TRANSCRIPT
CSIS- The Future of Statecraft

“Keynote Discussion with Ambassador Susan Rice”

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KEYNOTE
Ambassador Susan Rice,
Former National Security Adviser and U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations

MODERATOR
Kathleen H. Hicks,
Senior Vice President; Henry A. Kissinger Chair; Director, International Security Program, CSIS
Kathleen H. Hicks: Well, good afternoon. Thank you to everyone for your continuing participation today.

Kathleen H. Hicks: And I’m especially delighted to welcome our keynote speaker, Dr. Susan Rice. Ambassador Rice has served as national security adviser, the U.S. permanent representative to the – of the United States to the United Nations, and assistant secretary of state for African affairs. It’s fair to say you know statecraft, the topic of today’s conference, backwards and forwards, and you’ve served in every possible role to view it. You’re also a distinguished visiting research fellow now at the School of International Service at American, and you are working on a book, you’re mentoring students. And we’re so thrilled to have you here to talk to us a little bit about your experiences, your thoughts on the state of U.S. statecraft, and some of the major issues that we’ve been tackling here in this conference. So thank you so much for your time.

Susan Rice: Thanks for having me, Kath.

Susan Rice: It’s good to see you all. Thank you for being here.

Kathleen H. Hicks: So I think it might be most interesting for folks to get a little more knowledge of your background and what brought you first into this realm of national security and international affairs and foreign policy that you’ve dedicated your life to. Can you talk a little bit about what drew you to the world? I mean, do you have an early memory of global issues grabbing you and becoming a passion for you?

Susan Rice: Well, I grew up here in Washington, D.C. This is where I was born and raised, in 1964 I’m afraid to admit. (Laughter.) And I grew up in an environment and a family and a context where all of the events of the day were very much on my television screen, talked about at my dinner table, where they were talking about the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, Watergate, later issues like, you know, the Cold War and the competition with the Soviet Union, arms control, the Iran hostage crisis. All of these were things that were the stuff of my childhood and my upbringing.

Susan Rice: My mother lived not far from here on Massachusetts Avenue, right across the street from the Egyptian embassy. And, you know, I was home on the day that Sadat walked out of the embassy just having signed Camp David, and there were snipers on our roof guarding him to protect him and to enable us to celebrate that extraordinary event. So I feel like I grew up steeped on policy issues.

Susan Rice: But for the longest time I thought I’d find myself involved in domestic policy. I went to college at Stanford. I was a history major. You know, I was there at a time when, you know, Condi Rice was on the poli-sci faculty and Alexander Dallin and all these great international relations folks, and I took none of their classes. (Laughter.)
Susan Rice: I went to do my graduate work in Oxford, and when I left Stanford my expectation was that I’d do two years in Oxford and I’d come back and I’d go to law school and I’d end up doing some kind of public interest law, whether civil rights law or, you know, public defense, or something. And but I also figured that for the two years that I was at Oxford, thinking that I might one day want to become an elected official – forgetting that I was born and raised in Washington, D.C., and we have no voting representation – (laughter) – I decided to study international relations for two years, and did my master’s degree in IR.

Susan Rice: And when I was done with that, I sort of faced a decision point. Do I go to law school as planned, or do I stay on and do my doctorate in international relations? And I chose to stay on and do my doctorate, just because I loved what I was studying, and I was interested in my dissertation topic, and I was convinced by a wise person that at 25 when I finished my doctorate I wouldn’t be too old to go to law school if I still wanted to. I didn’t choose to go to law school. And there are some days when I think I missed my calling, because I think maybe perhaps I should have been a litigator because I like arguing.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Well, being a national security adviser, maybe not too different from sort at least arbitration and negotiation, so.

Susan Rice: Exactly, exactly. But that’s how I got into international relations. But even after getting my doctorate, it wasn’t clear to me that that’s where I was going to make my career. It went to McKinsey and Company for a couple of years, a management consulting firm. And then I had the opportunity at the very beginning of the Clinton administration to come to Washington and work in the White House. And I actually had two offers – one to work on the newly established National Economic Council and the other on the National Security Council. And I wrestled with that and sort of did an eenie, meenie, miney, moe and chose national security. And sort of one thing led to another. (laughs.)

Kathleen H. Hicks: Amazing. You – backing up slightly, because it’ll take us to that time in the Clinton administration – you had done your dissertation on Rhodesia. Had you developed a strong interest in Rhodesia in particular, or African affairs? What brought you to that issue set?

Susan Rice: Well, interestingly it happened because at Stanford I got very involved in the campus anti-Apartheid movement. And that was a time – this is, you know, the mid-1980s – when it was before Mandela was released. The violence was quite substantial in South Africa. And I was just very drawn to that issue as one of – you know, of equity, social justice, equality. And I got interested in Rhodesia, because Rhodesia and its transition to Zimbabwe in 1980 had been at the time – unfortunately, no longer so – a successful example of a transition from white minority rule to black majority rule. And I was interested in what one might learn from the experience and the transition of Rhodesia-Zimbabwe for South Africa’s future.

Susan Rice: So that’s how I got into it. But in a manner that I couldn’t have predicted when I started it, I got very deeply engrossed in it, because I was lucky to be studying
Zimbabwe in England, where the critical players were present, where the resources and the archival material was rich. I got to go down to Zimbabwe and do extensive field research and meet many of the protagonists and interview them. So there’s just a lot of meat there that I found fascinating. So I wrote on the transition of Rhodesia to Zimbabwe. And in fact, the implications of that transition for international peacekeeping because as virtually nobody in the world knows that period of time when the transition occurred there was the only time the commonwealth – the British Commonwealth deployed a peacekeeping force to maintain security during the election period. A first and only attempt at peacekeeping, a successful case study, and one that also got me interested in issues related to the United Nations and peacekeeping, which subsequently became my focus.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Well, so fast-forward then to the 1990s, the Clinton administration, and right where you left off. Obviously the genocide in Rwanda, but one of a series of peacekeeping operations that the United States was engaged in, in one form or another. Can you talk a little bit about your – you know, what you brought into that, as you were just commenting, from what you knew academically, and what the reality of the U.S. role during that period and the debates over is America’s the world’s policeman, and in specific how we can help, and where the limits are to our ability to help prevent things like genocide.

Susan Rice: Well, over the course of the eight years of the Clinton administration, I had three different jobs. And so three different vantage points on this broad set of issues. My first job during the first two years of the Clinton administration was at the NSC. My first job in government. I was director for international organizations and peacekeeping. And this was in the window from 1994 to early 1996, when we were dealing with Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Haiti, Cambodia – all of these complex operations – and then in February of 1996, I became the senior director for African affairs on the NSC staff.

Susan Rice: So I ran the small Africa office at the NSC where my focus was, you know, on the continent, broadly, and not just, obviously, on peacekeeping or security issues. I did that through the end of President Clinton’s first term and about six months into the second term, and then I went over to the State Department and served the rest of the administration as assistant secretary of state for African affairs.

Susan Rice: So, you know, I saw all of these issues from different vantage points and it was an interesting time, as you’ll recall, where there was perhaps an overoptimistic sense both of the United States’ primacy in the world and, therefore, our ability to address or resolve almost any problem out there, which, obviously, was misplaced, and I think also a moment of inflated expectations about the capacity of the United Nations to effectively address all of these conflict situations.

Susan Rice: And so one of the things we learned in those years were, you know, that as important as American leadership is, as valuable as in certain carefully defined circumstances an American-led humanitarian intervention can be, there are numerous pitfalls and unanticipated consequences, and one has to have a much
better sense than I think we did in the early 1990s of the risks and the costs of deploying American or international forces into a very complicated country, for example, like Somalia.

Susan Rice: We also learned that as – even as we tried to build up and strengthen the tools that the United Nations had for peacekeeping and conflict resolution that, you know, there was a great risk of overestimating their capacity and the political will to back their capacity. And so in places like Rwanda and Haiti and in Bosnia, we saw in real time the practical limitations of what the international community can do, even when its will is pretty strong.

Susan Rice: So many of those lessons and experiences I think not only informed U.S. policymaking more broadly but informed my personal perspectives on the use of force, on the role of multilateralism, on the risks and benefits of humanitarian intervention.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Mmm hmm. I should have also mentioned, by the way, there are cards on the table. We are going to take questions via the cards. So, please, when you think of a question, write it on the card. Put it on the edge of the table. There will be people who come around. Staff will come around to pick those up.

Kathleen H. Hicks: So let’s jump – it’s eight years, but we’re going to jump through it relatively quickly and talk a little bit about sort of the period in between, if you will, when you were in the think tank community because so many of the folks here are living in this world where they’re practitioners or they’re scholars or they’re somewhere in between.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Talk a little bit about that experience of coming back out of government now and being in a place inside Washington that’s designed to reflect on what’s happening in the policymaking world and what you took away from that experience.

Susan Rice: Well, OK. I will. But –

Kathleen H. Hicks: (Laughter.) Yeah. Well, or talk about whatever you’d like to talk about. (Laughter.)

Susan Rice: I have my own sort of strong personal bias about the value and utility of life in the think tank world, and it is personal so I don’t mean to suggest that it applies to others. But, for me, just to back up and put things in a bit of context, when I – in between serving as senior director for African affairs at the NSC and going to State to be assistant secretary, I had my first child, our son.

Susan Rice: So when I started at the State Department, I was the breastfeeding mother of a three-month-old child. And I worked all the way through the end of the Clinton administration with a very little person in our household for whom I was responsible, yet I was on the road a great deal of time in order to deal with the job at hand. And so when I left the Clinton administration, the first thing I wanted to do beside sleep was, you know, to be able to devote the kind of
sustained attention that I obviously wished I’d had to what was then my three-and-a-half-year-old son. So that was job one.

Susan Rice: And then job two, to the extent it was possible, was I wanted to have another kid. So those intervening years, that were otherwise known as the Bush years – (laughter) – were a very important window for me and our family to – you know, to grow and consolidate.

Susan Rice: So the think-tank world for me was really a perfect landing point in that I had enormous freedom and flexibility. I had a community of colleagues and scholars that helped, you know, refresh and broaden my knowledge and experience. I had spent most of my professional career working on Africa and/or U.N. issues. And to the extent that I had any ambition of coming back and serving again, I obviously had to have a broader set of experience and expertise, because there were no more jobs really to do in the realm of African affairs.

Susan Rice: And so I also used the time that I had in the think-tank world to delve into new issues and new areas of the world. So I spent time learning about and working on the Middle East and on Asia and deepening my knowledge of Europe, which was there but – a little more developed than the other areas, but not as much as it should be.

Susan Rice: And so it was a real opportunity for me to grow both personally on the family side and intellectually and professionally. And so for that I find – I believe the think-tank world is extremely valuable. It’s a time to regenerate intellectually and to push your knowledge.

Susan Rice: It is not a place, in my opinion, where one should expect to have any great influence over policymaking.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Right.

Susan Rice: In my opinion, at least as a policymaker, truth be told, I can count on probably one, maybe two, hands the number of, you know, think-tank products that I had the time to digest in any meaningful way when I was in government. And to the extent that I read what other people thought I ought to think as a policymaker, it was on the editorial pages, if they wrote, you know, an op-ed, which was succinct and digestible and readily available, which is why I now like to write op-eds, not only because they’re easy and quick, but because those are –

Kathleen H. Hicks: They’re consumed.

Susan Rice: They’re consumed.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Yes.

Susan Rice: And so, I mean, I did very interesting research while I was at Brookings. I wrote a book on failed states and the implication of state weakness for U.S. national security. I did, you know, a lot of stuff in that realm. I wrote a ton of stuff over
six years. But I had the benefit of not coming in with the illusion that I was educating policymakers.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Right.

Susan Rice: I was educating myself. I was, you know, working with colleagues. I was hopefully adding to the intellectual capital more broadly. But the think-tank world sometimes, I think, likes to emphasize its policy impact. And I think, to some extent, that’s overstated.

Kathleen H. Hicks: And we had, I think I mentioned to you, mentoring lunches. And I know – I don’t know if anyone was here for my lunch, but we had exactly this conversation. So it’s helpful to have –

Susan Rice: Did people disagree with what I said?

Kathleen H. Hicks: No. I think it was just a very similar – you know, a lot of it’s about building your own intellectual capital and building out your knowledge base. And if you want to have impact in a policy way, it’s really incumbent on you on the outside. You have to realize that policymakers don’t have the time and space to consume all that. So it’s on you to find those avenues. And they’re often indirect. Sometimes they’re direct, like a consumed op-ed. Oftentimes they’re more about talking to staff at a lower level and ideas about – (inaudible) – like that.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Anyway, I agree. I think people have to be much more realistic.

Kathleen H. Hicks: So let’s fast-forward then through the Bush years to the Obama years. And you come into the US/UN job. Can you talk a little bit about – you’ve already reflected a little from the Clinton years experience – how you thought about the U.N. institutionally before you came into the job, and how the job shaped you to wherever your view is now on the role of the U.N. and how the U.S. ought to think of it?

Susan Rice: Well, it’s interesting that, you know, being a junior staffer on the NSC and working on U.N. issues in the early ’90s where, you know, there’s all this churn and all this optimism and lessons learned is one vantage point. But you know, almost, you know, 15 years later, much in the world has changed. We’ve had 9/11. We’ve had the war on terrorism. We’ve had a shift in the perceptions of United States leadership and decision-making given how we got involved in Iraq without U.N. authorization, et cetera. So I was coming into the U.N. at a – you know, obviously, at a senior level, and in a very different environment where on the one hand Barack Obama’s election and his disposition in favor of trying to find effective collective solutions to global problems, you know, sort of opened a door to or reopened a door to the United States and our leadership role, which was comparatively welcome. And so I felt like I was – I had in many ways a fertile field on which to play and an opportunity to redefine, in some respects, how the United States related to the United Nations.
Susan Rice: And I think I did come with a degree of sobriety about the United Nations’ limitations, but also its utility. And you know, working for a president who wasn’t a particular romantic about the United Nations – he thought it was important and we had to be actively engaged and shape the outcomes there, but he wasn’t, you know, a wooly-eyed idealist or multilateralist for his own sake. He had really strong views about the U.N.’s need to reform its management and business practices.

Susan Rice: You know, we walked into a Security Council where, you know, Russia and China were already well on their way to regular and unrelenting collaboration; and where, as a result of the Iraq War experience and some of the predispositions of my predecessors, you know, the United States was not necessarily there to be embraced with open arms. We had to assert our way back into our rightful leadership role. And so it was – it was a fascinating and I think very fortuitous time to get to serve up there. And, you know, we were wrestling with all the issues that you were familiar with, from, you know, North Korea to Iran to the many conflicts and crises in Africa, the whole – the Middle East, the whole gamut of issues.

Kathleen H. Hicks: And looking at it – looking back today, is it your – what’s your sense of the trajectory for the U.N. in the current – you can name the trends you think are most relevant, but there are – but there are many underway that pull at that coherence to the extent there really was coherence left, as you pointed out, with the Russians and the Chinese routinely pulling away. What do you think the prospects are for the U.N.? What’s the best approach, if you think it’s important to maintain?

Susan Rice: Well, I think you got to – when you talk about the U.N., it’s easy to talk about it as if it’s a monolith, like people talk about Africa as if, you know, 48 countries of sub-Saharan Africa or 53 countries on the continent or 54 are, you know, all one. The U.N. is actually many different U.N.s, right? There’s the Security Council, which has its own very unique dynamics. There’s the General Assembly, where, you know, the United States has just one vote like everybody else. There’s the U.N. agencies and the operational activities that they conduct, which are extremely important in so many respects, the work they do on refugees and for children and for, you know, food security and you name it. The operational agencies are in many ways the most high-functioning portion of the system.

Susan Rice: And the Security Council – well, the General Assembly, I guess – I was about to say the Security Council is maybe the most dysfunctional part of the system, although you could depending on the day argue the General Assembly on certain things. But the expectations for the Security Council are high, and that’s where the great-power frictions and the comparative efficacy of American leadership really make a difference.

Susan Rice: And what we’re seeing now, just to narrow it back down to the Security Council, is, you know, a continued unholy alliance between Russia and China that aims to selectively employ the rules of the road in international law when it suits their purposes, but not necessarily at other points. We have a United States that has
cast doubt on its commitment to the institution. And, you know, it’s been months since we’ve had a confirmed permanent representative up there, and it’s not clear when we will. And even when we did, you know, our stated approach was, you know, we’re taking names, and if you’re not with us you’re against us. That was one of the most early statements that Ambassador Haley made, which in my experience doesn’t lend itself to bringing people onto our side and marshalling the votes that we need either in the General Assembly or in the Security Council, because there are going to be issues where we disagree with folks and we’re going to, you know – one might want to exert some measure of punishment, but on another issue we’re going to need them and we may be able to get them. So it’s far more nuanced than I think sometimes we make it seem.

Susan Rice: So I think the Security Council is in for a continued period of very uneven utility. What people see when they look at the news is all the times the Security Council failed, as we failed for – have failed for years on Syria for example, or you know, you name an issue where the permanent members are at odds. Ukraine is another good example. But most of the time all the – the votes that happen on – you know, on an almost daily, weekly basis end up being votes that are taken on the basis of consensus and they don’t get the attention that the bust-ups get. But on most issues, particularly issues related to Africa or issues, you know, related to some of the less-controversial parts of the world, that system still is functioning and producing outcomes that are – that are better than non-outcomes for the most part. And that’s in part where, you know, on the day-to-day spade work of diplomacy where the United States’ role is so critical. And I look forward to a confirmed ambassador who hopefully will have the chops and the skill and the weight to advance our interests in the way they need to be up there.

Kathleen H. Hicks: So I think I’ve described four careers already, and yet we haven’t gotten to the last of your government positions, which is as the national security adviser.

Susan Rice: I remember that one. (Laughter.)

Kathleen H. Hicks: Yes. You were the national security adviser, as probably every national security adviser hears, during a very challenging period. In your case it was during the rise of ISIS, Russia invading Crimea, Chinese militarization of the land reclamation areas, Russia’s election interference. That’s the highlight reel I can think of; I’m sure you have many other –

Susan Rice: There’s more than that, but keep going. (Laughter.)

Kathleen H. Hicks: – examples. I’m going to stop there. And again, hard to dig in. We don’t want to be too retrospective, as I don’t want to – I want to talk about the way ahead. But coming out of that experience, it would be great to hear the things substantively you’re most proud of, the things if any that you have regrets about.

Kathleen H. Hicks: And then maybe talk a little bit – we can do this as a second question, but just to get you thinking about it – about the process elements, if you will, the role of the national security adviser and how you looked at the job. In either order.
Susan Rice: So let’s hold that second part for your follow-up question.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Yep.

Susan Rice: You listed a lot of the challenges that we faced, and those were indeed a number of them, not a comprehensive list.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Not an exhaustive list, yeah.

Susan Rice: Not an exhaustive list. But you asked what I’m most proud of, and that’s also a long list, and I won’t give everything. But I would start with the painstaking diplomacy that went into consummating the nuclear deal with Iran, which I think, despite the fact that we have pulled out, has demonstrably rolled back a very significant threat. And, you know, it’ll be interesting to see if, despite our withdrawal and the reimposition of sanctions, that that deal can hold, as it even has over the last year, for another two years, such that there may be an opportunity to revisit the U.S. role in it.

Susan Rice: But, you know, we had Iran within two to three months of being able to produce the material for a nuclear weapon. That has been extended to beyond one year, with the most robust and intrusive inspection regime in place and all the pathways–plutonium, uranium, covert–to a nuclear weapon undone.

Susan Rice: I’m very also proud of another thing that apparently our successors took a different view of, which is the Paris climate agreement and the work that went into achieving that. I think people don’t understand the long trajectory to get there, which really began with President Obama storming a private meeting in Copenhagen in 2009 with a laptop and interrupting the Chinese and others as they were plotting to blow up the Copenhagen conference. And it extended through the U.S. reaching an understanding with China to play a leadership role in crafting the Paris agreement, and then some very painstaking diplomacy with India to try to bring India on board, where it was balking at the last minute, to accomplish the Paris accord.

Susan Rice: And again, while we have decided to subsequently absent ourselves, the world has gone on, and that endures. And while it’s a far cry from where we need to get to, it’s far ahead of where we would have been without it. And so I continue to be very proud of that.

Susan Rice: I can go on: The rebalance to Asia; the effort to stabilize our relationship with China and find ways to cooperate even as we compete and push back on their behavior; strengthening our alliance relationships in Asia; TPP; our outreach to the Southeast Asian nations; our work on global health security; fighting and rolling back the Ebola epidemic in 2014, which threatened to kill hundreds of thousands, and we were able to rally the international community to stem it; putting ISIS on the path to lasting defeat through a strategy that the Obama administration crafted and the Trump administration continued to pursue; the opening to Cuba. I mean, I could go on.
Susan Rice: But there are many things that I look back on with gratification and that I think were particular hallmarks of what the United States can do when it leads others and brings others along towards a goal that we prioritize and that we can convince the world that they share, or substantial portions of the world that they share.

Susan Rice: And we’ll get to the future, but I think that’s a skill that seems to be less in use these days.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Regrets or missed opportunities?

Susan Rice: Regrets? I mean, obviously there – that’s a list too. You know, I regret, for example, that we were unable to close Guantanamo, even though we vastly shrunk the prison population there. Congress refused to allow us to bring any of the remaining prisoners back to the United States to be incarcerated in maximum-security facilities. And therefore that last hard-core element that remains, which were under 60 people, I believe, when we left, we couldn’t accomplish that.

Susan Rice: You know, I don’t think anybody can look back on what has transpired in Syria over the last many years and not feel an enormous amount of regret. Certainly I do. But I – this is a longer conversation, but then you get into all the what-ifs.

Kathleen H. Hicks: The what-ifs.

Susan Rice: What if we’d done this? What if we’d done that? And it’s not clear to me what the right alternative answer would have been, other than the path we took, which obviously was unsatisfactory. But the alternatives may have been more so. You know, we – I’ll give you one last regret – and, again, not an exhaustive list. I very much regret how our support for the Saudi coalition in Yemen has played out, and how what began as an effort to help the Saudis defend themselves against Houthi attacks and the Houthi strongholds in Yemen has evolved into a U.S.-supported humanitarian disaster.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Role of the national security adviser, can you talk a little bit about how you – were there examples that you looked to prior to? And how did you see the role? And maybe more broadly, how do you think a national security adviser can be most effective?

Susan Rice: Well, the national security adviser plays multiple roles, right? Number one, he or she is the principal adviser on these – the whole panoply of issues – diplomatic, political, economic, military, intelligence, even some law enforcement as it relates to national security – adviser to the president. So at the end of the day, the person in that role has to ultimately provide his or her best judgement to the president as to how to approach a given issue.

Susan Rice: Next and equally, the national security adviser is responsible for ensuring that the national security decision-making process is optimized, and that options and risks and benefits are carefully weighed and analyzed, that all of the agencies
have a full and adequate voice, and that their perspectives and that of their Cabinet secretaries are fully and fairly reflected to the president, with no spin on the ball.

Susan Rice: So that we sit around the table and we wrestle at, you know, the working level, at the deputies level, at the principals level, and ultimately with the president, and deal with the toughest issues that the United States faces. And the national security adviser has to be trusted by his or her colleagues to run a process that is fair, that gives every participant the opportunity to be heard, to influence the outcome, and to be treated as an equal when it comes to the inputs provided to the president.

Susan Rice: And then, thirdly, the national security adviser is responsible for a staff of, when I left, about 350 people, down from 400 – I’m not quite sure where it is now – that are some of the most talented career experts across the interagency, who bring enormous skill and experience to their roles. And enabling them to contribute, to feel valued, to be supported, and to then at their various levels run an effective interagency process is also a critical role that the NSC and the national security adviser plays.

Susan Rice: So it’s a multiring circus. And then obviously also, to a lesser extent than the secretary of state or secretary of defense or even the U.N. ambassador, you do have a public facing role as well. So I – you know, I feel really fortunate that my first job in government at 28 was beginning as an NSC staffer. My last job in government was as national security adviser. And I benefited as national security adviser from having served at both levels on the NSC staff, then having been an assistant secretary and therefore a backbencher at deputies and principals committee meetings when I was at the State Department and seeing how that process worked and being part of the IPC, the working group, policymaking process.

Susan Rice: And then being a principal at the table as U.N. ambassador, and seeing how the national security adviser ran the process and having views as to its relative strengths and weaknesses, that I then brought to my role when it was – when it was my responsibility to chair the meetings.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Yeah. I think that’s really helpful, particularly for those who haven’t lived – didn’t start at 28, if you will, on the NSC and seen it at every level. It is really amazing how many aspects to the job there are.

Kathleen H. Hicks: So with that broad perspective you’ve gained over your career to date, let’s talk a little bit about the state of diplomacy today. The tools of diplomacy, I think, are something that are particularly worrisome to many people so the deconstruction, essentially, of the State Department being at the top of that list but the relative imbalance I also hear a lot about between what is being funded in defense – my old world – and what’s being funded elsewhere. What do you think the state of the toolkit is for the U.S. today for statecraft?
Susan Rice: I’m looking for a polite term. (Laughter.) Poor. (Laughter.) I mean, you’ve hit on the key points. I’m deeply, deeply concerned about the health of the State Department and, particularly, the State Department workforce. You know, there’s long been a real and perceived imbalance between, you know, the relative heft of DOD and the relative heft of State and, you know, it will be ever thus to a greater or lesser extent.

Susan Rice: But not in my memory have we seen what can only be assumed to be deliberate efforts to undermine the very foundations of the State Department from a budgetary point of view, from a personnel point of view. You know, some of the most experienced talent was deliberately driven out early in the administration. There are, you know, still extraordinary number of vacancies in important senior roles, not to mention ambassadorships in the field.

Susan Rice: There was an effort to punish and sideline and drive out people who had served in previous administrations, which is almost everybody, and, you know, what we have seen as a consequence is a hollowing out of the experience and talent of the State Department that is going to take years, maybe even decades, to reconstitute, and it may be among the most lasting consequences of this era.

Susan Rice: Meanwhile, you know, attention to and interest in development activities and development tools are – and funding for them is also on the chopping block. You know, I’m very much a believer that – you know, to hearken back to a cliché, that the three Ds of diplomacy, development, and defense are in fact important legs of the same stool and you can’t have them way out of balance. And yet, I think that’s where we are.

Susan Rice: And the other thing is that, you know, we haven’t seen, although there may be signs of an awakening, Congress playing a sufficiently robust role in trying to right these things. Fortunately, they have preserved much of the budget and so the cuts that we’ve seen have been far less than would otherwise have been the case. We’re seeing Congress now step in on issues like Yemen and Saudi Arabia and NATO, which I – which I applaud.

Susan Rice: But the larger challenge of the imbalance in the personnel issues, which Congress really can’t and probably shouldn’t be in a position to affect in normal times, are areas where, you know, things are atrophying before our eyes.

Kathleen H. Hicks: So looking beyond the shores of the U.S. then, given that state of affairs in the U.S. with our tools, what are those trend lines that are most concerning to you, and there are, I’m sure, many because regardless of what administration we’re in we’re trained as security analysts to think about risk. So maybe just pick the top several that really strike you as most important for how they may be shaping the future we’re living in.

Susan Rice: Well, I mean, I think the obvious ones are ones that have been longstanding and maybe simply gaining in significance. Russia’s revanchism and their renewed aggression in Europe and the Middle East is, obviously, a significant trend. And China continues to flex its muscles both from a security and an economic point
of view, and its use of technology and unfair trading practices and the like is straining our collective ability to address and compete effectively against it. But, obviously, you know, more recent trends that are concerning, I think, involve the internal developments in Europe and the health and stability of some of our most reliable partners, from the U.K. to France to Italy. Those trends worry me.

Susan Rice: I could go on, but I’ll come to the trend that worries me most, which is the United States and what’s going on here, and with respect to our leadership role in the world. I think we are rapidly and I hope not irrevocably abdicating our traditional leadership role and ceasing to play the role that the world has long relied on us to play in terms of predictability, stability, exporting more solutions than problems. I think we are reversing that equation. And by questioning and undermining our alliance relationships in Europe and Asia; by engaging in reckless trade conflicts, including with some of our closest neighbors and partners; by failing to concert our efforts to deal with problems like China and Russia where, you know, collective counterweights are far more beneficial than any of us trying to deal with these problems in isolation. These are all things that worry me enormously.

Susan Rice: And then I would add, you know, we are losing our moral leadership by refusing to stand up for our values – for democracy, for freedom of the press. When we shield, you know, behavior like the assassination of Khashoggi and whitewash it; when we fail to speak out about what’s happening in places, you know, from the Philippines to Turkey; when we align ourselves with, you know, dictators like – and laud dictators like Kim Jong-un and fail to reinforce and support our allies even when they need it most, we are upending the foundations of strong and effective American leadership internationally. And I think the consequences of that are extraordinary, and they’re most concerning at a time when all of these other trends and trajectories, many of which are not new, are becoming even more challenging. This is the time for the United States to be leading in a – in a far more effective way with the benefit of our partnerships and alliances, rather than sort of being the bully that pulls up at the dinner table and yanks the tablecloth off and walks away.

Kathleen H. Hicks: We’re going to come to the audience questions in a moment. I’m going to ask one more question before I do that, which links to this conversation. There has been – over many years Americans have been concerned about issues of burden-sharing, the role of alliances; entanglement is even inside our academic literature. Given where we are in the world – you’ve made clear the case for alliances and partnerships as a U.S. advantage. What, though, are the – should we continue essentially as we are? Are there prospects for reforming that you think make sense for how we approach the issue of alliances and partnerships? Where should we be on this question? Because, you know, President Obama had his Atlantic article in which he expressed concern about allies. Obviously, President Trump has been very vocal on his views on allies and burden-sharing.

Susan Rice: Look –

Kathleen H. Hicks: It’s an issue.
Susan Rice: Well, I think that they shouldn’t be confused. I mean, I can assure you that President Obama had no doubt about the importance and the necessity of allies and partners, and spent, you know, a great deal of time trying to reinforce and reinvigorate our relationships particularly with our treaty allies. And yet that doesn’t mean that we don’t want our allies to pull their weight, which is why President Obama in 2014 led the effort at NATO to get all of the partners to agree to increase their spending to 2 percent by 2024. That’s the –

Kathleen H. Hicks: Right. That’s the 2 percent.

Susan Rice: That’s the stick that we keep beating everybody with. But it was President Obama in 2014 who did the personal diplomacy. I remember him in long conversations on the phone with the Germans and the Canadians and various others to line up that will to make that commitment.

Susan Rice: And, you know, going back to Secretary Gates in the Bush administration –

Kathleen H. Hicks: Yes. Right.

Susan Rice: – this has been a longstanding concern. The question is, how do you get there most effectively? And do you get there through threats and bullying and transactional, you know, tactics wherein we suggest that we won’t fulfill our alliance obligations if – you know, if people don’t pay us back? That’s the language we’re using – by the way, which, as you all know, doesn’t make any sense. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be pushing and prodding our allies to do the right thing.

Susan Rice: I think the question is how do we get there most effectively. And I think, you know, I am dubious that the approach of publicly berating them and threatening not to uphold our alliance obligations and questioning the value of defending individual members of the alliance is the way to get there. And then I think at even one point the president, President Trump, suggested that the right number was 4 percent, and now, before we’re even near to getting to 2 percent.

Susan Rice: So I think there’s a real issue and a real challenge. But I think there’s a question of how do we get there most effectively.

Susan Rice: I also think that, you know, it is, this week, on the 70th anniversary of the founding of NATO, well and good that we ask ourselves how to refresh that alliance through the challenges that we’re going to face going forward. And already NATO has evolved in important ways. It’s, you know, playing a role in the Mediterranean, in counterterrorism, in cybersecurity, in many other respects, that one might not have envisioned 20 or 30 years ago.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Sure.

Susan Rice: And yet the alliance is going to need to continue to evolve and grow to adapt to be as relevant as we need it to be for the challenges of the future. I think there’s
a lot of useful leadership that the United States could and should be providing in helping to define that way forward.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Some of the questions here are about – and you may well know, people often refer to this as a period of great-power competition. I’m using air quotes because I’m not a fan. But also it opens the question, as came up in our first panel today, of opportunities, question mark, for cooperation across Russia, China, the U.S., which seem to be an ever-narrowing set of issues.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Do you think there is the opportunity for cooperation? What do you think is most promising or even thinking about new dyads, if you will, of great power and rising powers in order to get cooperation? So a suggestion here, for instance, the U.S. and India; so thoughts on cooperation.

Susan Rice: I mean, I think cooperation is essential. It should be our aim to maximize effective cooperation on those issues that – which are almost every issue that the United States and no other individual country can tackle alone.

Susan Rice: Even as we compete and, in many respects, diverge with China, we have demonstrated our ability to cooperate with them. And I think we must continue to demonstrate an ability to cooperate with them, whether it’s on, you know, nuclear security or climate change or global health or Fentanyl, as we saw, to the administration’s credit, a breakthrough today. There’s a whole range of important issues where we can and we must find common ground with China.

Susan Rice: Even Russia, which has become far more complicated, as you all know, we – even under Putin and with, you know, very fraught relations now, you know, we’ve been able in recent years to be able to find common ground, including on things like the Iran nuclear deal; also on nuclear security and other issues. And as much as I am of the view that we need to be very clear-eyed and sober about Russia’s intentions and their efforts to undermine our democracy and democracy in general, I wouldn’t advocate for excluding opportunities for cooperation. I think we got to – we got to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time, push back forcefully on their threatening and abusive behavior, but to the extent we can leave the door open for cooperation where it’s possible.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Are there any areas that strike you with the Russians right now? I know it’s hard.

Susan Rice: It’s hard. Well, can I come back to it?

Kathleen H. Hicks: Yeah, absolutely. (Laughter.)

Kathleen H. Hicks: You mentioned earlier inflated expectations in the framework of what – how the ’90s sort of presented themselves ultimately in your reflections upon it. Of course, that’s during the time in which Secretary Albright spoke about the U.S. being an indispensable nation.

Susan Rice: And so you’re reading a card now?
Kathleen H. Hicks: I am reading a card.

Susan Rice: OK. I’m sorry.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Yeah. Yeah. Sorry, it’s not coming from me. So can you just talk about that mindset, if you will, and where you think we should be today on the spectrum, if you will, of indispensable nation to, you know, not leading in the world community. What’s the right way to frame how the U.S. should think of its aspirations?

Susan Rice: Well, I don’t – I don’t know if the terminology is the most timely at the moment, but the concept is correct, in my opinion – has been, and remains. I mean, and we’re seeing, as I was trying to argue, what happens when American leadership is lacking. I think that we are still in a – in a world where when the United States is playing an active and hands-on role, we are more likely to see outcomes that benefit our interests and the interests of others more broadly. And when we are a disruptor or absent, things get worse. And so I think we are still – to use Secretary Albright’s term – in many ways indispensable.

Susan Rice: That doesn’t mean we’re the only country that matters. It doesn’t mean that, you know, we can do things alone and by ourselves. But it means that we are critical. And we are critical in our presence, and we’re critical in our absence. And when we are active and engaged, we do a much better job of protecting the American people and making the world a safer and more secure place. And the opportunity for growth and prosperity rises.

Kathleen H. Hicks: We also have a number of questions here about your – sort of more on the personal career side, one of which is to give some examples of how your academic training, you think, helped you in the policy roles that you had.

Susan Rice: What I got out of my academic training that I think was most useful in policymaking, one, the ability to write well. This is a personal pet peeve of mine. I know there are a couple of folks that I’ve worked with here who are in the audience. But, you know, I don’t think you can underestimate the necessity and utility of being able to craft well-conceived, coherent, well-punctuated arguments – (laughter) – to inform decision-making. So that was one thing. And also the ability to digest large quantities of information and distill them down to their essence, and, you know, think critically such that one can formulate the questions and the lines of inquiry that are the most fruitful to pursue in order to – you know, to tackle an issue.

Susan Rice: I mean, as many of you know, one of the hardest things about policymaking is there’s far more information than one can ever properly consume and digest. And yet, with all that information, there’s also going to be a hell of a lot you don’t know. So trying to figure out what you know, what you don’t know, what you need to know, how to employ your time efficiently to, you know, pursue things optimally – those are all skills that you learn, in my experience, in a high-quality academic environment. And so those skills of critical thinking and distillation and synthesis are vitally important.
Susan Rice: And then, finally, the ability to argue a perspective or articulate a point of view succinctly and persuasively matters enormously in policymaking, as you know. I mean, you can – it’s one thing to be at the table; it’s another thing to have impact at the table. And it’s very hard to have impact if people can’t follow you or you’re not, you know, precise and effective in your presentation.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Orientation. How about the role of history for policymakers, use and misuse? Do you have thoughts you’d like to share on that?

Susan Rice: Well, as a history major –

Kathleen H. Hicks: Yes.

Susan Rice: – I’m a big believer in the value of – in the value of knowing what’s happened and understanding it. I’m baffled by the notion that we can make informed policy today without understanding what’s been done in the past, and yet it happens every day. (Laughter.) I think understanding history is absolutely critical.

Susan Rice: And you know, it’s – obviously, nobody knows everything about everything, so – but you got to have that – you know, that desire to learn that the – the historical inquiry instinct for when, you know, you’re making difficult decisions.

Kathleen H. Hicks: That’s interesting.

Susan Rice: So I’ll just give one example. You know, in the context of Syria we had many a debate about the wisdom of arming and training the Syrian rebels. Now, as you all know, there is a long history – not entirely a happy history – of the United States arming and training rebel groups around the world during the Cold War, you know, before and after. And you know, some of those lessons could be mis-learned, as you said. Others could be properly learned. But having that discussion and debate – and that’s just one example, and there are many like it – without any historical frame of reference to me is malpractice. So I found that aspect of my – of my education and training to be really useful.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Valuable.

Kathleen H. Hicks: What about personal diplomacy? I’m sure in all of your roles you had to employ it. Can you share a few experiences where all the tools are out there but it’s really the personal relationships, and how that plays into the making of foreign policy?

Susan Rice: Yeah. Well, I could give many examples, but I think the richest set of examples come from my time at the U.N., where I spent more time with the ambassadors of the permanent five countries than I did with my husband or anybody in my family over that four-and-a-half years. And that’s the Russian, that’s the Chinese, as well as the Brit and the French. And for better or for worse you form very intense relationships, hopefully productive ones.
Susan Rice: And one of my – (laughs) – most complex but important relationships at the U.N. was with my Russian counterpart, then-Ambassador Vitaly Churkin. And we had what I publicly described as a robust love/hate relationship. (Laughter.) The hate part was self-evident. We argued, you know, bitterly in public on all manner of issues, and sometimes with personal invective thrown in – more from him than by me, but he would probably say the opposite if he could. He, unfortunately, passed away a couple of years ago. But we also had enormous mutual respect. He was a very smart guy. He was a fierce advocate for his country. He was funny as hell. And when we were behind closed doors, you know, without cameras or the need to posture, we’d get a lot of stuff done, and we could probe where there might be areas for agreement that we could go back and try to convince our capitals to agree to. And, you know, he tried many times. I won’t speak out of school on his behalf, but there were many occasions where on some of the toughest issues he tried very hard to change his instructions to lead the Council to a better outcome and many of those efforts came out of his understanding and the common ground that he and I were able to forge and that he was able to forge with other members of the Permanent Five. And so that’s just one example of, you know, where personal relationships really matter. You know, they matter with friends, obviously, as well as with opponents.

Susan Rice: But, you know, when I look back on my time at the U.N., that relationship was, in many ways, the most consequential, and when I left the U.N. and the U.S. mission threw me a going-away party, I only asked one ambassador to speak and that was Vitaly because – mostly because I knew he’d be funny as hell – (laughter) – and he would – I was giving him one last opportunity to get in his licks and it was – it was worth it.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Last question on the personal career side is on mentorship and if you can talk a little bit about the mentors or sponsors you’ve had along the way and how you have attempted to play a mentoring or sponsoring role in your career.

Susan Rice: Well, I feel that I’ve been extraordinarily blessed. The best and earliest mentors I had were my parents, who were both very successful, very hardworking, very dedicated public servants in their own way. My father was a professor. He was – he worked at the World Bank as an acting ED at the World Bank. He, ultimately, was a governor of the Federal Reserve. But his whole – the bulk of his career was in public service.

Susan Rice: My mother never served in government but spent most of her career in higher education policy, and her signature contribution was being instrumental in the creation of the Pell Grant program, which has, obviously, had enormous impact in terms of broadening access to higher education for lower-income Americans. And this is a shorthand version, but they taught me many important lessons and raised me with, you know, perspectives and values that have been indispensable in my – in my development.

Susan Rice: And then I had extraordinary teachers in high school and then I had mentors in my professional career, men and women, who took an interest in me and helped
me grow and develop. Madeleine Albright is top of that list. So are Tony Lake and Sandy Berger, who were national security advisers in the Clinton administration.

Susan Rice: Richard Clarke, the famous counterterrorism and cybersecurity czar, was my very first boss in government. When I came to the NSC staff as a 28-year-old he was the senior director and he was – he was wondering what he was supposed to do with me as somebody who had never served in government and, you know, was about as wet behind the ears as it was possible to be, and he and Randy Beers taught me an enormous amount in a short period of time about how to be effective in the interagency and, you know, taught me tricks that I don’t think everybody gets taught like how to dissect the national security budget and find money for things that you – that other people don’t even know exist because they don’t know how the budget works.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Yeah. Right.

Susan Rice: So that when you need something – when you need to fund a program that everybody says there’s no money for, you know how to go and vacuum up money within the, you know, unallocated balances to do stuff that you want to get done.

Susan Rice: So I had – I’ve been blessed every step of the way by extraordinary mentors and I have tried very hard to give that back, particularly as I became more senior and particularly as I, you know, was leading a mission at the U.N. or leading the National Security Council team. And I’ve tried not only to be able to be supportive and helpful to men and women who served on my team while I was in government but to this day, you know, my door is open to any of those colleagues and friends that I can be helpful to, who I’ve been privileged to serve with.

Kathleen H. Hicks: We’re going to close out on a few of the final substantive questions folks had. One actually, it turns out, relates a little bit to your dad’s expertise, which is essentially on economics.

Susan Rice: That means I know nothing about it.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Well, this is the question, which is: Do we have enough economic know-how inside our national security structure and talent pool to execute the kind of strategies we need for the future?

Susan Rice: Probably not. We obviously have some. We have – and we have experts in the State Department who, you know, are economic officers and who know those issues. And that’s their – that’s what they do on a daily basis.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Backwards and forward, right.

Susan Rice: In the – in the White House for many years we’ve had a quasi-merger of the National Economic Council staff and the national security staff in the
international realm. And that arrangement I think has served both the NEC and the NSC well. We tried very hard, and I hope that this is still happening to involve the expertise at Congress, and Treasury, and USTR, and other agencies in those aspects of national security decision-making where, you know, without them we’d be flying partially blind. But I do think there’s still a degree of siloing among those disciplines that is – that’s suboptimal.

Susan Rice: And when – you know, when I think about those areas where I wish my own knowledge and experience were deeper, you know, we talk about history – and that was – you saw, I was good on that. But I wasn’t so good on the economic side. I took economics courses in college and graduate school. But I didn’t have the depth of knowledge that I think would be useful. Another area where I’m under-equipped and wish I had more knowledge and experience and, again, like economics an area where I think we need to integrate more into national security decision-making is, you know, knowledge of technology.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Right.

Susan Rice: In, you know, all forms – digital, bio, artificial intelligence, et cetera. These are all areas where that’s where the puck is going. And many of the more – particularly the more senior decision-makers are maybe as ignorant as I am.

Kathleen H. Hicks: We have two remaining questions. One is very specific to Syria. I’m going to ask it because I know a lot of people are interested in this topic. What are your thoughts on how we move forward in Syria? What’s the best-case scenario you can spell out where the U.S. can help bring some sort of conclusion to the civil war there?

Susan Rice: Well, in the first instance I regret that the president announced an abrupt withdrawal of the U.S. military presence in Syria. Now, I guess we’re keeping 400 of the 2,000 and splitting them between the north and the south. So it’ll be a very modest presence on the ground. I’m certainly not in favor of an indefinite U.S. military presence in Syria, but I think as we’ve learned the hard way in Iraq and elsewhere that there’s no such thing as mission accomplished when it comes to dealing with resilient committed terrorist organizations. And so I would prefer that we took a somewhat more gradual and longer view of our presence there, both for counterterrorism purposes but also, frankly, to give us more of a hand both in the potential for contributing to reconstruction in the liberated areas, but also for having some greater heft in our ability to conduct diplomacy that might address the underlying conflict there.

Susan Rice: I also worry enormously about what our drawdown will mean for the Kurds, despite assurances that we’ll give them their due. I’m quite skeptical of that.

Susan Rice: But in terms of the Syrian conflict itself, there is no diplomacy that I can detect that is dealing with the root causes of the conflict and the future of the Syrian government. You know, Assad seems to be increasingly well entrenched, protected by Russia. And yet, you know, he’s governing a subset of what was
once Syria. And we have advanced none of our interests in a political outcome that would be more stable and more beneficial.

Susan Rice: And it seems like it’s always been a hugely intractable challenge, but it seems like – not to denigrate the efforts of Ambassador Jeffrey, who I have great respect for – but it doesn’t seem that we are doing any of the things that might be done to try to create openings to affect the future course of events.

Kathleen H. Hicks: And if I can make sure I understand, the priority of which would be around a strong effort around diplomacy? Is that what –

Susan Rice: Diplomacy – yeah. I’m talking about diplomacy, but I’m also talking about, you know, using what influence and leverage we might have –

Kathleen H. Hicks: Right.

Susan Rice: – to some effect. You know, somebody is going to have to rebuild and reconstruct those parts of Syria that have been utterly destroyed. The Syrians can’t do that by themselves. The Russians are not going to do that. The Iranians are sure as hell not going to do that. So who’s going to do that?

Kathleen H. Hicks: Right.

Susan Rice: And what do you the people who are putting those resources in – is it going to be the Gulf? Is it going to be Europe? Is it going to be the United States? What do we get for it in terms of an outcome in Damascus that is better than the status quo? These are the kinds of questions that – you know, that, at least from the outside, it’s not obvious that we’re wrestling with.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Right. So the last question is, as all these usually are, the most aspirational. It’s 2020. Somehow you are yet another candidate for president on the Democratic side. You become president. You turn to your national security adviser.

Susan Rice: OK. (Laughter.)

Kathleen H. Hicks: What are your top three priorities? What are your top three priorities for statecraft that you want to pass on to your administration in 2020?

Susan Rice: Well, I think the most urgent will be to convey to our allies and friends around the world that we are prepared to lead again in a way that they can count on and that is reliable, predictable and respected. And there’s a whole lot of things that fall into that bucket. But that’s to me job one.

Susan Rice: I would also – I mean, again, and I’m not talking about issues in the world, but the work of statecraft. Reinvesting in restoring confidence and depth to the State Department has got to be an urgent priority. And I would advise the new president to seek from Congress authority, extraordinary authority, to bring back departed State – departed and retired State Department talent, without the bureaucratic BS that that usually entails, so that there’s a very simple, swift way
to reincorporate those who have left who may wish to come back at the level they were at, you know, without losing their retirement benefits and all that. So we’re going to have to find some extraordinary ways to try to recoup that talent.

Susan Rice: And I guess, thirdly, I would go out of my way to reinvest in repairing our alliance relationships and partnerships and reestablishing our moral authority. That relates to the first point I made. But, you know, I don’t think we get another bite at this apple, frankly, to convince our allies and friends that we are a leader that they want to hitch their wagons to. If we don’t manage to do that in two years’ time, I think that train will have left the station.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Ambassador Rice, you have been incredibly generous with your time today. We have learned a great deal, both about you and about the world. I want to thank you for taking your time to share your wisdom.

Kathleen H. Hicks: Thanks also to everyone who’s joined us throughout the day today. Great conference. And for all of us who – those of you who joined us online, excuse me, there will be a survey coming around to you online for feedback on today’s forum. Please take the five minutes to fill it out. It really helps us refine this series for next year.

Kathleen H. Hicks: And finally, before we close out here, we are having a reception. I can see the wine already set up.

Susan Rice: It’s served. (Laughter.)

Kathleen H. Hicks: Right outside here in the Nunn Gallery, the Sam Nunn Gallery, and I hope you all will join us there afterwards. But before you do that, please join me in a round of applause for Ambassador Rice. (Applause.)

(END)