrorists all around the world." Yes. But there's something unique about the Afghanistan, Pakistan region. That's not a theoretical argument. It's a historical argument and it's not easily accessed. It's landlocked. There's a lot of bad – A large number of the world's terrorist organizations find their homes right there. So I think if we have 486,000 active duty soldiers in the US army. If by maintaining five to

8,000, five to 8,000 out of 486,000 active duty in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future is what we need to do to prevent another 9/11 on New York, Washington, and this time with weapons of mass destruction, that's a reasonable investment. What about those service members of America who don't come home? Every one of those we should weep over, but we should also weep over people in New York who died on 9/11 and making sure that doesn't happen again either.

KILCULLEN: Can I say? There are two reasons why strategically you might want to leave an occupation force in location for a lengthy period of time.

MAY: When you're talking 13,000, 10,000, 8,000, is it an occupation force? Because hear one thing – You hear from the media, we're fighting this war for 18 years. 13,000, 8,000, that's not fighting a war. Can you not say that this is a force that advises and assists?

KILCULLEN: Well, it absolutely is.

MAY: Counterterrorism and counter insurgency –

KILCULLEN: Since the end of 2014 it's been counterterrorism and security force assistance very tightly focused. What I was going to say, okay, so leaving aside occupation force, if you wanted to find that. There's two reasons –

MAY: Because the word occupation gets a visceral reaction from any audience.

KILCULLEN: So two reasons why. One is to achieve something. The other is to prevent something. People's critique of Afghanistan is, "What are we achieving?" I think Brad's point is, "Here's what we're preventing." And if you want an example of something that has worked in US history recently to do that, the answer is Korea. We've had 28,500 troops in South Korea for going on 50 years. Not to nation build in North Korea, but to prevent a war in the Korean peninsula and it's worked.

MAY: And by the way, a nation has been built in South Korea.

KILCULLEN: Absolutely. That's exactly right.

MAY: And American forces being there was part of the equation.

KILCULLEN: But even if it hadn't been, it still would've been a valid use of that size force. And we're talking about a dramatically smaller force for dramatically better set of circumstances than we saw in 2001 and we need to preserve that set of circumstances.

SCHAKE: Can I add another example? I realized that nation building is out of fashion, but there is the example of Northern Iraq after the 1991 war where the United States and its allies created a safe zone that we invited reconstruction for long-term, providing long-term security there. We grew a generation of political leaders among Iraqis in the Northern parts of the country.

MAY: Kurdistan, specifically you mean.

SCHAKE: When I started working on the Middle East in 1990, Kurds were killing each other at wedding parties. And now it is the safest, stablest part of the country most aligned to the values we want for the entirety of the region. So if you actually pay attention, care about it and do it in a sustained way, and that's the problem with President Trump's continued melodrama about immediate withdrawal from Syria or Iraq or Afghanistan.

KILCULLEN: He said that about Korea as well, too.

SCHAKE: It drives the cost up of achieving the stability that it's in our interest to achieve.

MAY: This probably is going to be the last question, but a big part of this it seems to me is we still have this view that war is something that should be declared and then there should be an ending and a victory parade and maybe a sword gets – And I'm not sure that ever existed, but if it did, it's nostalgic and wonderful to think. But that's not the real world we live in.

SCHAKE: Dave speaks so beautifully to this in the book. Fire away.

KILCULLEN: I make the point that, well, two points. One, when you're dealing with snakes, you don't get a victory parade. This stuff takes a long time. The classic counterinsurgency example is the Malayan emergency, which officially came to an end in 1960. In 1989 as a Lieutenant, my battalion was still deploying troops 30 years after the end of the campaign to Northern Malaya because what happens is you draw the threat down to the point where the local partner can handle it and then they handle it for as long as it takes. So that's the first point.

The second point I should I think is what Kori is referring to is I observe in the book that we are extraordinarily good at achieving particular battlefield outcomes using military force. We totally suck at translating those into long-term sustainable political outcomes, as Brad mentioned. So the problem is not that the military can't do this kind of conflict, it's that the nation hasn't figured out how to translate military power into a broader set of economic and political outcomes. I think that's where we all need to get engaged. This isn't a military problem actually. It's a broader national problem.

MAY: And we hope the UN would be helpful. And I got to say it hasn't been, it is not. Let's just be – I'm going to be clear on that.

BOWMAN: In the last few months and I suspect in the coming months we're going to hear a lot of the term endless wars and Dave and I and Cliff we were talking yesterday and you quoted Leon Trotsky and you said, "You may not be interested in war but war is interested in you," and you also write in your book that we confuse sometimes leaving the conflict is the same thing as ending it. And it's kind of like in a boxing ring, you can put down your hands and you might get clocked or the fighter might actually follow you out of the ring and follow you home.

And we've seen that before. We saw that on 9/11 and so to my friends on the center right who say, "You have to withdraw from the Middle East to focus on China." I counter and say the number one way your China strategy is going to fail is if you have another 9/11 and a major ground war in the Middle East that saps resources. The way to be able to focus finite resources on the China threat is to be smart in the Middle East where the kind of economy of force mission in Syria that President Trump tried to end.

KILCULLEN: Yeah, that's true.

MAY: So we were talking no permanent victories, only permanent battles. We're talking wars like the Cold War, which was a forever war until it ended. And that's the reality that a lot of people don't seem to want to face.

KILCULLEN: Yeah, long-term resilience, adaptability, the ability to evolve when our adversaries evolve. That's the sort of stuff we need to be focusing on, not necessarily how do I get to a ticket tape parade down Broadway?

MAY: Final comments?

SCHAKE: That's a great place to end.

MAY: David, you wrote this book not to solve the problem, but to get a better debate going on how free societies remain free and endure and I think you're doing that. I think we've done that. But you guys have done a wonderful job on that for one hour. Could have gone a lot longer. This conversation will go on. I'd ask the audience to applaud and you should do so at home while you're watching. We got a few people in the room here who are not a health concern. Thanks very much. Pleased to be with you.