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## **‘Trump Is at His Absolute Worst in a Crisis’: Three Columnists Imagine the World Ahead**

*di David French, Lydia Polgreen e Bret Stephens*

*Patrick Healy, the deputy Opinion editor, hosted an online conversation with the Times Opinion columnists David French, Lydia Polgreen and Bret Stephens about the biggest risks and challenges facing America in the world today and the leadership of President Biden and President-elect Donald Trump.*

**Patrick Healy:** President Biden is about to hand back national security and foreign policy to Donald Trump, and the president-elect is already musing about [taking Greenland and the Panama Canal](#) by military force. Trump has big notions about America’s place in the world, and that’s where I want to start.

We started the new year with the truck attack in New Orleans by an Army veteran who had an ISIS flag. You have hostages and fighting still in Gaza, and a new Ukrainian offensive in Kursk. The Biden team [portrays](#) the world as safer than when the president took office, while Trump sees a world in chaos and is promising order and peace while making a lot of threats to other countries. Let’s start with a base-line question: Do you think America is stronger and more secure in the world today than it was four years ago?

**Bret Stephens:** The fault doesn’t lie with the Biden administration alone, but it’s hard to argue that President Biden leaves office with the world safer than he found it.

Iran, China, Russia and North Korea now form a new axis of repression and cooperate in ways that were hard to imagine a few years ago. NATO has a couple of new members and is spending [a bit more](#) on defense, but the war in Ukraine is not going well, in part because of the administration’s reluctance to supply it with the arms it needed when it needed them. China’s threatening behavior toward Taiwan and in the South China Sea

has gone from bad to worse. And Islamist terrorism may be resurgent. The one bright spot is the weakening of Iran and its proxies in the last few months, but that was brought about not by the administration but by Israel's military successes — achieved often in the face of Biden's opposition.

**Lydia Polgreen:** One thing that strikes me about the Biden administration and this era in the world is the element of surprise and seeming unpreparedness. There was the Afghanistan withdrawal, which really weakened Biden. But I also think of the comment by the national security adviser Jake Sullivan about the “[quieter](#)” Middle East just a week before Oct. 7, and then the total failure of the administration to influence Benjamin Netanyahu's prosecution of the war in Gaza. And now we have the seeming surprise at the stunningly rapid fall of the Assad regime in Syria. Perhaps the best way to achieve strength and security is to anticipate, influence and shape global events in the interests of the United States. And on that score I think we have had a pretty lousy four years.

**Stephens:** Lydia makes an important point about the administration's repeated unpreparedness, which I wrote about in my [latest column](#) — Biden offering assurances that the Taliban [wouldn't quickly overrun Afghanistan](#), and his 2021 [claim](#) that the uptick in migration across the southern border was merely part of a seasonal pattern. These were the sorts of analytical errors that ultimately helped cost him his presidency.

**David French:** I think two things are true at once — America's key enemies are weaker than they were four years ago, and the world is more dangerous. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Hamas's attack on Israel triggered two wars that have increased instability and geopolitical risks. The war in Ukraine in particular represents a failure of deterrence.

At the same time, neither war has gone the way the aggressors wanted, in part because of the Biden administration's responses. Russia has taken enormous losses in men and equipment, and its economy is struggling. Yes, Russia is putting Ukraine under significant pressure on the battlefield, but it's safe to say that Vladimir Putin never expected his invasion to cost this much.

Iran has suffered the most severe defeats. Hezbollah — its most potent proxy army — has been decimated. The Assad regime has collapsed. Hamas is a shell of its former

self. And the vaunted Iranian ballistic missile arsenal has proved ineffective (at least so far).

**Healy:** How do you see Biden in all of this, David?

**French:** The Biden administration has played a role in all these developments. It deployed considerable military force to blunt two separate Iranian attacks on Israel — a direct military intervention that not only exposed Iranian weaknesses, but also signaled that differences over strategy and tactics were not creating a rift in the alliance. I have many disagreements with the Biden administration’s approach. He should have provided more weapons to Ukraine, sooner, and with fewer restrictions on their use, for example. But in both Ukraine and the Middle East his approach has been directionally correct. America has stood behind its allies.

**Polgreen:** Patrick, you mentioned New Orleans, and there has been some concern about the re-emergence of extremist terrorism, especially with the fall of Assad in Syria. But I am also concerned about the Las Vegas truck explosion. One potent source of violence in the United States is actually our own veterans. There was a fascinating A.P. investigation in October about the [rising tide of radicalization](#) among veterans. This can certainly be expressed, as it was in New Orleans, by support for foreign terrorist groups.

But much more common is homegrown extremism. Coupled with veterans’ disproportionately high rates of death by suicide, domestic violence and serious mental distress, these events do not make me feel especially great about Pete Hegseth, who has fiercely [defended](#) American soldiers accused of horrific war crimes. Veterans who serve our country deserve much better.

**French:** Hegseth is a culture warrior, and more culture war is the last thing the military needs. You don’t cure a radicalization problem in the military by putting a radical in charge of the Pentagon.

The political conversation about military life is pretty far downstream from actual military life. If you’re walking into the Pentagon thinking the way to improve morale or to increase recruitment is to wage war on “wokeness,” then you’re demonstrating that you don’t quite understand the problem. Service members are straining under the burden of frequent deployments and extremely high-tempo operations. Military

bureaucracy can be maddening. And recruits are often suffering from many of the same mental health issues that plague so many of their civilian peers.

**Stephens:** Yes. But it's important to note that defense spending as a percentage of our G.D.P. was around 3.3 percent in 2023, close to a historic low and down from 5.7 percent in 1985. Ships aren't being maintained or [built](#) fast enough, the Air Force is a [shadow](#) of its Cold War self, and our nuclear weapons infrastructure is decrepit. And wokeness — or the perception of it — is a factor, at least to the extent that it partly explains persistent recruiting shortfalls in all the services. Meanwhile, the nature of warfare [is changing](#) in ways that no longer match the expensive and exquisite weapons systems we keep buying. If we're really in a new Cold War against autocracies, we need to arm ourselves adequately to deter them.

**Healy:** I want to turn to the challenges and opportunities that the Trump team has in foreign policy and national security. You three may disagree with me, but President-elect Trump seems to be setting expectations that he will get the hostages released in Gaza imminently and Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky to do a deal on the future of Ukraine. So for starters: What do you like and dislike about Trump's approach to the world in his second term?

**French:** I like the Trump team's hard line against Iran. While Trump has had a tendency to flatter dictators in Russia, North Korea and China, he's long held firm against Iran. The assassination of its intelligence chief Qassim Suleimani was one of Trump's most significant national security achievements.

The dislikes are easy to state, beginning with Ukraine. It's unclear how he can achieve anything like an immediate peace unless he somehow coerces Ukraine into accepting defeat. Russia is taking terrible losses, but it's making battlefield gains, and it's unclear whether Putin is willing to make a single meaningful concession to achieve peace. I'm also quite concerned about Trump's approach to China. [His flip-flop on banning TikTok](#) is instructive. He went from a sensible, shrewd policy to naïve acceptance of Chinese access and influence, seemingly in large part because of pure perceived political self-interest.

**Stephens:** I agree with David. Trump has never been the savvy deal-maker he imagines himself to be, and there's a real risk he'll get sucked into deals — including a bad

nuclear deal with Iran and a bad cease-fire deal in Ukraine — that may play well with the more isolationist parts of his base but are bad for U.S. interests and worse for our allies. Narcissism is a bad basis for foreign policy, to say nothing of life.

**Healy:** I think narcissism is partly driving these rants by Trump about Greenland and the Panama Canal. He likes seeing himself as an all-powerful leader who thinks big, and men like Biden as figureheads who don't know how to use power.

**Stephens:** Trump does have four potential advantages over Biden. First, our adversaries fear him in ways I don't think they feared Biden, who was nothing if not cautious and often slow. That's the long-term benefit of something like the Suleimani assassination: The Iranians don't know his red lines. Second, he's post-ideological, meaning what he lacks in consistency he adds in pragmatism. Third, his skepticism of some of our historic alliances and his threats to pull out of NATO might help to achieve their intended effect, which is to get our allies to actually start paying their fair share for their defense. Fourth, he recognizes the need to spend a whole lot more on defense.

**Polgreen:** I'd love for someone to define Trump's approach for me. Is there a Trump doctrine? "Peace through strength" is perhaps how those who want to put a brave face on it might put it. But I think Trump often confuses "what I like and admire" — strong men doing strongman things — with what is in America's best interests. There is a profound narcissism to this approach. Does this guy care about anything but looking tough?

**Healy:** He likes doing "big" deals like the Abraham Accords (even if he's not as savvy as he thinks, as Bret noted), he thinks with one eye on the history books (moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem), and he thinks of himself as a turnaround artist who can, say, flip Putin and Kim Jong-un into productive relationships (which didn't happen). But to your point, Lydia, I don't think that adds up to a coherent doctrine beyond strutting the world stage with a combination of confidence, hypocrisy and a gambler's instinct for bluffing. It all adds up to "Brace for impact!"

**Polgreen:** One of the most accurate measures of power is the ability to get away with hypocrisy. And at this, Trump is a master. He has been able to shape events to his benefit — just look at how he has turned the entire narrative about Jan. 6 on its head. It might work on low-information American voters. But like David and Bret, I am

skeptical it will pass muster when he is speaking to the likes of Xi Jinping and Putin. It seems quite clear he will exchange long-term interests for a short-term political “win,” beginning in Ukraine but surely elsewhere as well.

**Healy:** What do you see as one or two of the biggest challenges facing Trump in keeping America strong and safe in the world? And then we’ll talk about opportunities.

**Polgreen:** Last fall I [wrote about the BRICS summit](#) in Russia, and the profound opportunity successive American presidents have missed to lead an opening up of the international system to be more inclusive of rising powers. The old system was clearly crumbling in a changing world, and the U.S. had the chance to shape a new system with its leadership. I think Trump may be the final nail in the coffin for any American-led effort to bring rising powers into a fairer and more equitable rules-based order. The dangers are profound for a weaker United States in a more Balkanized, multipolar system in which it is merely one of many players grubbing for influence.

**French:** I do wonder if the foreign perception of Trump has changed a bit — from “unpredictable” to “manipulable.” To return to the TikTok example again, China has now seen how easily Trump changed his mind on a consequential national security decision. Money and flattery go a long way with Donald Trump.

Give him a “deal” that he can trumpet, and the exact details won’t matter to Trump all that much. Bret and Lydia have both appropriately identified the withdrawal from Afghanistan as a low point for the Biden administration, but we can’t forget that Trump’s [terrible agreement](#) with the Taliban set the stage for disaster. Neither president covered himself in glory in Afghanistan.

**Polgreen:** It is such a good point, David, and underscores how what looks like a win in the short term can be a profound loss in the long term.

**Stephens:** Blame for the Afghanistan withdrawal goes to Trump for negotiating a bad deal and to Biden for executing it.

But to your question, Patrick, the great global challenge for Trump — and probably for the next several administrations — will be managing the relationship with China in a way that deters its imperialistic ambitions while avoiding all-out war. That’s going to require many things: a stronger U.S. Navy, particularly when it comes to undersea warfare; continued alliance-building with longstanding partners like Japan, Australia

and India and new(ish) ones like Vietnam; tough measures against China's theft of intellectual property, its hacks of government data, and its intimidation of ethnic Chinese living abroad; and also some opportunities for engagement and détente. Trump's promised trade war takes us in the wrong direction, assuming he's serious about it and it's not just a negotiating tactic.

**Healy:** And what do you see as opportunities that Trump has to strengthen America's place in the world?

**Stephens:** The most urgent crisis in the world right now is the prospect of Iran crossing the nuclear threshold — not necessarily by fielding a bomb but simply by acquiring all of the capabilities it needs to do so in a way that we cannot stop by force or diplomacy. That's going to have the Trump administration's attention on Day 1. Tehran had better have a really credible diplomatic offer the next day or it will find themselves at war, probably with Israel but possibly also with us.

**French:** Trump's most immediate opportunity is in the Middle East. Israel's military victories — combined with the fall of the Assad regime in Syria — have left Iran weaker than it's been in decades. This is exactly the time to press to end Iran's nuclear ambitions.

I agree with Bret that Iran may choose to rush to the nuclear threshold, but it's arguably more vulnerable than it's been at any time this century. It is in no position to dictate terms to America or to Israel.

**Polgreen:** I keep thinking of things then waving them away — they all seem in the realm of fantasy, not reality. Could Trump play the same role in Sudan's current brutal civil war that George W. Bush played in the last one? Might he be Nixon-in-China but in the Middle East, midwifing a Palestinian state through a Saudi deal? Nah. I don't think so.

**Healy:** To borrow [a phrase from Don Rumsfeld](#), we've been talking so far about some of the known knowns and known unknowns. What are the unknown unknowns in the world that keep you up at night? Or that give you some hope?

**Stephens:** I really worry about Europe, where long-term economic and demographic decline is matched with the rise of extremist parties, some with not-so-secret affinities for Moscow. On the other hand, it's not out of the question to see Iran's theocratic

regime falling, particularly if the country loses its nuclear card amid an economic crisis that reignites the sorts of protests we saw in 2022. That would be a blessing for global security, to say nothing for the Iranian people. I have similar, if more far-fetched hopes, about the dictatorships in Cuba and Venezuela.

**Healy:** Bret, is there any leader in Europe who impresses you?

**Stephens:** Greece's economic resurrection under the conservative government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis should be a model to other small countries mired in debt and low growth. And Italy's Giorgia Meloni has been a pleasant surprise. Otherwise, Europe's principal leaders — Keir Starmer in Britain, Emmanuel Macron in France, Olaf Scholz in Germany — are a Who's Who of Not Much.

**Polgreen:** I worry about another global catastrophe requiring any kind of international cooperation. Estimates indicate Covid killed [at least 20 million people](#) across the globe, and the United States had the highest known toll, some 1.2 million. It has become fashionable to describe the response to Covid as an overreaction, and I'm not going to get into that debate here. But next time it will be worse, especially with Trump in the White House.

**French:** I'm going to agree with Lydia. As we watched during the pandemic, Trump is at his absolute worst in a crisis. He was both malicious and incompetent. We definitely need to give Trump credit for Operation Warp Speed, but in so many other ways, Trump failed test after test in 2020. His response to the pandemic divided Americans and diminished the effectiveness of the public health response. His response to the death of George Floyd and the protests helped rip the scab of a host of old American wounds, and his response to a close electoral loss almost plunged America into constitutional chaos.

He is not a man who is ready to meet important and dangerous moments.

**Healy:** A lightning round. What do you think Trump's biggest impact in international relations or national security will be in 2025?

**French:** I'm most interested in the immediate impacts in the active battlefields in the Middle East and Ukraine. We'll see two very different approaches to two American allies — Israel will enjoy a far more free hand, while Ukraine may find its options narrowed to the point of a strategic crisis.

**Polgreen:** Given the state of the world and the F.B.I.'s vital role in investigating and preventing terror attacks, you have got to worry about Kash Patel demolishing the bureau with his witch hunts.

**Stephens:** Israel will win its wars with Trump's blessing and material support. Hamas's leaders will be destroyed in Gaza or exiled from it. Hezbollah will not be able to rearm itself to threaten its neighbors. That's a good thing for everyone, not least for ordinary Palestinians and Lebanese suffering under terrorist rulers. Hopefully, a peace deal between Jerusalem and Riyadh might soon follow.

**Healy:** Which world leader will have the greatest unexpected consequence in 2025, and why?

**Polgreen:** I am not sure this is unexpected, but it has been astonishing to watch Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey over the past two years. The disastrous earthquakes in 2023 seemed like a death knell for his long years in power, but he is stronger than ever in some ways, and in the catbird seat with Syria.

**Stephens:** Javier Milei in Argentina. If his shock reforms succeed — and early signs on inflation and the Argentine peso are good — it might change all of Latin America for the better.

**French:** Italy's Meloni could have an interesting role to play. She's reportedly friendly with both Trump and Elon Musk, and she's a stalwart supporter of Ukraine. That's an unusual combination, and she is likely to have Trump's ear more than most European leaders.

**Healy:** Which leadership vacuum will matter most in 2025 — Syria, Germany or Canada?

**Stephens:** Canada, definitely. If Ottawa falls, can Gatineau be far behind?

OK, I'm kidding. The real leadership vacuum I'm worried about is in my home country, Mexico. It isn't at all clear to me that Claudia Sheinbaum, the new president, is anything more than a mouthpiece for her pernicious predecessor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, whose twin legacies are the erosion of Mexican democracy and the narco-domination of much of the country.

**French:** I'm more concerned about a different country entirely — South Korea. We're still [learning the details](#) of Yoon Suk Yeol's misbegotten attempt to declare martial law, but that degree of instability in a key American ally is profoundly disturbing. It's hard to imagine an effective strategy to counter China or North Korea without a stable South Korea.

**Polgreen:** I am going to cheat and say that the biggest vacuums are actually regional and metaphorical. As Bret said earlier, Europe is basically leaderless, given what is unfolding in France and Germany, and the broad turn away from Brussels and toward more nationalist populist parties. In the Middle East you have a huge vacuum in Syria and Lebanon alongside a group of leaders vying for primacy — Erdogan in Turkey, Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, Mohamed bin Zayed in the United Arab Emirates, not to mention Netanyahu in Israel. There's a fierce contest playing out in Latin America between versions of the right — Nayib Bukele in El Salvador and Milei — and the left — Sheinbaum and an aging Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil.

But the most important vacancy, I think, is for the leader of the free world as we have long understood it. In an age of conflicts over migration, climate, territory, religion, culture, economics — who will embody an ethos of moving the world forward in some semblance of peace and prosperity? Since World War II the president of the United States has claimed this role, but Trump seems to have a very different vision for America and the world.

**Healy:** Antony Blinken gave [an interview](#) to our newsroom colleague Lulu Garcia-Navarro in which he argued that he and President Biden generally made the right calls in office. Briefly, what's a right call that they made, and what's a wrong call?

**French:** The decision to support Ukraine is the most consequential correct decision Biden has made, even if the execution has been flawed. But we also shouldn't overlook the decision to use military force to defend Israel from Iranian missile attack. Had Iran inflicted serious damage on Israel, the world would be far more dangerous and unstable than it is now.

There's no need to think hard about Biden's worst call — the decision to abandon Afghanistan was deeply flawed in both strategy and execution. We never should have left.

**Polgreen:** As David says, there are decisions, and then there is the actual nuance of execution. Help Ukraine defend itself, yes, good decision. But how to be effective? Help Israel respond to a vicious terrorist attack, absolutely. But failing to prevent the horrific and avoidable slaughter in Gaza, with American weapons, was a catastrophic mistake.

**Stephens:** Supporting Ukraine and Israel were the big right calls, even if the execution was often wanting. I'd also give the administration a lot of credit for some of the quiet but important diplomacy in Asia. AUKUS, the trilateral nuclear submarine deal with Australia and the U.K., was an important achievement. So were the U.S.-mediated reconciliation efforts between Japan and South Korea, and Japan and the Philippines. And I'd even give credit to Biden for repeatedly insisting that the U.S. would defend Taiwan militarily if it were attacked by China, even if his aides tried to walk that back.

**French:** I'm glad you brought up AUKUS, Bret. That was an important achievement that will have very real national security benefits.

**Healy:** Final question — a lot of world leaders are curious about what kind of America they will get under President Trump in the next four years. What would you tell them?

**French:** Trump's second victory should be a signal to the world: Don't think of Trump's relative isolationism as a phase that will soon pass, but as perhaps a harbinger of an enduring change in American temperament. If your strategy for international stability depends on American leadership, it's time to consider a Plan B.

**Polgreen:** When I get the chance to meet world leaders, I try to listen more than talk. But there is a strain of tremendous global resentment toward American leadership, and I would imagine a profound sense of relief among many world leaders that the United States is led by someone who doesn't pretend it is about anything but self-interest. I don't think that bodes particularly well for the rest of us ordinary folk, who have to live in this complicated, interconnected world.

**Stephens:** It's too soon to give into despair. The next four years are going to be disruptive. Some of it will be foolish and some of it will be just noise. But we're in a world in which the status quo has been failing for some time, and some of the disruption is long overdue. Let's not write off the new administration before it's even begun.