



The Marathon Initiative

27th Annual Economist Government Roundtable Keynote Remarks

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Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan are all Western democracies that sit at the frontier, next to large autocratic, predatory powers. The stability of all three regions ultimately rests on America having the capability and political will to deter major aggression.

We are entering a time of hard decisions. What’s happening in Ukraine and Israel would have seemed unimaginable even a few years ago. We’ve now had two serious wake-up calls. We need to move with urgency to prepare ourselves, our alliances, and our societies for more turbulent times ahead.”

Wess Mitchell

*Athens, Greece
October 24, 2023*

Thanks for that introduction. Thank you to The Economist for inviting me to speak today. It's good to be back in Greece and see old friends.

When Nectaria asked me a few weeks back to talk about the U.S. perspective on the Eastern Mediterranean, I had planned to give a somewhat optimistic appraisal. I was going to talk about how this region has become an unexpected bright spot in an otherwise bleak international picture—about the remarkable diplomatic breakthroughs we have seen in this region over the last few years: The Abraham Accords, the progress in Greek-Turkish relations, the Israel-Saudi détente.

But then came Hamas' attack on Israel. This was a great shock to all of us. Of course we know that the Middle East is a region that can produce violent surprises. But this was something different. It was an act of animal savagery, perpetrated on a grand scale. It was barbaric and evil.

It's not yet clear what this event will mean for the geopolitics of the Middle East. Israel has been threatened in a way not seen before. It has every right to respond forcefully, to protect its people. And it deserves our full support in that endeavor.

The situation in Gaza has serious implications for U.S. global strategy. These attacks didn't happen in a vacuum. There are now major conflicts in two of the world's three most important regions. We have a land war in Europe that's in its second year and shows no signs of abating. We have a crisis in the Levant with the potential for dramatic escalation. And on the other side of the world, we have the makings of a military confrontation in the Formosa Strait.

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The stability of all three regions ultimately rests on America having the capability and political will to deter major aggression. The last two U.S. national defense strategies made it clear that we do not currently possess a military designed to fight wars with two peer competitors simultaneously. So the nub of the strategic problem facing the United States is that we have to respond to the urgent crises in Europe and the Middle East without jeopardizing our ability to deal with a Chinese attack on Taiwan.

My view for some time now has been that Putin's attack on Ukraine gives us an opportunity to sequence these dangers. The weaker of our two main rivals moved incompetently, on a timetable that was faster than China was ready to move against Taiwan. But recent events may make it more tempting for Xi Jinping to make his move.

The crisis in Gaza heightens that possibility in my view. This situation is likely to be protracted. Even if Hamas is dealt with quickly, it's just the symptom of a bigger problem, which is Iran.

To be clear, I see good reasons, rooted in China's own interests, for it not to choose war. China's economy is struggling. Its army has little experience outside of internal policing. China is working to insulate its energy and banking sectors against U.S. sanctions. The better bet from Xi's perspective would probably be to play the clock.

But history is full of wars that started for reasons that didn't seem rational at the time. The undeniable fact is that China is preparing for a conflict in the near future. It has accelerated its military buildup. It's conducting air and naval exercises around Taiwan on an almost 24/7 basis. China just launched its third aircraft carrier. It's sprinting to nuclear breakout and plans to have 1,000 warheads by 2030.

A war between the United States and the People's Republic of China would have catastrophic consequences out of all proportion to any other crisis currently underway.

It's possible the world will step back from the brink. But the job of leaders is to plan for the worst and work to avoid it—or make sure that we're prepared if they can't. That has to now be the overwhelming focus for the US and its allies. The current situation demands that we reexamine how we've been approaching things and make some hard decisions.

In the United States, priority number one has to be to make sure that Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan have the tools and support they need to defend themselves.

To do that, we have to act urgently to get our defense-industrial base in order. The situation is serious enough that we may need to invoke the Defense Production Act. That would mean converting some civilian industries to military production.

It's obvious we will have to increase defense spending. That will mean confronting tradeoffs with social programs that have broad public support. This will be very difficult in an era of inflation, record deficits and increased entitlement spending.

America will also have to stop being naïve about our opponents. The current administration tried a second reset with Russia after it came to office and Putin responded by attacking Ukraine. We gave concessions and cash to Iran to lure it back into the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] while Iranian proxies run amok. For more than a year, we've been chasing after détente with China, at a time when our deterrent in Asia is weaker than it has been at any point since the end of World War Two.

The present situation also has implications for Europe. Josep Borrell is right when he says that Europeans grew too accustomed to cheap gas from Russia, cheap goods from China and free security from the United States.

The Ukraine war has done a lot to get Europe more serious about security. It forced Europeans to raise defense spending and wean themselves from Russian gas. But even

now, less than a third of NATO members are fulfilling their commitment to spend two percent of GDP on defense. Europe will have to continue to take up more of the slack in aid to Ukraine for what may be a very long fight. In the event of a major crisis in the Indo-Pacific, America will need Europe to step up and play a more significant role in conventional deterrence.

The world situation makes alliances more important than ever. That's especially true in regions like the Eastern Mediterranean. The decisions that we made a few years ago to expand U.S.-Greek ties, normalize the security relationship with Cyprus, and launch the 3+1 format are now bearing fruit. This region is the pivot between the three global theaters. Stability here is essential to U.S. global strategy and to European energy security. That's why Greece's efforts to reduce tensions with Turkey are so important. Recent events make this kind of effort more difficult but also more necessary.

We are entering a time of hard decisions. What's happening in Ukraine and Israel would have seemed unimaginable even a few years ago. We've now had two serious wake-up calls. We need to move with urgency to prepare ourselves, our alliances, and our societies for more turbulent times ahead.

The future according to China, Russia and Iran is not one that any of us would want for our children. That should animate us all to confront hard decisions today so that we are not in a worse situation tomorrow.

Thank you.